RETHINKING THE RENEWAL AND INTERNATIONALISATION OF UNIVERSITY OF THE GAMBIA IN THE POST-COVID-19 ERA

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ABSTRACT

The central question grappled with in this paper is: How can the University of The Gambia (UTG) be renewed in the post-Covid-19 era in a way that will enable it to reclaim its space in the international higher education landscape? To answer this question, this conceptual paper relies on document study, interdisciplinary discourse analysis and an insiders' perspective. It is argued that the present and future state of UTG can best be understood when located within a historical and international context. While Covid-19 has ruined the academic project at UTG, the establishment of this institution remains a noble idea which deserves to be applauded. With targeted funding and other forms of support especially from the government of Gambia, UTG is well poised to renew and reclaim its space in the international higher education landscape. Theoretically, these recommendations are distilled from the major findings of the research of this paper which has been shaped largely by the decision making approach.

Keywords: Gambia, University, Covid-19, internationalisation, renewal

INTRODUCTION

In 1995 the government of the Gambia in collaboration with St Mary's University in Nova Scotia, Canada established the University Extension Programme (UEP). UEP was a provisional arrangement that would provide degree-level education in the Gambia until a fully-fledged University was established. This is because at the time, the Gambia did not have a university and it heavily relied on the goodwill of big Western powers to educate and/or capacitate its people as agents of development. The University Extension Programme was coordinated and run by Borris Devany of the Nova Scotia Gambia Association. In this programme, lecturers and professors were hired from St Mary's University to the Gambia to provide the necessary academic, professional and technical assistance and advice to both the students and the administrative staff of UEP (MOHERST 2021).

After a four-year UEP, the establishment of the University of The Gambia (UTG) followed suit and was accomplished in November 1998 and such effort was consummated by an Act of National Assembly in March 1999. The University of The Gambia Act establishes the University and provides for its powers, mandates, aims and objectives, and guiding principles and also spells out its governance and academic structures. The objective for the establishment of UTG is to provide an opportunity for degree studies in the Gambia (UTG 2021). Thereafter, the intakes for the UEP were terminated forthwith following the commencement of the full-time UTG. Despite the abolishment of UEP, St Mary's University continued to award its degree for two years after the origination of the UTG. This became the transition period in which some efforts were intensified to build the necessary capacity for the university for the total takeover of UEP (MOHERST 2021).

Having instituted UTG, various schools were created: Medicine and Allied Health Sciences, Agriculture and Environment, Economic and Management Sciences, Humanities and Social Sciences, Physical and Natural Sciences including ICT, Law school and School of Education. In subsequent growth of the University, some new schools were further established viz: a school of Engineering, schools of Graduate Studies and Research (UTG 2021). Since the inception of UTG, it has been able to secure a renowned and reputable space in the International Higher Education landscape. Her products do not only hold high domestic government positions but also in intergovermental organisations and international non-governmental organisations as well. In terms of her academic out-put, many people across the globe were attracted and motivated to seek admission to UTG. It has accepted and admitted a great number of overseas students who were motivated to pursue their various degrees at UTG.

Currently, the UTG international seminars and conferences for students, lecturers and administrative staff were all hampered due mainly to the year 2019 corona virus disease (COVID-19) prevalence. Similarly, on the 18th March 2020, physical lectures, seminars and tutorials were all suspended as a measure to curb the spread of the virus. Consequently, the efforts and aspirations of the university to explore the international market in terms of students' admission have been frustrated and jeopardized by the preponderance of the virus; which continues to ravage the higher education sector, job market, economy and etc. In light of the above, this paper seeks to present a systematic account of how the UTG can be revitalised in the post-COVID-19 era

hence recommends restituting its original place in the international higher education landscape. The section that follows briefly discusses the evolution of Covid-19, whose implications serves as a point of departure for making sense of the future of UTG in the international higher education landscape.

Methodologically, this paper relies on the fusion of document study and interdisciplinary discourse analysis in its broadest form. Since most of the contributors to this paper have a closer association with UTG in one way or the other, its research immensely benefitted from an insiders' perspective. The choice of this research design was partly informed by the challenges presented by Covid19-lockdown conditions, which makes it rather difficult to undertake field research in the Gambia where internet access remains a challenge.

CONCEPTUALISING AND THEORISING INTERNATIONALISATION

Due to increased interdependence among nation states, internationalisation within the framework of higher education has become a necessity. While the role of universities as foreign policy agents is often downplayed within the academic and policy circles, these institutions have vigorously pursued this process. They do so for different reasons. Some universities pursue internationalisation as a contingency relief from stiff domestic competition with other universities. On the other hand, some universities have opted for internationalisation to gain global recognition and confidence on their offerings (Nyoni, 2021). Others, have resorted to internationalisation as a means of sharing international best practices for the benefit of their students and staff. Due to the selfish nature of internationalisation as a process pursued by universities, its conceptualisation remains contested among scholars. This is despite its old age. For the purpose of this paper and in the context of higher education, internationalition is understood as a process of integrating multiplicity of dimensions, perspectives, global culture, knowledge and skills in research, training and community service (Ota, 2018).

While this paper's interest is on internationalisation as an aspect of higher education, it is important to note that this is subject that also concerns scholars of foreign policy. As such, the authors have partly drawn from the literature on foreign policy to enrich the theoretical framework of this paper. The foregoing observation should be understood within the context that the study of foreign policy is based on two main approaches: traditional analysis and decision making approach. Emerging from this, this paper specifically adopts the decision making approach as its contextual and theoretical lens. Hence, it has posed the most important challenge to the assumptions of traditional analysis. It offers a behavioral rather than a realist approach to the study of foreign policy. The object of the study is not the state (but university) which is both abstract and ascribed with human qualities by traditionalists. Decision making approach has proved to be more important than any other, hence its choice as theoretical prism for this paper. To some extent, decision making approach agrees and reinforces the traditional assumptions (Clarke & White 1990).

EMERGENCE OF CORONA-VIRUS

Coronaviruses are a family of viruses that cause illnesses such as the common cold, Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS). The new coronavirus was first reported in the city of Wuhan, China, in December 2019. The Virus, now named the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome 2 (SARD-Cov-2) causes a disease called

coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19). COVID-19 is mainly transmitted through droplets in the air which are typically expelled when an infected person coughs, sneezes, talks and touches a surface or an object (CDC 2020).

In March 2020, the number of covid-19 cases outside China increased at an exponential rate. This deadly virus caused the world to be on high alert as the death toll and the number of the confirmed cases were continuously spiking since the first case was reported. "The Chinese government warned that the transmission ability of the virus is increasing and international efforts are needed to overcome this outbreak" (Altakarli, 2020). Added to this, the risk of infection from close personal contact and "estimated disease incubation period by tracing the travel history of five family members who visited the city of Wuhan in China from December 29, 2019, until January 4, 2020" was reported (Altakarli, 2020). As it grew to become a public health concern in China, the Director-General of the World Health Organisation (WHO), announced on January 23, 2020, that "the emerging COVID-19 is an emergency in China only not considered as Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC)" (Tedros, 2020). The fear and the paranoia that stroke the world. As a result, WHO declared COVID-19 as a global public health emergency of international concern on Thursday, January 30, 2020, which required a coordinated global response (Epidemiology and Disease Control Unit, Ministry of Health the Gambia 2020).

In China's response to the containment of the virus, the local government in Wuhan has made several attempts in checking the virus. Initially, the Chinese government instituted a nationwide ban on wildlife trade in markets, restaurants and e-commerce platform. Similarly, they closed the seafood and animal market in Wuhan to collect environmental specimens and to perform environmental sanitation and disinfection exercise. In addition, the Chinese Public Health Commission announced on January 23 "the suspension of public transportation, closure of the airports, railway stations and highways in the city to prevent the further disease transmission" (Altakarli, 2020). In observance of the WHO's recommendations and guidelines to follow in the fight against the spread of the COVID-19, countries around the world responded positively to observe the preventive measures such as social distancing, use of face masks, coughing in the elbow, regularly washing hands, avoid touching your nose, eye and mouth, etc (WHO 2021). Countries also instituted their various domestic regulations in an attempt to contain the perpetual spread of the virus and The Gambia is no exception to this (Serpa, et al 2020).

IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON HIGHER EDUCATION: THE CASE OF UTG

"The COVID-19 outbreak had a devastating impact on human life and shattered economies around the world" (Xiang et al., 2020) with a massive jolt to the education systems both in industrialised and developing countries. The pandemic has exposed the vulnerabilities and shortcomings of the current education systems and has caused the need for digital literacy development. "The students encounter serious hurdles with the distant learning process, presenting a better opportunity to sharing knowledge and asking for help easier and more interactive" (Iwona, 2007).

The Gambia registered its first case of COVID-19 on March 17th 2020. Since then, the number of cases has risen steadily, with the first death recorded on March 20th 2020. "To prevent a major outbreak, the government of the Gambia implemented various precautionary measures including the

closing of the air space, as well as sea borders on March 27th, 2020 suspending all non-essential services and closing public places. The state of public health emergency was extended consecutively until July 22nd 2020 when it was lifted" (Samateh, 2020). According to the daily situation report of the Gambian Ministry of Health, "the number of confirmed cases of COVID-19 as of 22nd July 2020, stood at 170 and 5 deaths. However, within two weeks after lifting the SoPE, cases of COVID-19 spiked to an unprecedented level of 1,09 confirmed cases and 19 deaths" (Samateh, 2020).

The COVID-19 has affected the educational system worldwide, leading to the near-total closures of schools, universities and colleges around the globe (Serpa, et al 2020). The global lockdown of educational institutions was going to cause a major interruption in student's learning, disruptions in assessments, and the cancellation of public assessment for qualifications. To be specific, The Gambia like any other country around the globe has decided to close schools, colleges and universities to curb the spread of the virus. According to the United Nations Education, Economic and Social Council (UNESCO, 2020), on 1 April 2020, "schools and higher education institutions were closed in 185 countries, affecting 1, 542 412000 learners, which constitute 89% of total enrolled learners".

The Gambia Ministry of Higher Education, Research, Science and Technology (MOHERST) (2021) has ordered the closure of the UTG and other higher learning institutions. This move has generated a lot of inconvenience in the educational sector. Taking into account, the deadly coronavirus pandemic has taken a dramatic turn in the Gambia learning system thus the interruption is beyond repairs. University campuses are places where students live and study nearby. They are also active cultural hubs/centres where students are brought together from various nations around the world.

The students' accommodation environments have been impacted significantly by the rapid spread of the Covid-19. The outbreak created some uncertainty regarding its implications on higher education. The UTG students were asked to disperse to their various homes all in the fear of the spread of the virus. The UTG has deployed plans to resort to online class as students were not allowed to physically attend lectures. Despite this, the movie has engendered a lot of inefficiencies in terms of the effectiveness of the lectures. Usually, students suffer from a poor internet connection and lack the opportunity to adequately interact with the lecturers. UTG does not have a monopoly over this challenges as the same can be observed among rural based students in South African universities.

As it might be the same elsewhere, UTG officials have decided to suspend all classes and closed all the campuses across the country as a step to respond to the growing coronavirus outbreak. Suffice to state that countries like the United States of America (US) have switched classes to online learning. Unlike students studying abroad in China, Italy and South Korea have been encouraged to return home to complete their studies. While class closures impacted the enrollment at the beginning of a new semester, it is hard to foresee whether the novel coronavirus will result in long-term disruption to the higher education system. Hence, universities across the globe are fast adopting to the new normal of virtual teaching and learning.

PONDERING THE RENEWAL OF UTG IN THE POST-COVID-19 ERA

With the outbreak of COVID-19, The Gambian education system has over the period undergone a series of significant changes ranging from physical class attendance, tutorials and seminars to online classes, virtual tutorials and seminars. These stemmed from attempts aimed at responding to changing needs and circumstances guided by perspectives and experiences derived from WHO's control measures to mitigate the spike of coronavirus both at national and international levels. The future of higher education in the Gambia needs rethinking and consultations with diverse people in many ways. The lessons learned during the peak of COVID-19 so far must guide the future strategic development of UTG. High-quality research and education are required; likewise, the equality agenda needs to be supported everywhere to rebuild the academic structures that would be viable and not only to those who will be able to afford it. The need for knowledge creation and dissemination is as important as ever especially since the challenge identified and to build a sustainable educational facility to support the higher education sector (MOHERST 2021).

Again, higher education has a significant role to play in realising her ambitious aims. UTG is a critical component of the education ecosystem in the Gambia, the role in strengthening the education policy and practice at every level of training lecturers, formulating pedagogical contents and leading educational research is central to the declining education to address and keep abreast of future issues affecting education (UTG 2021). The UTG should renew its commitment with partners and/or stakeholders interested in business education, technical and vocational education and training sectors to upskill and reskill young and adult learners for an inclusive recovery. UTG should now be prepared to be at the forefront of local and international scientific responses to the future uncertainties that might have the potential to disrupt the environment for teaching and learning, research and community engagement (Serpa, et al 2020).

UTG as a higher educational institute already foresees the impacts of the shift to online classes or the impacts of the educational crisis on national and international students such as the closure of universities for the short, medium or long term. This foresight is enshrined in the National Higher Education Policy. To elucidate, "Information and communication technology – Computer literacy and ICT education will be introduced and expanded across all levels and the use of open and distance learning (ODL) will be strengthened. Educational broadcasting service (EBS) will be provided to support teaching/learning processes" (Republic of the Gambia, 2021). This attempt seeks to help in fulfilling the renewal of UTG's educational system in the aftermath of COVID-19.

The grim financial situation that the University faces while the likelihood of being at risk, seeing the activities being halted altogether weakened the capacity of the institute. Students need to be assisted and motivated, staff need to be supported and which as a result will revive the institute and it may eventually help it regain the original position in the international higher education landscape.

UTG'S RECLAIM OF SPACE IN THE INTERNATIONAL HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM

Universities are large complex organisations that have multiple goals—educating undergraduates, training graduate students, facilitating and expanding research activities and serving various communities (Shai 2021). Each of these activities depends

on complex contributions by very smart faculty staff and administrators often in a highly decentralised way and each can be more or less successful. The UTG can reclaim its position in the international learning system through effective pedagogy and sound educational deliverance to students (which means that on average students who study at the university improve their intellectual prowess over time). Again, with the successful cultivation of high-quality research by faculties, there should be an increased flow of published and funded research results with measurable impact on both academic and non-academic spheres. As research is fundamental and it is through research that emerging issues can be discovered, it is, therefore, necessary that the university intensifies its commitment with a vision of becoming a powerhouse in the transformation of the Gambia through the creation, application and transfer of knowledge. Candidly speaking, the UTG has not been very active in research and publicities, now there is a need for the university governing body to up a sound and comprehensive strategic plan that will engender an action plan and design to achieve its overall aims and objectives. It goes without saying that the "UTG can make a massive investment in the area of research and development to achieve the highest standard of academic excellence, provided that the government can allocate adequate subvention to the university in support of her programs and projects" (Republic of the Gambia, 2021). The importance of research development at the university cannot be emphasised. This is because inasmuch as research add to the existing body of knowledge and at times, informs policy; research finding are also central to the shaping and delivery of quality curriculum and integrated community service (Shai 2021).

UTG can reclaim its space in the international higher education landscape through the deployment of mechanisms to encourage entry into collaborative arrangements with universities outside the country under which programs and materials can be secured in fields that are relevant to the learning needs. This collaborative initiative will encompass programs delivered through the traditional face-to-face as well as distance education methods. UTG's Masters Programme in International Relations and Diplomacy already features visiting scholars from Nigeria and South Africa who are engaged in remote teaching. This initiative ought to be replicated at the university as a whole and scholars from other continents should also be engaged in visiting scholarship to allow UTG students to benefit from the plurality of perspectives, experiences and best practices in their various areas of learning. Similarly, the UTG to continue to build and establish working relationships with existing tertiary level institutions in the country to strengthen its infrastructure as well as to develop the nucleus for an enduring and sustainable higher education system in the globe.

In realising the best academic output, the UTG should be keen to hire the best academic and administrative staff that would contribute and raise the image of the institution to a higher level.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the research of this paper, it is recommended that UTG embarks on investing in research and development as research is fundamental and it is through research that emerging issues can be discovered. Knowledge becomes relevant when it is generated within the context of the prevailing environment rather than import exotic ideas that usually do not fit for purpose of realities on the ground. To support this, the UTG seemingly lacks the

resources in terms of research and development, this inhibits the research production and pedagogy. Most universities are well known for their research strength; hence, the government should guarantee to support UTG by creating and giving adequate subvention to cater for the needs of the university.

Furthermore, human capital likewise any other resources is phenomenal, therefore human resource capacity building is a precondition in the success of every work of life thus UTG should be empowered to achieve this prerequisite. The university staff, especially academics should well rewarded in order to promote retention and interest on UTG as the employer of choice. Against this backdrop, there is a need to provide training for the academic staff to keep abreast of future emerging issues related to knowledge production. In the same vein, the university has to build the necessary capacity for the development of advanced technology as technology is now a very important requirement in fulfilling any academic and professional pursuits. We in the current academia realise that the technology base in the UTG is exceedingly insufficient. For example, the university has not yet subscribed to the turn it in facility (plagiarism detection software). Subscription to academic online facilities is also below the minimum standard as compared to most universities in other parts of the world.

The UTG should be very committed with a view to equipping her educational set-up, this has to do with the establishment of a standard library that would cater for the learning needs of her students. The foregoing submissions in the recommendation of this paper highlight the constraints of the university, however, UTG should attempt to restitute her original position in the international higher educational landscape if these recommendations are seriously taken on board.

CONCLUSION

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has put the world of higher education under great pressure and frustration. This crisis has forced Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs) to swiftly change their status quo, their ways of working and their environments. At the same time, the situation has also brought to light the rigidity of the current higher educational system, the rigidity confronted with and which will inevitably have to change as a consequence of current or future lockdowns. Lecture rooms are empty, and most students are following their courses online and in digital means. International mobility as we know is under threat due to travel restrictions and preventive measures that may be in place for a long period to come. In light of the above, the UTG is no exception in terms of the impacts of the Covid-19. Base on the recommendations given, drastic steps need to be followed to meet the target goals for UTG. Despite its imperfections, UTG is on right path if its age since establishment is anything to go by.

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