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POLICY BRIEF

Resourcing for Access, Equity and Quality Higher Education in Kenya in a Post-COVID-19 Pandemic Era

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Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic made a profound impact on higher education systems in Kenya, as it did in other parts of the world. Our mixed-methods study conducted among university students, faculty members and other higher education stakeholders reveals vulnerabilities in the high education sector in the face of similar shocks. There are significant **resources gaps relating to funding, inadequate ICT infrastructure (devises and internet access) and skills,** as well as **quality control standards** that were necessary for transition into online teaching and learning. Designing a shock-responsive education policy, scaling up targeting of needy students for high educations loans and grants, and rethinking strategies for enhancing and diversifying funding for public universities are important strategies in fostering resourcing for access, equity and quality in a post-COVID era.

Key Message

- **The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the financial vulnerability of Kenya's higher education system.**

- **To create more resilient high education systems, there is a need to rethink public funding for high education, and explore alternative resource mobilizing mechanisms, through effective public private partnerships.**

- **Policy action to encourage the creation of Open and Distance e-Learning (ODeL) platforms to drive online learning across all universities will strengthen access and equity.**

Higher Education and COVID-19 Pandemic context in Kenya

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, universities in Kenya relied on physical class-based teaching and learning. Although some universities had created Open Distance and e-Learning (ODeL) platforms and had initiated processes to integrate e-learning as a mode of delivery of teaching and learning, still the bulk of teaching, assessment and tutor-student interaction were undertaken in a physical format. In many cases, ODeL implied distance learning as opposed to online and virtual learning. Further, there have been questions about the quality of ODeL offered by most public universities in Kenya. A study conducted in 2012 on the delivery of ODeL services in two major universities, the University of Nairobi and Kenyatta University, revealed that about 65.7% of the services were deemed ineffective with the main challenge being the inadequate capacity and skills among programme facilitators.

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted delivery and access to higher education services. With the closure of physical learning, universities and students alike grappled with online/virtual teaching and learning with limited resources, lack of relevant ICT infrastructure and capacity gaps among lecturers and students. In order to understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on higher education with relevance to access, equity and quality, the Partnership for African Social and Governance Research (PASGR) commissioned a study to take stock of how students, lectures and universities and other stakeholders experienced the pandemic. A mixed-method study was conducted among 34 universities in between June and December 2022 in Kenya. A sample of 209 students (117 males and 92 females) and 273 lecturers (165 male, 108 females) participated in the survey. The survey data was complemented by focus group discussions and key informant interviews with education managers, higher education regulatory officials and other stakeholders in higher education. The COVID-19 pandemic

Key Findings and Discussions

1. A growing financial vulnerability amidst shock

Although there were no explicit fiscal data from universities, inferences from qualitative data shows that most universities were financially vulnerable before the onset of COVID-19. **The vulnerability was even more exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.** Interviews from key stakeholders including university administrators, ministry officials and from institutions such as HELB show that the financial limitation affected how universities coped with the pandemic especially in limiting disruptions and ensuring continuity of teaching and learning.

With limited resources, universities in Kenya were faced the twin challenge of rolling out online learning and finding money to pay their staff. **Some universities reported increasing public debt and dwindling revenue collections, as the cause of poor university funding in the country.** Some public universities are in debt and unable to meet some of their mandates. The precarious financial situation was attributed to universities relying on fees mostly paid by families and private individuals with limited public funding to support students from low socio-economic backgrounds. As a result, the financial precarity faced by universities raised significant concerns for access, equity, and quality of higher during and in a post-pandemic period. Figure 1 below conceptualizes the challenges faced by universities during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is elaborately discussed in the sections that follows.
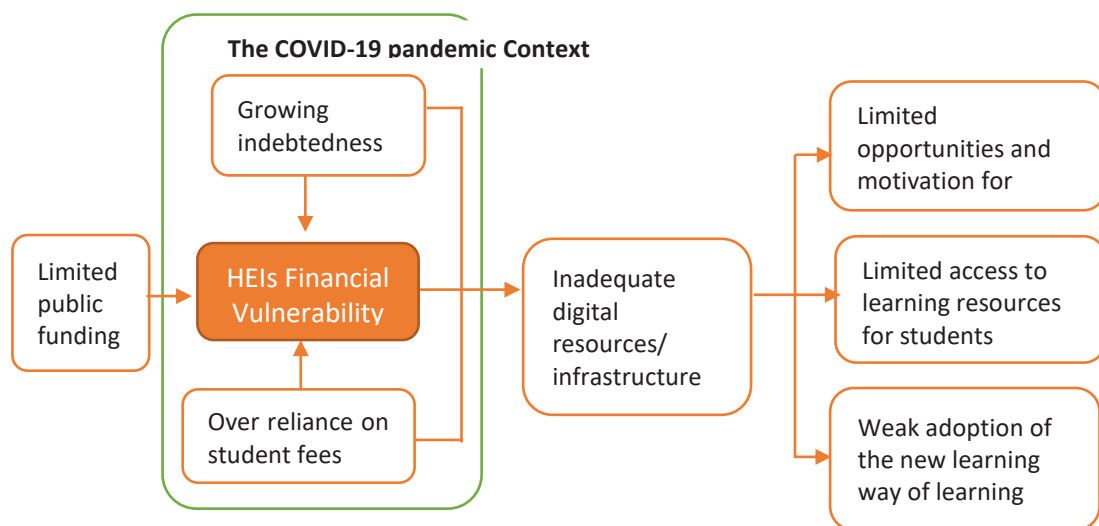
The COVID-19 pandemic Context

- Growing indebtedness
- Limited public funding
- HEIs Financial Vulnerability
- Over reliance on student fees
- Inadequate digital resources/ infrastructure
- Limited opportunities and motivation for
- Limited access to learning resources for students
- Weak adoption of the new learning way of learning

Figure 1: The COVID-19 pandemic exposure of HEIs vulnerability and its implications

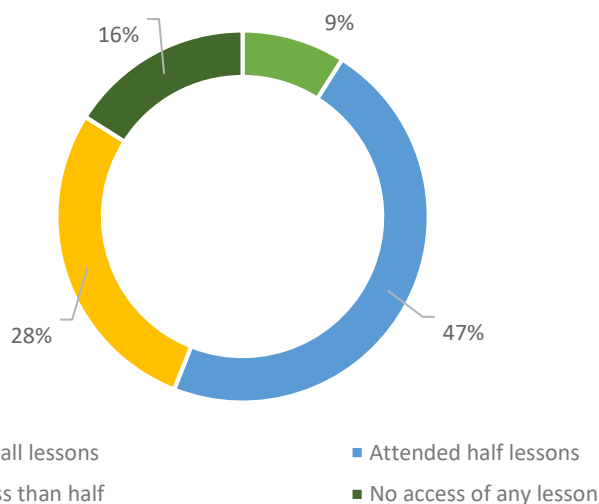# 1. The challenge of access, equity, and quality.

• *Access issues*

The resource challenge faced by universities impeded the installation of adequate ICT infrastructure to enable the transition to online teaching. With disrupted teaching, access to learning was extremely affected. Only 9% of students attended all their scheduled sessions during the pandemic, with 47% attending less than half of the sessions, and 28% attended a quarter of the sessions. 16% of students did not attend their sessions at all.

Poor attendance has implications for the extent at which University regulations on attendance and examinations have been followed during the pandemic. Going by the normative rules, about 90% of students were ineligible to sit examinations during the period as they did not fulfil the 80% session attendance set by the

Commission for University Education (CUE) for access to examinations.

Instructively, mobile phones were the most used device (60%) in accessing learning materials. **This finding raises concerns on the quality of learning given the limitations of usability of smartphones in accessing high-volume learning materials.** The finding also implies that the students did not have access to the required tools for learning such as laptops. This was a major challenge even for lectures whereby only 30% reported using laptops to delivery lessons. Further, teaching and learning was constrained by inadequate access to data bundles by both faculty and students. About 78% of students relied on their personal and family provision of internet bundles to support their learning. As the evidence shows, with the economic hardships, very few students were able to get internet bundles to cover themselves.

Access to scheduled classes during THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

- Attended all lessons — 9%
- Attended half lessons — 47%
- Attend less than half — 28%
- No access of any lesson — 16%
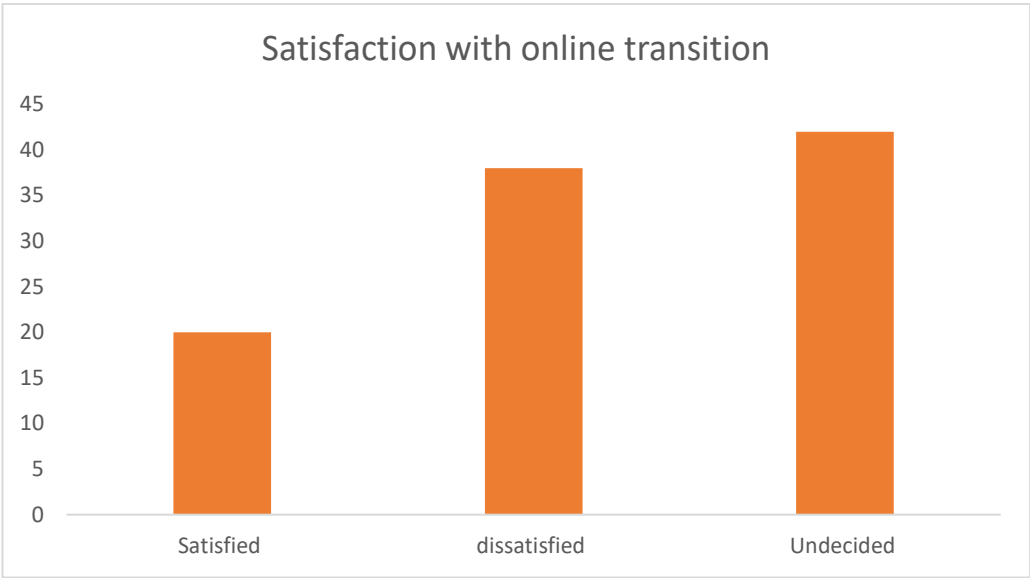
• *Equity issues*

Limitations on access also stoked questions on equity among students, with those from low socio-economic background severely affected. 83% of the students who reported not being able to access scheduled classes cited financial constraints as a major reason. These students did not have and could not afford the required digital resources, such as laptops and internet bundles, to aid them access online platforms and learning materials. This finding raises critical equity questions which require policy attention. Overall, the study found significant inequalities in the access and utilization of online platforms for learning across all universities in Kenya in terms of opportunities to use the required resources.

• *Quality issues*

Quality learning was mainly examined from the supply-side. Despite notable efforts by higher education institutions and other stakeholders to transition to online teaching, the services can hardly be described as having met the quality standards. Capacity gaps for online delivery of lessons especially among lecturers and lesson facilitators significantly affected quality of education. When asked about the online transition and whether the lessons supported continuity of learning, most respondents (42%) were neutral or undecided, while about 38% were dissatisfied. Only 20% of all respondents were satisfied with the services. The dissatisfaction with the services were mainly tied to quality concerns with issues such as constant internet breakdowns, scheduled but missed classes, and poor facilitating skills. It also become apparent that some programmes such as engineering, and lab-based courses could not be effectively taught in an online format.

Overall, the pandemic impacted higher education in both negative and positive ways. While it caused significant disruptions which resulted in loss of time and resources, the pandemic also revealed the resilience and adaptability of the higher education institutions and ability to integrate technology for effective learning. Many universities across the country, both public and private, were able to roll out online teaching amidst intensified constraints and challenges with some level of success.

The post-pandemic environment and provision of education services needs to take keen consideration of the experiences and lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic. Having tried online teaching, universities and other higher

Satisfaction with online transition

Category	Value
Satisfied	20
dissatisfied	38
Undecided	42

education stakeholders need to build on the gains as a way of strengthening education systems in Kenya. Strategies for financing and availing resources to support institutions and needy students are important steps in building a resilient higher education system.

Policy Recommendations

1. **Rethinking and diversifying funding sources for public and private universities.** To maximize gains in online teaching, there is need to rethink the funding and resource mobilization for higher education institutions targeted at strengthening the ICT infrastructure and regulation of quality of online learning.

2. **There is need for policy re-design to encourage universities** to offer blended programmes that allows physical and online teaching and learning. This will prevent a possible rolling back of the gains achieved during the COVID-19 pandemic with the online transition. Like in other countries where digital learning is a norm, there is need to incentivise transition through effective policies.

3. Funding institution such as Higher Education Loans Board (HELB) should **create funding and grant support for needy and economically vulnerable students** tied to purchase of digital learning resources equipment such as laptop support their access to virtual classes and other learning sites.
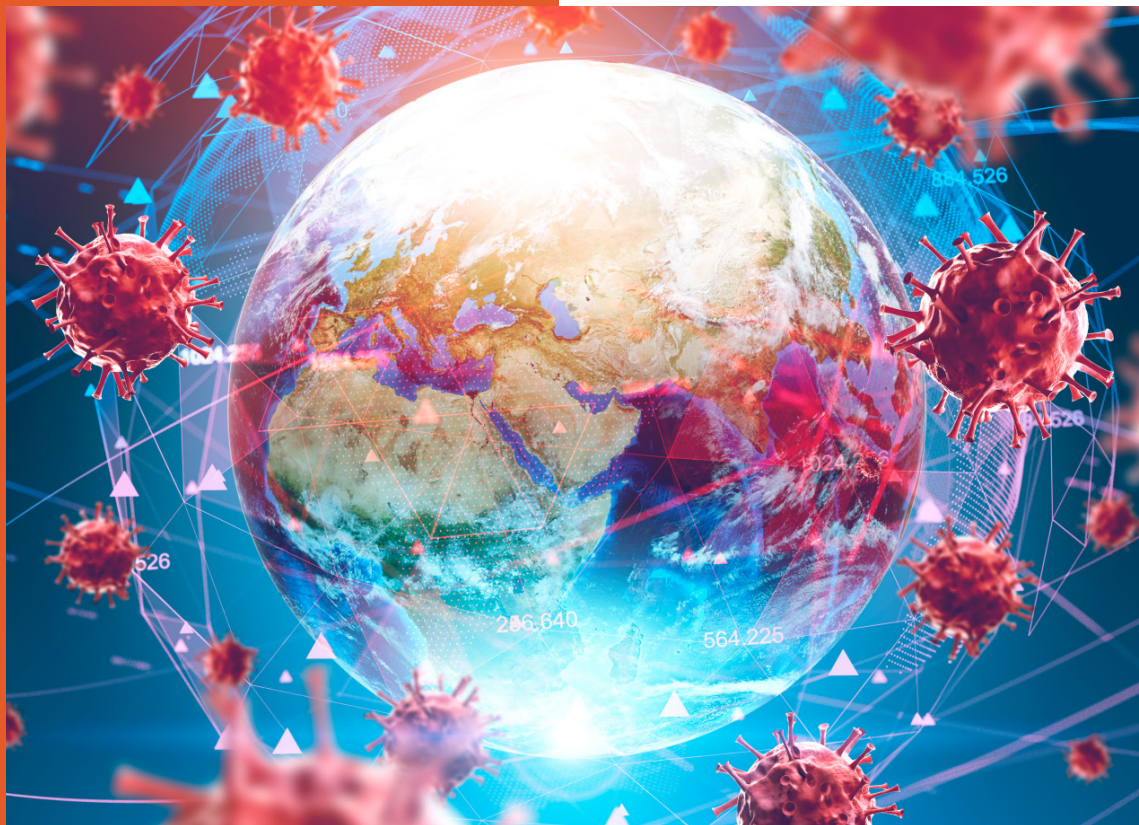
4. **Strengthen the capacities of lecturers and course instructors on ICT skills and digital teaching**. This will ensure that universities can navigate digital platforms, monitor effective learning and evaluate progress through digital platforms.

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