

POLICY BRIEF

Towards Equity and Access: Postgraduate Training and Research During COVID-19 in Kenya

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The recent global COVID-19 pandemic, has changed how we live, learn, and work worldwide. Higher education institutions across Africa, including Kenya, have borne its brunt. This policy brief is based on a mixed methods study to examine the impact of COVID-19 on postgraduate education in Kenya. **Findings show that although there was some degree of access to teaching and learning, inadequate ICT resources and trained personnel to manage the online learning environments compromised effective learning.** Students and lecturers were unprepared for the drastic transition to the online learning environment. It is crucial that universities in Kenya and other higher education stakeholders prioritize this investment **to ensure that they are adequately equipped to sustain post-COVID recovery gains and facilitate new ways of teaching and learning.**

Key Messages

- ◆ Covid-19 has significantly affected postgraduate education – research, supervision, and assessment in Kenya.
- ◆ Although access to postgraduate learning opportunities was evident, significant digital and human resource challenges remained including limited access to digital tools and resources needed to facilitate an online learning transition.
- ◆ There is an urgent need for capacity building on digital skills for faculty and students, the adoption and formalisation of blended learning, and financial investment in digitised postgraduate education in Kenya.

Background

The COVID-19 pandemic affected all sectors of human life. In compliance with the WHO recommended containment measures, the Government of the Republic of Kenya (GoK) closed all learning institutions between 16th March and 20th March 2020 as was the case in many countries globally. In response, Kenyan universities implemented online learning to facilitate teaching and learning.

Postgraduate programs, **many of which are heavily field-research oriented, were adversely affected.** Digital-oriented research skills were suddenly the new norms, despite teachers' and learners' limited skills. The future of emerging academics and their ability to adequately participate in knowledge creation became a concern and hence the need to examine how Covid-19 affected postgraduate education in Kenya. Overall, the study sought to:

- To assess access, equity, and quality of postgraduate education in Kenya before and after the Covid-19 Pandemic.
- Examine the impact of COVID-19 on postgraduate teaching and learning in Kenya.

This policy brief is based on a mixed methods study conducted between June and December 2022 research which combined a cross-sectional survey, key informant interviews, and focus group discussions with 158 postgraduate students and 217 lecturers from 34 universities between June and December 2022. Participants were selected randomly from the participating universities after determining their gender and course of study. Descriptive statistics and thematic analyses methods were used to analyse quantitative and qualitative data respectively.

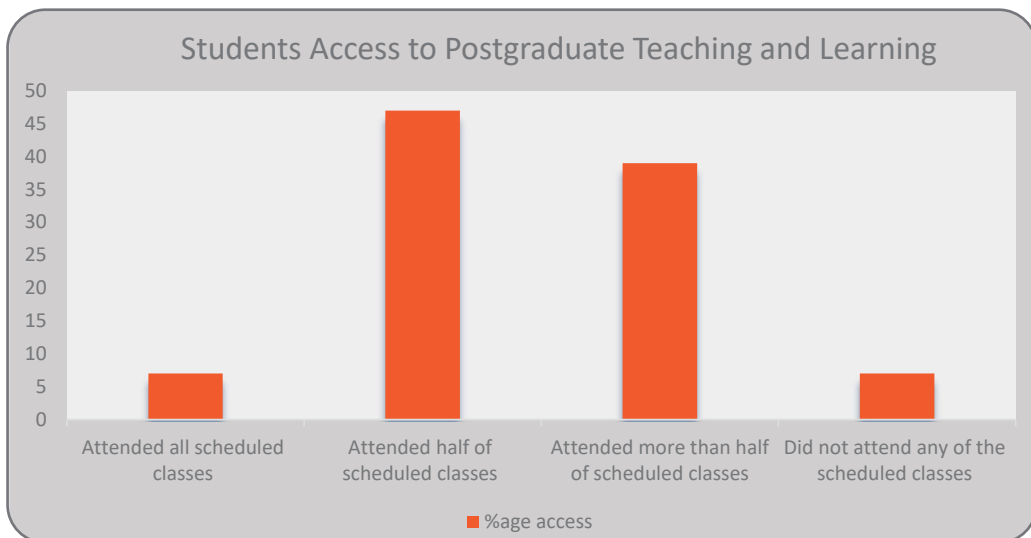
Key Findings & Discussions

1. Availability of ICT for online teaching and learning

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) tools including virtual platforms such as zoom, Moodle and others have gained much relevance in the facilitation of online learning especially during the pandemic. **This study established that basic ICT infrastructure existed in some universities before, during and after the pandemic.** A large proportion, 73% of study participants reported to have used ICT facilities during the pandemic with the proportion slightly

dropping to 66% post the pandemic due to partial resumption of in-person learning.

Despite evident use, the study showed insufficiency of available ICT facilities to support quality teaching and learning. **Major challenges included inadequate skills in using ICT, quick and unplanned transition, and lack of ‘internet bundles’ to enable access.** Although institutions like KENET and mobile network operators provided subsidized education internet bundles such as the *Telkom somabundles*, these were largely insufficient to cover the increased need.



2. Access to online teaching and learning

The study findings show significant gaps in access. Only 7% of students attended all the scheduled classes, with 47% attending half of the scheduled classes. Instructively, about 7% reported zero attendance to any online classed during the pandemic. Further, there were no significant differences in access across gender and students with special needs.

In most cases, students noted 'lack of necessary tools and resources such as laptops, smartphones and internet bundles', required to connect them to online platforms. Within a shrinking economy, most students were confronted with the hard choices of choosing their education against other competing needs. Further, the lack of robust online learning management systems in most public and private universities, contributed to a general apathy in using available online platforms.

3. Online teaching resources in higher education

Teaching and assessment are core components of post-graduate education. As a result, quality of learning during the pandemic relied on the availability and correct use of online resources. More than half of lecturers who participated in the study indicated they had **no prior exposure to various platforms of online teaching and learning**.

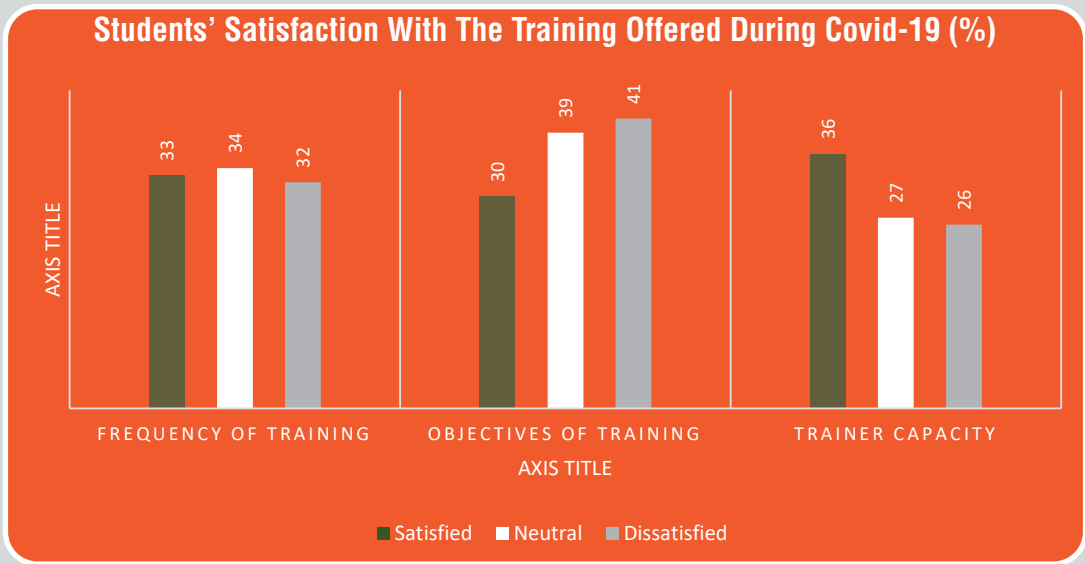
The students' satisfaction measured in terms of trainer capacity, frequency of training, and whether the objectives of training were met were 36%, 33% and 30% respectively. **The low levels of satisfaction are a wake-up call to the need for re-tooling of university lecturers** in the new era that requires technological versatility.



Source : Adobe Stock



Previously, many universities across the country provided Open, and Distance e-Learning (ODEL) through the Learning Management System platforms to support both on- and off-campus learning. Most universities have received accreditation for online programmes from the commission for university education (CUE) although the rollout of these programmes is yet to fully take off.



Key policies related to COVID-19 interventions in access, equity, and quality education

To augment previously existing emergency education policies such as the Education Sector Disaster Management Policy of 2018, the pandemic saw the emergence of several policies and frameworks. These policies include:

- ◆ Policy on Information and Communication Technology in Education and Training (MoE, 2021). The policy emphasizes the integration of ICT in education, training and management. During the pandemic, provided the platform for increased collaboration between higher education and ICT stakeholders to enable online learning and teaching.
- ◆ Guidelines on Health and Safety Protocols for Reopening of Basic

Education Institutions amid COVID-19 Pandemic (MoE, 2020). The policy provided guidelines for physical reopening and safe operation of education institutions to enable prevention, early detection and control of COVID-19.

- ◆ Despite these groundbreaking policies, the study findings show that they were **limited in scope, as they did not address key issues such as funding, provision of training for online teaching pedagogy**, as well as vagueness in regards to postgraduate teaching and research. This in turn may have contributed to the low rates of completion indicated by students who participated in the study.

Policy implications

These findings imply that teaching and supervision were strained during the pandemic. A number of policy implications are thus proffered:

- ◆ **Strengthen capacity building for university lecturers to deliver pedagogy on digital platforms**, with specific emphasis on teaching, laboratory activities, virtual supervision, and online assessment methods. This training should be conducted through continuous partnerships with local and international organisations.
- ◆ **Formalize and operationalize blended learning through policy frameworks** and adopted as an alternative way of teaching and at the postgraduate level.
- ◆ **The government, through CUE, in collaboration with HEIs, should design guidelines for learning assessment** to ensure the quality of the assessment process in an online teaching environment. Maximize gains from ODeL to properly ensure quality assessment and measuring of progress.
- ◆ **The government, through HELB, should develop affordable loan products for vital teaching and learning products like laptops**. This should be done directly through internal resource mobilization and strategic public private partnerships that enable education.

Further reading

- UNESCO (2020). COVID-19 and Higher Education: Today and Tomorrow. Impact analysis, policy responses and recommendations. Available from <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000375693>
- Byrom N. (2020). The challenges of lockdown for early-career researchers. Elife. doi: 10.7554/eLife.59634

This policy brief was written by **Elizabeth Kalunda**, **Timothy Oketch** (United States International University), **Stephen Odebero** (Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology) and **Kellen Kiambati** (Karatina University), and edited by **Joel Otieno**, **Daniel Doh** and **Pauline Ngimwa** (Partnership for African Social and Governance Research). It was produced as part of the ***Strengthening Equitable Access to Quality Higher Education Post-Pandemic Environment*** project with financial support from the Carnegie Corporation of New York.

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