

Higher education in Mozambique during covid-19

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Abstract.

The current covid-19 pandemic that the world is experiencing is leading us to unexpected and complex context. The Covid-19 crisis has brought the disruption of higher education systems in Mozambique, affecting approximately 239 600 students and 5716 teachers by closing all institutions. The emergence of COVID-19 awakened controversy over the role of HEI. Questions have been raised about the role of HE in Mozambique to reach certain societal agendas – democratization, economic development and innovation. There is a demand for a full participation of university outside academia, both in society and in business. Thus, the study provides an overview of the higher education in Mozambique during covid-19 crisis. Methodologically, the study uses a comprehensive literature review, policy document analysis and statistical data from various official sources. While others students are coping well with online learning, others are experiencing difficulties due to lack of digital literacy and poor infrastructures. Despite effort over the last two decades, Mozambique has one of the lowest (20.9%) internet penetration rate of the population and one of the highest data cost in Africa as proportion of income. Thus, policies and effective strategies about connectivity, data cost, digital skills training and internet infra-structure must be considered to ensure inclusive education.

Keywords: Higher Education; University role; Covid-19; digital literacy; inclusive education.

Introduction

Mozambique is one of the poorest countries in the world, with around 60% of its population living below poverty line. The country has one of fastest growing economy in the world. However, so far, the progress made is limited compared with other countries in the region. There are many obstacles to overcome - such as poverty, domestic conflict, disease, corruption and natural disasters – yet there is opportunity to build a strong and sustainable economy that can compete in the region.

As elsewhere in the world, Higher Education (HE) in Mozambique is expected to be key driver for sustainable development. Hence, over the past 20 years, higher education institutions (HEIs) in Mozambique have grown dramatically, both in number of institutions and in the universe of students. This rapid expansion resulted from the reforms made for a more inclusive system. However, this massive growth has posed enormous challenges to the functionality of the subsystem and to the quality of its teaching. Studies suggest that the challenges of Mozambican HE are, among others, the quality of teaching provided by it, its consolidation and functional differentiation, its financing and research. It also suffers from a critical shortage of highly qualified/skilled professionals, gender imbalance distribution and high teacher student ratios.

Effort by Mozambique Government to establish a HE system that develops a highly skilled workforce for competing in the global economy have been done. The Government came up with its first Strategic Plan for HE in Mozambique (2000-2010), which focused mainly on expansion, regional and gender equity, on the need to decrease unit costs per student as well as to improve internal efficiency of the whole sub system. The Second Strategic Plan for HE in Mozambique (2011-2020) came up, which among others things, envisages on the quality and relevance of

the curriculum and research. But, judging by the current trajectory of growth, it appears unlikely this target will be achieved. Moreover, given the present sluggish performance of the economy, the government's plan in HE for expanding access and improving its quality may be halted in the near future if the policymakers do not find a new source of funding and contain the costs.

Comprehensive reviews of policy and reform of Mozambique HE system over the last decade have been conducted by Chilundo and Berverwijk (n.d), Mouzinho et al (2003), Langa (2013), Langa and Zavale (2015) and Fonteyne and Jongbloed (2018). The ultimate goal of reform made was to bring more effectiveness in terms of quality and access. But, for so many years, questions have been raised about the role of HE in Mozambique to reach certain societal agendas – democratization, economic development and innovation. This discussion has gained relevance recently, when Mozambique government, in response to the Covid-19 outbreak, closed all HEIs to curb the spread of the disease. These closures are severely impacting many families. Since, many HEIs immediately shifted from in-person learning to online learning distance. With this sudden shift away from classrooms, also HEIs were called to produce new knowledge and innovative solutions in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic. This brought controversy about the role/functions of the university needs to play in Mozambique context. Thus, the study provides an overview of the higher education in Mozambique during covid-19 crisis.

Higher Education in Mozambique Prior Covid-19

The history of HE in Mozambique dates back to the Portuguese-colonial period, 1962. The first institution, the General University Studies of Mozambique, was upgraded to University status in 1968 – Lourenço Marques University. Later, in 1976, Lourenço Marques University was transformed to Eduardo Mondlane University. After independence, the government attempted to build socialist ideology as political model of development, which soon led to a 15-year civil war, ending in 1992. Mozambican Civil War (1977–1992) also took its toll on educational efforts.

Like other developing countries, Mozambique's HE post-independence has had strides and trends, highlighting the shortage and drain of qualified staff due to exodus of Portuguese. In the mid-1980s, during the civil war, two public HEIs were created: Higher Pedagogical Institute (1985) and Higher Institute for International Relations (1986). Following the Peace Agreements in 1992, the country embarked on a major reconstruction of social infrastructures and started consolidation of change to a free market economy, initiated in 1987. Since the end of civil war, expanding access to HE has been a key policy goal for Mozambique Government. Thus, the first law enabling the establishment of private HE came in 1993 motivated by the inability of public sector to satisfy the increasing social demand (Langa and Zavale, 2015). Since then, a rapid expansion of HEIs also took place. Partly due to the establishment of the private universities, student numbers rose from below 4000 in 1990 to almost 230,600 in 2020 and from 3 public institutions in 1990 to 53 in 2020. Current distribution of students per knowledge area is illustrated in Figure 1. The increase in HEIs resulted in the growth of enrolled student numbers. Nevertheless, Eduardo Mondlane University, first HEI, remain by far the largest HE institution. Furthermore, the country has 53 HEIs offering 890 courses served by 5716 teachers, which shows clearly high teacher student ratios.

Although there has been a significant increase in enrolments in HEIs, the demand for HE is far from being met. To minimize the situation, the Government has embarked on provision of HE opportunity through distance learning. This is because distance learning offers education to masses than to a limited number of students as in traditional classroom programmes. However, monitoring and evaluation, quality assurance, and standards management have always been a concern for many HEIs.

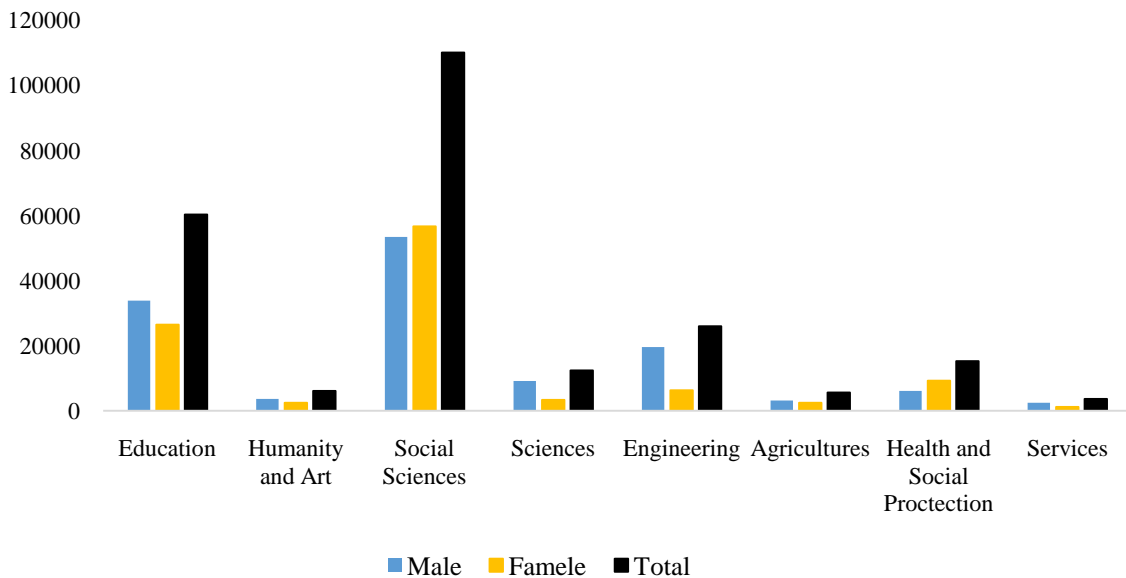


Figure 1: Students per area in HE, Source: National Directorate of Higher Education (2020)

Student demographics and Internet penetration are driving forces for distance learning. Although distance education enrolls large numbers of students into HEIs in Mozambique, it is limited to a few courses as it is not yet suitable for technical courses. This might be the reasons for less students in technical courses, as illustrated in Figure 1. Another reason, might be the presence of few HEIs specialized in Science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM). It was reported by African Development Bank (2019), that less than 25% of African higher education students are in STEM fields, with the majority of students studying social sciences and humanities.

For developing country like Mozambique, STEM fields may play a key role in boosting economic growth and industrialization. Despite the remarkable effort made by Mozambique Government to address gender imbalance distribution in STEM fields, the gap is still very pronounced, as illustrated in Figure 1. Now, the country is facing a public outcry for quality and relevance of teaching and research. Furthermore, Covid-19 is worsening the situation by pushing the country into deepest recession which will have effects on economy and public finances.

Quality Assurance and role of University

In Mozambique, the act that approves the Regulations for Licensing and Operation of HEIs, Decree law 46/2018, of 1 August, differentiates HEIs (universities, higher institutes, higher schools, polytechnics, or academies) in terms of their mission and dimension. The latter corresponds to the degree of coverage of the domains of knowledge or the number of the areas of knowledge covered by each type of HEI. Universities are HEIs belonging to Class A, which cover the greatest number of areas of knowledge. As for the mission, universities are the HEIs with the greatest number of functions, including teaching, research and extension. Universities and higher institutes may combine academic and professional training with research in a wide range of fields, whereas higher schools and polytechnics are devoted primarily to technical-professional training in specific, narrow fields (Langa and Zavale, 2015). Regardless of the legal personality and autonomy (scientific, pedagogical, financial and administrative), all HEIs are subject to assessment systems inherent to transparent markets, with information that guides informed decision-making by all stakeholders. The Decree law 63/2007, of December 31, has approved the National Higher Education Evaluation, Accreditation and Quality Assurance System (SINAQES), and created the National Higher Education Quality Assessment Council (CNAQ) as its implementing body. CNAQ started evaluating the quality of higher education, in 2014, as a pilot phase, and from 2017, as the effective phase. Currently, CNAQ accredits and certifies the courses offered by HEIs, aiming to ensure its functioning within the defined quality standards (CNAQ, 2017).

The Manual for External Evaluation of Courses and/or Programs edited by CNAQ comprises nine key quality indicators, 36 standards and 229 verification criteria. Indicator 1 refers to the mission and general objectives of the HEIs or its academic unit and consists of two quality standards and 16 verification criteria. Standard 1.1 establishes that every HEI or its academic unit must possess a mission clearly expressed, relevant, well disseminated and related to institutional and the country socio-economic development strategies. This highlights the need for HEIs to respond to contemporary demands and expectations, not distancing itself from the society and the market that finance it and need it most, particularly in this period of emergence of COVID-19.

Higher Education in Mozambique During Covid-19

In response to the Covid-19 outbreak, the Government of Mozambique closed all HEIs to curb the spread of the disease. Hence, many HEIs shifted from in-person learning to distance learning. However, Africa have the lowest internet access than another geographical region. It is estimated 526,710,313 internet user and 39.3% penetration rate – mainly in urban areas. Mozambique became 4th country in Africa to be connected to the internet in 1993. The Government, recognizing the potential of ICT to encourage development, have made serious efforts to increase internet access to, and usage of, internet and broadband in Mozambique. The internet growth is estimated 21,6% from year 2000 to 2020. Globalization of the HE subsystem is being driven by the spread of internet access. However, the country is still characterized by having lower internet penetration rate (20.9%) when compared to the rest of the continent (Figure 2). With this rate of internet use, it will be difficult to use ITCs as a tool for economic and social development. As in many developing countries, challenges to accessibility of internet are poor infrastructures, high cost of internet, low level of computer literacy and power availability. In the last de decade, the Government introduced a variety of innovations in education delivered over internet. Thus, even before COVID-19, the country was already growth in distance learning.

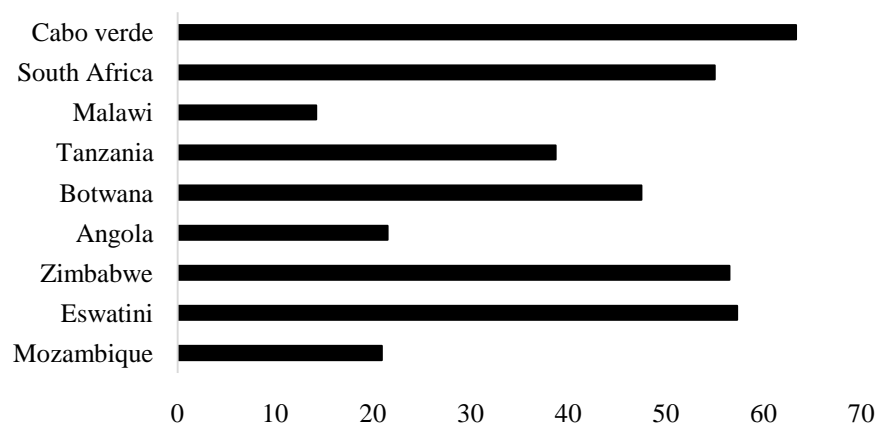


Figure 2: Internet Penetration rate, Source: Africa Internet Users (2020)

But, HEIs with experience in distance learning in Mozambique are three public funded (Pedagogical University, Eduardo Mondlane University, University Joaquim Chissano) and 8 private funded (Polytechnic University, Catholic University of Mozambique, Higher Institute Dom Bosco, Higher Institute of Education and Technology, Monitor Higher Institute, Higher Institute of Education Science from Distance, Wutive University and Higher Institute of management, economy, accountant and finance). The remaining 42 HEIs made massive effort to respond to the shock to education system by migrating from in-person to distance learning.

HEIs in Mozambique offer in total 890 courses. Recently, the survey made by National Higher Education Quality Assessment Council for 525 courses in 37 HEIs found that in 80% of courses 76-100% of teachers migrated to online learning. Also, in same 37 HEIs was found that 16% of courses indicated that 51-75% of teachers did not migrate to online. This reveals that some students did not attended any class remotely. Moreover, it was found that the 37 HEIs are using several platforms for distance learning, such as: Zoom, Google Classroom, Moodle, Email, WhatsApp, Skype and others, as presented in Figure 3.

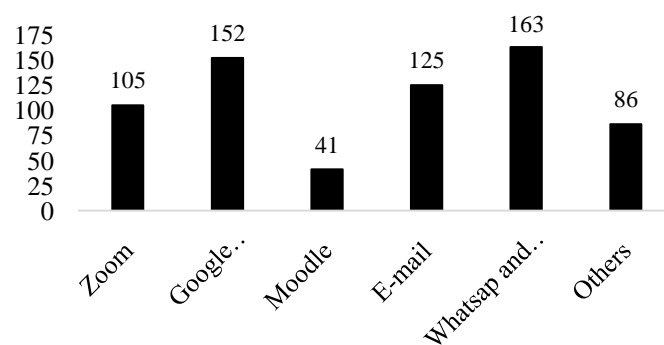


Figure 3: Platforms used HEIs for on-line teaching, Source: DNES (2020)

Many HEIs are using more than one platform for online teaching. This was expectable, since majority of HEIs were not prepared for sudden shift to online learning. In Figure 3, is evident that many HEIs are using WhatsApp and Skype and very few are using Moodle. However, monitoring and evaluation, quality assurance, and standards management are challenges when using platform which are not designed for online courses, such as: E-mail and WhatsApp. Recently, the Ministry of Science, Technology, Higher Education and Technical Professional decided gradually to reopen the HEIs in blended learning model. The academic calendar was readjusted so that no one is left behind.

Covid-19 and the role of HEIs

The emergence of COVID-19 awakened controversy over the role of HEI. Within university, some agree with Botomé *apud* Calderón (2004) who claims that there is confusion between “functions” and “activities” of a university: teaching, research and extension are activities and not “functions”! The function of a university, its backbone, is only the production and dissemination of knowledge. This is the essential function that should guide the activities of a university, and it should only meet the demands that fit this function (Botomé *apud* CALDERÓN, 2004). Others agree with Calderón (2004), who warns that limiting the role of the university to the production and dissemination of knowledge, makes it impossible for the university to respond to contemporary challenges.

There is a demand for a full participation of university outside academia, both in society and in business. McCowan and Schendel (2015) state that concerns about the impact of higher education are common to many countries, due to pressure on public fund, and the need to justify the allocation of taxpayers' money on one hand, and on the other hand, due to the high expectations placed on the university to solve complex and urgent contemporary challenges, including global warming and emerging epidemics. For these authors, the greater pressure for the universities in the southern hemisphere to demonstrate their impact is not surprising, as public funds are scarcer and society's challenges are too many (MCCOWAN and SCHENDEL, 2015).

The costs of expanding public HEIs have led governments to demand these institutions justify public funding, through direct and measurable social and economic impact. Nowadays, financial support to higher education, by governments and supranational organizations, moved from *deontological* to *functionalist* foundations: the justifications for funding is now based on contributions to local, national and world development, rather than a commitment to research or the search for truth as an end in itself (MCCOWAN and SCHENDEL, 2015).

Conclusion

Mozambique HEIs are of the sectors deeply affected by the multifaceted impact of Covid-19. The pandemic crisis revealed that technology is an important component of the education process. The country has one of the lowest (20.9%) internet penetration rate of the population. For those students attended the course, while others were coping well with online learning, others were experiencing difficulties due to lack of digital literacy and poor infrastructures. Thus, policies and effective strategies about connectivity, data cost, digital skills training and internet infra-structure must be considered to ensure that no one is left behind and teaching and learning can become ubiquitous even in resources-strapped environments. Also, projects that offer high pre-owned computers to educational purposes could help to reduce the gap between students. While covid-19 presents major challenges on quality and relevance by scarcity of qualified teachers, low level of internet, under funding and disparity of ratio students and teachers, it is also opportunity, especially for higher educational institutions, to create flexible, equity and inclusive curricula and embrace in new mode of learning that take advantage of technology, with significant benefits. On other hand, it was observed that some HEIs have been actively involved in combatting Covid-19 by producing hand sanitizers, masks, etc. There is a demand for a full participation of university outside academia, both in society and in business.

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