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Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Work of University Administrators in Ghana

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Abstract: *This paper examined how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the work of university administrative and professional staff in Ghana. The pandemic has affected higher education institutions (HEIs) throughout the world in the areas of teaching, learning, research and the provision of administrative support services. In this paper, we used survey data and in-depth interview transcripts to describe how a selection of administrative and professional staff from eight public universities in Ghana are affected. The survey targeted members of the Ghana Association of University Administrators (GAUA) which is made up of non-teaching Senior Members of the public universities. We found that the work of university administrators in Ghana was mainly office based with little or no virtual working schedules or platforms. We, therefore, predict a drastic shift from office-based working to blended-working schedules among university administrative and professional staff in the post-COVID-19 era.*

Keywords: University administration, COVID-19, blended working, HR policy, professional competencies, technological challenge

Introduction

The novel coronavirus (COVID-19 pandemic) has become a serious global health emergency with dire consequences. As the pandemic continues to eclipse the world with lock-down and social distancing protocols implemented by countries to slow down the spread of the virus, there are discussions around the world about its impact on the different segments of the higher education sector in the areas of teaching, learning, research and funding. Beyond these important areas, it is noteworthy to discuss the impact of the crisis on university administrators. University administrators include non-teaching Senior Members in the public universities who provide administrative and/or professional services such as admissions, student affairs services, counselling and administrative support in general. There is little doubt about the fact that the pandemic has presented university administrators with much

uncertainty about the future of their work. Although we do not know any statistics about the working schedules of university administrators throughout the world before the pandemic, we speculate that the majority did not work virtually, mostly due to the nature of administrative support services. In a developing country like Ghana, internet connectivity challenges make it a daunting task for university administrators to work virtually. The question that arises during the pandemic is: What is the impact of lock-down and social distancing protocols on the work of the university administrator? We investigated this question by analysing data from a cross section of administrators in Ghana's public universities about their working schedules before, during and after the crisis. The objectives were to help unpack the nature of services rendered by university administrators, the medium of work and what may change in the post-COVID-19 era.

Review of Relevant Literature

The varied work of HEIs, in this case universities, is carried out by different categories of staff. University administration is one of the most important career areas in higher education management/administration. It is carried out by people with different professional and educational backgrounds and varied competencies that are required to work in a rapidly changing academic work environment. For the purpose of this paper, we briefly explored some literature on the theory and practice of educational administration in the Ghanaian context and the impact of COVID-19 on higher educational administration.

Theory and Practice of Educational Administration

Educational administration is a distinct discipline that plays a key role in achieving the goals of an educational enterprise. It is very important to appreciate the underlying concepts in the global context and apply them to appreciate the dynamics within the Ghanaian context.

Empirical evidences have shown that educational administration has evolved. Adebayo (2001) postulates that there has to be administration in any organisation in so far as human beings are gathered together in a hierarchical order, thereby making use of human and material resources towards the achievement of objectives. According to Pont, Nusche and Moorman (2018), educational administration is a process of utilising appropriate materials in such a way as to effectively promote the development of human qualities. It, therefore, includes the totality of those techniques and procedures employed in operating the educational organisation in accordance with established policies (Akinwumi and Jayeoba 2004). Consequently, Okendu (2012) stresses the need for both human and material resources to be brought together within the school system to engender any effective teaching and learning process. This view is premised on earlier views expressed by Knezevich (1984) who thought of the concept as a social process that creates, maintains, stimulates, controls and combines human and material energy within an integrated system that has been designed to achieve predetermined (educational) objectives. For instance, Campbell, Corbally and Ramseyer (1966) observe that educational administration consists of facilitating the

development of goals and policies basic to teaching and learning, stimulating the development of appropriate programmes, recruiting and managing personnel and the procurement of materials to implement teaching and learning goals. This view is supported by Amadi (2008) who defines educational administration as a process through which the school administrators arrange and coordinate the resources available to education for the purpose of achieving the goals of the educational system. Kaur and Kaur (2016), on their part, opine that educational administration is about formulating the general plans and policies for an educational enterprise. What these connote is that there must be a goal at which human and material resources are aimed to achieve and lay credence to the earlier views that educational administration concerns itself with the achievement of educational goals of facilitating teaching and learning.

Roles and Nature of Work by University Administrators

In the opinion of Mohanty (2005), university administrators concern themselves with all the activities incidental to the achievement of the pre-determined goals. They do this through the proper utilisation of resources (human and material) which borders on some aspects of management, regarded as functions of administration. These functions include planning (goal setting, vision, mission of the school, etc.), organising (marshalling and deployment of both material and human resources), directing, coordinating, supervising, controlling and evaluating. Effah (2017) broadly categorises the functions into *advisory, procedural, supervisory* and *managerial* roles. This means that all the day-to-day functions of the university administrator could be seen from the viewpoint of offering expert advice on the progress of an issue, adhering to established protocols and following laid-down bureaucratic procedures (administrative procedures and processes), and providing leadership or the management of resources (human and material). The performance of these functions has undoubtedly been influenced by the pandemic.

Similarly, Amadi (2008) outlines the task areas of the educational administrator into five main areas of curriculum/instructional functions, staffing function, student personnel function, financial and physical resources management function and the function of school/community relations. Consequently, any task of the educational administrator could be said to fall under one of the above broad categorisations which include planning, organising or evaluating an educational activity. Duze (2012) explains that the primary concern of university administrators is how to manage resources allocated to them and do so by managing budgets, human resources, policy, shape institutional priorities and practices. They plan and make decisions on course materials, recruitment and training of instructors and the use of communication tools.

In the Ghanaian context, university administration can be explained in two breadths; in one breadth, it encompasses all top-level management staff of the university, which is made up of the Vice-Chancellor, the Pro Vice-Chancellor, Registrar, Provosts, Directors and Deans who are charged to implement the university's strategy. They are supported by administrative and professional staff who include General Administrators, Chartered Accountants, Lawyers,

Public Affairs Specialists, Engineers, Architects, Planners, Surveyors, Land Economists, Estate Officers, Procurement Officers, Medical Officers, Pharmacists, ICT Specialists, Human Resource Managers, Security Experts, Dentists, etc. (Asamoah-Boateng, 2020). This paper focuses on the latter group of university administrators who play middle-to-senior-level management roles.

Methods

This study adopted a mixed method research approach to unearth the opinions of university administrators about how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected their work. The online survey strategy was used to collect data from a selection of administrative and professional staff from eight public universities in Ghana. The survey instrument was sent to 11 public universities out of which 48 administrators from seven universities and one technical university responded. We conducted in-depth interviews with five purposively selected respondents who provided ideas about the topic. These interviews were conducted by telephone from May 26 to May 30, 2020 after we had received the survey responses. We used the interview transcripts to contextualise some of the responses received from the survey. The survey report was analysed through the use of graphs. The respondents were drawn from the following public universities: the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST), the University of Energy and Natural Resources (UENR), the University of Ghana (UG), the University of Health and Allied Sciences (UHAS), the University for Development Studies (UDS), the Accra Technical University (ATU), the University of Mines and Technology (UMaT), Tarkwa and the University for Professional Studies, Accra (UPSA) (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1:** Percentage Sample Distribution of Universities for the Survey
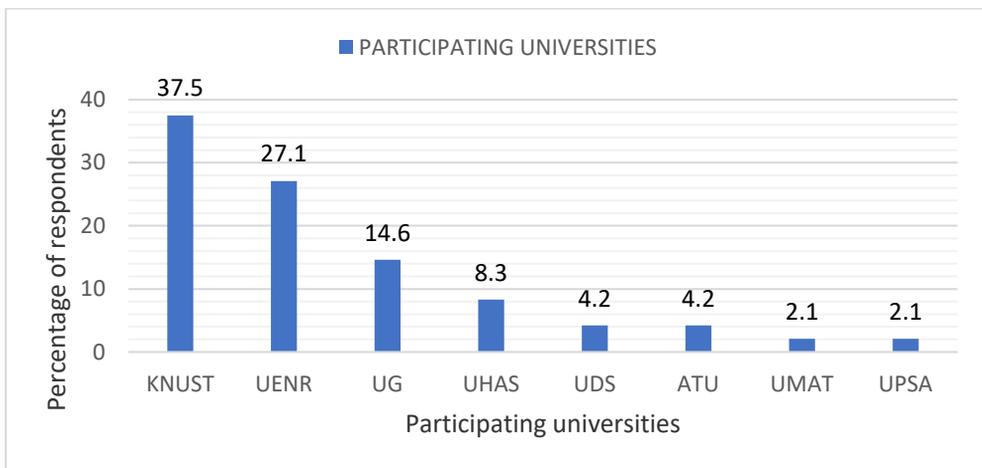
Source: Online Survey (May 2020)

Results and Discussions

Administrative Department of the Respondents

The survey solicited information on the particular office in which respondents worked in their institution. From the survey, the Registrar's Offices recorded the highest respondents with 54.2 percent. This is partly so because, most of the administrative departments in the universities in Ghana are under the Registrar's Offices. This was followed by respondents from the Finance Directorate, Works and Physical Development Department, Internal Audit and the IT Directorate (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Percentage Distribution of University Administrative Departments
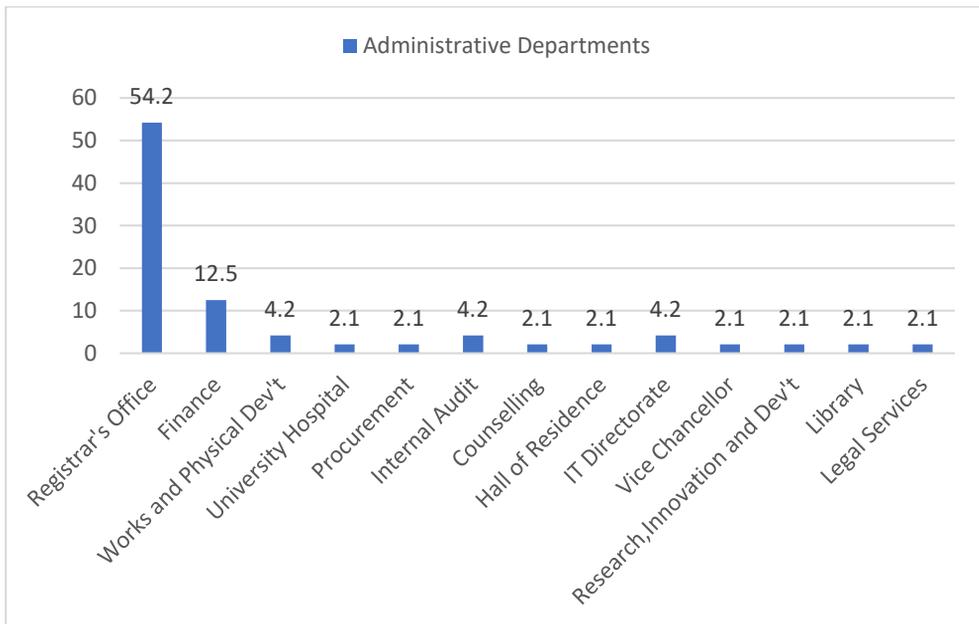
Source: Online Survey (May 2020)

The rest of the offices included Procurement, Counselling, Vice Chancellor's Office and the Library. The nature of the work of the respondents confirms the general trend in the literature (Asamoah-Boateng 2020; Duze 2017; Tolman & Calhoun 2019) that university administrators perform administrative, teaching and learning support services in various departments such as general administration, finance and academic quality assurance.

Pre- Covid-19 University Administrative Work

The results of the survey revealed that the work of the majority of respondents (60.4%) were mostly or entirely office-based (See Figure 3).

Figure 3: Percentage Distribution of the Nature of Respondents' Work Before COVID-19 Restrictions
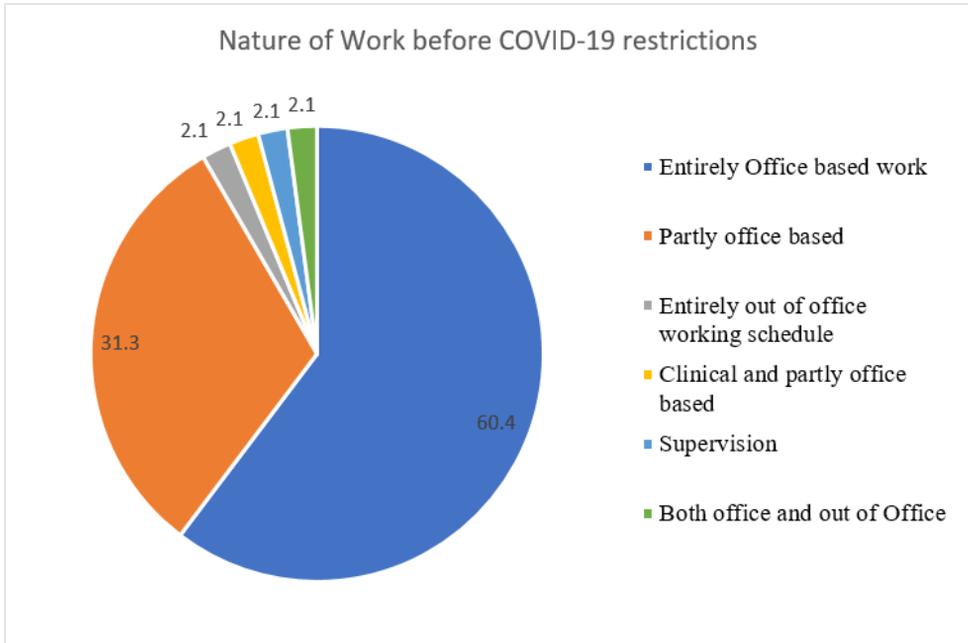
Source: Online Survey (May 2020)

Although there are no official statistics on how university administrators in Ghana performed their day-to-day administrative functions before the crisis, the survey report shows that work was mostly done intensively in office. Even where technology could allow for blended-working schedules among university administrators, work culture and other constraints made it less attractive to work virtually. This involved physically performing administrative work in the office premises. This was the case for the majority, as 58.3 percent of the respondents indicated that they did not employ any virtual platforms in performing their roles. The nature of university administrative work is mostly office-based because most of the roles involve face-to-face contacts with the various clientele (i.e. faculty, students, prospective students, parents). There is, however, a growing attempt to provide online services. This is often hampered by technological challenges such as poor internet connection and cost of data. The next category of respondents (31.3%) indicated that the nature of their work was blended; partly office work and field work. This suggests that looking at the nature of university administrator's work, restrictions of the pandemic would have severe negative effects on productivity. The survey further revealed that 39.6 percent of the respondents used virtual platforms of various kinds to help in performing their roles.

The survey revealed that out of the 39.6 percent of the respondents who used virtual platforms in performing administrative roles before Covid-19 restrictions, Zoom had the highest usage of 41.4 percent, followed by Skype (37.9%), Facebook (17.2%) and WhatsApp (17%). The least used platforms were 'intercom', 'emails' and 'Ask the Librarian' which recorded 3.5 percent each (See Figure 4).

Figure 4: Percentage Distribution of the Various Virtual Platforms Used by the Respondents
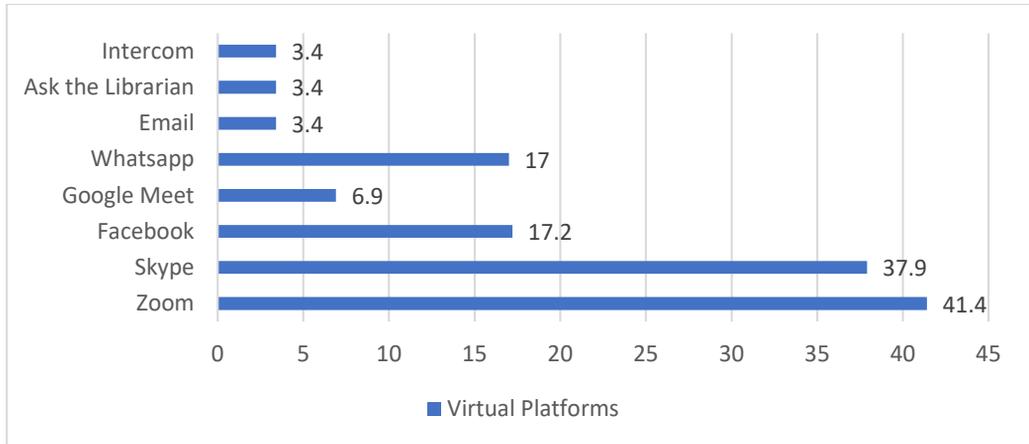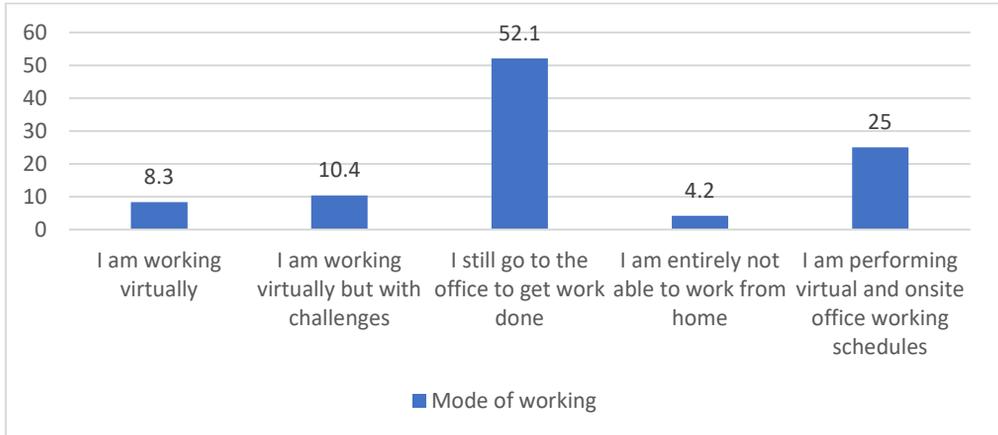

Source: Online Survey (May 2020)

Work Schedules in the Covid-19 Era Among University Administrators

Ghana temporarily closed universities in March 2020. This change made university administrators adjust their work schedules due to social and physical distancing protocols. The survey revealed that the majority of respondents (52.1%) continued to go to their offices to work, while 25 percent indicated they combined both virtual and in-office working schedules. It follows that the majority of the respondents did not adopt the use of any virtual work schedules but continued to perform their duties only when they were in the office. The survey further revealed that 10.4 percent of the respondents said, 'I am working virtually but with challenges' while 8.3 percent said 'I am working virtually' (see Figure 5).

Only a small percentage of the respondents said they were working virtually in the COVID-19 era without challenges. A Deputy Registrar explained that:

> … The crisis has rendered me 'redundant' because I am unable to work although there is work to be done. I go to the office twice a week to make sure that administration functions are rendered. I try to work from home, but it is virtually impossible because the university is not programmed that way…everything is office-based… (Phone interview, Deputy Registrar, KNUST, 30.05.2020)

**Figure 5:** Percentage Distribution of Respondents' Working Schedule During the COVID-19 Restrictions

Source: Online Survey (May 2020)

The Post-COVID-19 University Administrator in Ghana

As at the time of writing this paper, universities in Ghana continue to be closed and there is growing uncertainty regarding how universities will resume academic work. Much the same way, university administrators are uncertain as to how their work will change during and in the post-COVID-19 era. The survey revealed that the majority of the respondents (76.6%) envisaged a blend of 'virtual and in-office working schedules will be introduced', while 12.8 percent said 'virtual working schedules will be the new normal' (see Figure 6).

Figure 6: Percentage Distribution of the Nature of Work Among University Administrators Post COVID-19
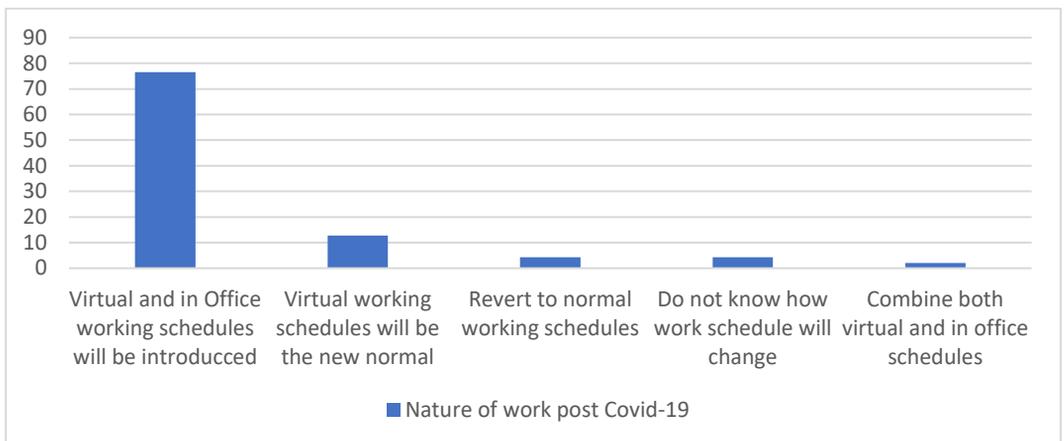
Source: Online Survey (May 2020)

One Accountant stated as follows:

> … Even those of us in accounts section who did not think about taking our accounting work virtual, this crisis shows we must start to do things differently. We cannot continue to be glued to our offices… (In-depth interview, Senior Accountant, UENR-Sunyani, 27.05.2020)

A Senior Assistant Registrar shared the views of the Accountant by saying:

> … The pandemic has showed that we have to shift to virtual working schedules. Look, there are so many tasks we can perform without coming to the office everyday… (In-depth interview, Senior Assistant Registrar, KNUST 29.05.2020)

The views of the respondents pointed to a need to appraise current work schedules of university administrators and design work in a way that staff can perform their duties and achieve the same results as though they were in the office.

Conclusion and Policy Implications

University administrators play critical roles in universities all over the world. In Ghana, most of the administrators worked in the office, with limited use of virtual platforms. Even during pandemic shutdowns, the majority of people chose to go to the office to work. There is some increase in blended-work schedules, and as the shutdown continues, workers are anticipating that there will be increased virtual work in the post-COVID world (Cohen 2020). The technology limitations that exist in Ghana at the moment may slow this, but the expectation is that long-term blended work will be the new normal. There is the likelihood that there may be major changes for the universities. Computers, devices and networks would need to be improved and training provided. Human resource policies would have to be updated to reflect the needs of modern times. Universities would have to create enabling environments to support staff as virtual work platforms become more important and more common. We believe that such changes will improve the work of the university administrator in the ever-changing world.

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