

# The Impact of Covid-19 on Higher Learning

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**PRESIDENT Hage Geingob invoked the head of state's powers and declared a state of emergency effective from 27 March 2020 in order to contain Covid-19. Thus far, over 157 countries have imposed full or partial lockdowns as the number of people dying and testing positive keeps rising.**

In Namibia, lockdown includes the suspension of all social gatherings, including schools and universities. While this may have been a necessity, closing institutions of higher education, such as the University of Namibia (Unam) and the Namibia University of Science and Technology (Nust), has led to major disruptions of their academic calendar.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) estimates that the closure of higher education institutions would impact over 90% of 1,5 billion of the world's student population.

The interruption of teaching and learning at the institutions of higher learning will cause a huge backlog in the academic calendar. It will hamper the skills development and growth of students – especially in their first year. Some people have suggested that Unam and Nust should deploy e-learning on a full scale, but this is not possible due to high disparities in terms of inequality, poverty and unemployment.

For instance owing to a lack of comprehensive rural electrification, e-learning may marginalise the poor, who do not have access to the internet and thus find it difficult to access the learning material. E-learning may further be a catalyst for learning difficulties as students fresh from secondary schools may not have been privileged to have internet facilities before.

In addition, there is no clear roadmap from these institutions on how e-learning is going to be executed in terms of time slots and syllabus. Lecturers will juggle which topics are of critical importance in a particular subject.

The suspension of classes also interrupts the assessment period as examinations and continuous assessments might be postponed or cancelled. The loss of this precious time is tantamount to distraction, because the main purpose of test and examinations is to assess whether students are able to conceptualise and demonstrate what they have learned. Losing this component in academic learning may not provide lecturers with such critical information.

Cancelling examinations may result in these students redoing their academic year, which might delay their academic lives and also incur an additional financial burden to their families.

While online assessments may be an avenue for exploration, this may be a cumbersome process to big institutions like Unam and Nust with 39 288 students combined, as online assessments may pose larger errors.

Not only that, but some courses involve practical learning, and online instruction may not cater for that.

The state of the matter is that the pandemic not only affects teaching, but also the administration processes of the universities.

It is highly possible that the pandemic may cause the university to postpone application dates for the year 2021 and also make changes to the admission requirements due to failure of completion of the curriculum by the secondary school.

The closing of borders affect foreign students to return and continue their studies and this might affect the institutions financially.

Graduation ceremonies have been halted. Nust postponed its ceremony to September hoping the virus will be contained, whereas Unam has called off its graduation for the year and has suggested students graduate in absentia. While these are positive efforts to contain the spread of Covid-19, it may delay the awarding of diplomas and degrees.

While the future is unknown, it remains the university's mandate to ensure the academic year is not lost. We propose that institutions of higher learning redesign and revise the curriculum to make up for the loss of time, and concentrate on important concepts when lectures resume.

If the universities insist on e-learning, the ministry of higher education and the institutions should engage telecommunication companies such as MTC and Telecom to apply free data polices when downloading learning material.

For the sustainability of institutions of higher learning, universities in Namibia, in collaboration with the Namibia Institute of Pathology (NIP), should vastly invest in medicine production, the manufacturing of reagents for testing kits, and in laboratories for the manufacturing of vaccines.

This should assist state facilities in repurposing existing drugs, and in conducting research to deal with the spread of future viruses.

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