What universities should do to survive coronavirus crisis

By DICKSON NYARIKI | September 19th 2020 at 12:00:00 GMT +0300

The Covid-19 was first detected in Wuhan, China, in December 2019. Kenya confirmed the first case of the disease on March 13, this year.

Following the outbreak, the government ordered universities to close by March 30. Since then, the pandemic has created the largest disruption of the university education system in the recent history of this country. This has led to substantial setbacks in this sector.

Universities have been experiencing low funding, hence the inability to recruit and retain more senior-level academic staff that can provide additional leadership in academic programmes. Development projects such as equipping workshops and laboratories, putting up additional tuition blocks and lecture theatres have also been affected. Therefore, the pandemic has exacerbated massive pre-Covid-19 university education funding gaps.

Insufficient lecture rooms

Universities are now struggling to upgrade their technology to ensure that all students are taught and examined online. This requires more funding to support a robust ICT infrastructure.

Institutions of higher learning still need to raise more funds to prepare for the reopening for face-to-face learning. As a requirement, universities have to meet the Ministry of Health protocols by ensuring social/physical distancing of 1.5 metres, providing soap and sanitisers at every entrance to the university premises, and providing masks to staff and students. For instance, the issue of social distancing makes the usual labs and lecture rooms insufficient, hence the need for more rooms, in turn requiring more funds.

The Covid-19 crisis has led to an unparalleled university education disruption. Learning losses threaten to extend the period of study for university students, hence disrupting the semesters. For instance, teaching practical subjects such as engineering and medical courses may not be done online, even though simulations are possible in some instances. These students will have to defer practicals done in the labs to a time when universities will be opened for face-to-face learning. The disruption of semesters will also make it possible for vulnerable students to drop out of the university as their parents may not

manage to pay their tuition and upkeep at the university after the Covid-19 pandemic. This will lower the number of students registered, leading to low A-In-A for universities due to non-payment of fees.

It has been recognised that preventing a learning crisis at the universities from becoming a generational catastrophe requires urgent action from all education stakeholders. This is because education is not only a fundamental human right but also a strong base for a just, equal, and inclusive society.

Therefore, to mitigate the potentially devastating consequences of Covid-19, universities should consider establishing an online Lecturer Resource Centre that shall provide easy access to a variety of classroom materials that support teaching and learning, including the recording of lectures for further sharing with students. This would include an illuminated room with sound insulation to minimise echo. The establishment of this centre shall enable universities to offer both face-face and online teaching, thereby ensuring that all the necessary facilities are put in place to meet the Ministry of Health protocols.

The institutions of higher learning should come up with innovative approaches in support of education and training continuity. These may include manufacturing of sanitisers, soaps, and dispensers for use by staff and students.

Common units

University common units should be taught as a block in a particular semester and all students admitted to various programmes taught together to save costs.

Further, most universities spend more than necessary on hiring part-time lecturers to teach units that overlap. This is a situation where the same units are coded differently in different programmes in the same university and timetabled at different times and days. It is, therefore, expensive for the university to finance the teaching of these units. Universities should therefore identify such units and merge them to minimise costs.

[*Prof Nyariki is the vice-chancellor, Murang'a University of Technology*]