

## **It is Non-Stop Learning at SPU!**

### **Covid-19 and Our Transition to Online Education**

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Provision and access to education is a fundamental human right for everyone. However, the Covid-19 pandemic brought unprecedented educational disruption as a result of the subsequent closure of universities across the globe. At St. Paul's University (SPU), this emergent situation did not catch us flat-footed as the virtual campus was already in existence. SPU officially launched Distance & eLearning programmes on 22<sup>nd</sup> September 2012. Since then, it has continued to offer various programmes and has graduated learners in various fields. To a great extent, online education was associated with off-campus students; but currently all our students are part of it!

It was three weeks to the close of the January-April, 2020 semester when the first case of the Coronavirus disease was announced in Kenya. Like all other educational institutions in the country, SPU closed its doors. Through the use of various technological tools, all on-campus students and lecturers were instantly transitioned to online education to complete the semester. This was done through a mix of synchronous (real-time) and asynchronous (self-paced) technologies such as *Zoom*, *Google Meet*, *Piazza*, *Google Classrooms*, *Skype*, emails and *WhatsApp* audio recordings. Online open-book examinations were prepared and administered to students to facilitate closure of the semester. Online education efforts for on-campus students would then receive a boost as it became clear that the University needed to be conscious and strategic in planning for the May-August, 2020 semester. This was driven by the realization that Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) as it came to be commonly known across the world would not be a long-term strategy for online education with the global lockdown.

Elaborate consultative planning processes were pursued to facilitate communication of the vision to transition all lecturers and students to the SPU Learner Management System (LMS). The SPU LMS became the sole and central platform that would house the virtual campus in compliance with quality assurance requirements. The University eLearning (utilized by distance learning students) and vLearning (utilized by students enrolled in other modes of study) portals became critical as they provided educators and learners with a gate pass to the virtual classroom. In the virtual classroom; the social, cognitive and content presence is available. The learner engages with other learners and the facilitator in addition to interacting with the course content. The virtual campus experience is technology enabled from end to end.

Governance and administrative structures were strengthened to support and facilitate a seamless transition process. The Executive, Board of Management, Senate, faculties, students and support staff all united for a common cause that not only ensured there was business continuity and sustainability but also guaranteed non-stop learning, which enabled students meet their learning goals. This was followed by intense training and demo sessions to get everyone on board. Four cycles were executed with a hallmark achievement of 65 training demos which were realized between April and August, 2020. The demo sessions targeted the entire University community and various aspects were addressed using a multipronged approach. This promoted acquisition of necessary skills and competencies to survive and navigate through an online learning environment. The training arenas played a critical role in empowering educators and learners with technological skills that were instrumental in activating uptake and use of technology. Additionally, students without desktop computers, tablets or iPads could learn on their mobile phones as an investment had been made on a mobile phone application that is free for download and use by SPU users. The University then went ahead to provide internet bundles that were negotiated with service providers resulting in students getting 10GB monthly bundles. Lecturers benefited from 30GB bundles to enable them to facilitate online classes.

Student support services continued to be offered online. Many virtual meetings were held to discuss various issues affecting students. As we progressed, webinars, e-therapy sessions, Bible studies and daily online services took place uninterrupted by lack of physical proximity as various technologies bridged the gaps between the University and the learners. The University community became a beneficiary of what online education could offer. The gains realized as a result of working from home include: spending more time with family, enjoying more time flexibility, cost effectiveness as money that would have been used for fueling cars, commuting, paying for hostel services and other associated costs and risks that come as a result of being away from home were shelved.

For every cloud there is a silver lining. The Coronavirus pandemic has changed education forever. It has challenged the place of the traditional face-to-face class room based approach leaving in its place a technology receptive culture that is now anchored at SPU. A recent survey conducted by the SPU virtual campus on student and lecturer experiences with virtual teaching and learning indicated a high level of satisfaction with the outcomes. There is obviously a paradigm shift in the way online education is being perceived in comparison to face-to-face scenarios. It enabled access to learning at the convenience of the learner while ensuring that all stayed safe in compliance with the Ministry of Health guidelines.

Despite all the gains, COVID-19 has taught us a few lessons on the value of building and strengthening existing online learning communities that serve the purpose of ensuring that learners do not feel isolated while learning virtually. Isolation is an inherent characteristic of online education which requires strategic interventions to eradicate. Learners need to have a feel of togetherness and a sense of community that enables them to collaborate and interact with each other even though they are far apart. Scaffolding is also an important strategy for motivating and engaging learners and to facilitate deeper and more-self regulated learning. Online academic advising is also an area the University seeks to strengthen so that students can build meaningful connections within the online learning environment from the time of enrollment to graduation. To deal with online examinations, SPU is in the process of sourcing for an online examinations software that will enable learners to write synchronous examinations from where they are. Finally, the University is committed to implementing the principle of equivalence. What happens in face-to-face settings is consciously being mirrored in the online learning environment. This ensures that no teaching and learning experience is lost. Only the medium of instruction changes.

With this in mind, SPU is keen on leveraging technology to achieve the infinite possibilities it has to offer in making it the best University in online education in the region. Let us embrace the new normal: Online education is no longer nice to have, it is a must have as it has its own place in creating great value in learning experiences and in enabling quality delivery of education services. Remember, *“the illiterate of the 21<sup>st</sup> century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn and relearn”*-Alvin Toffler