

The impact of COVID-19 on International Students

By Grace Atuhaire, KASEA Uganda (current scholarship for PhD in political studies at University of Tübingen)
Tübingen/Germany in May 2020

The reality of COVID-19 to African students living away from home has given a common nostalgic feeling of a desire for a strong sense of community, questioning the role of our embassies and if such an African diaspora community exists or if it does, where is it?

The news about COVID intensified here in Germany while I was in Berlin. From 09 to 12 March 2020, I participated, along with my fellow KAAD scholars in a workshop entitled "Photography: Images and their Impact". Some of the sentiments shared at the time was the hope that the pandemic would disappear right through the winds that are supposed to usher in summer. I am a Ugandan KAAD scholar pursuing my doctorate in political science at the University of Tübingen.

The photography workshop brought together different KAAD scholars. Beyond learning new knowledge in a field of interest like photography, the workshops are an opportunity to connect with fellow KAAD scholars. I was happy to meet some of the scholars I was acquainted to while I was learning the German course in Bonn, from May 2019 - November 2019. The workshop, the conversations, learning and praying together created a deeper sense of community in a new country. Although we are all in different universities all over the country, the similarities of our experiences in new places, away from home and our ideals, as we shared them, made it easier to become closer to one another. As soon as the workshop ended and we were all settled back to our universities, the total lockdown was initiated in Germany and subsequently the rest of the world.

I moved to Tübingen in December 2019 and the lockdown has found me with one new friend and a fellow KAAD scholar. However, I live in a shared WG with my landlord who is in the category of the most at-risk persons which increases the intensity of fear and a high sense of responsibility in ensuring extra care to prevent the spread of COVID-19 to our doorsteps.

Following up on the processes in my country has been both a leap of faith as well as an additional frustration. I am thankful that so far, in Uganda, we haven't had any cases of death caused by COVID-19. However, it is becoming common to hear of a death caused by a non-COVID-19 related case. Besides, the news of the racial treatments of Africans in China, and non-actions of African embassies to support African students in Italy substantiated criticism of the foreign affairs policies of African member states. More so, the silence from the African Union office of the Diaspora leaves a lot of room for speculation regarding the overall relationship of the office with Africans in the Diaspora.

Outside my normal school obligations, a desire for social connections activated online communities. However, the online communities don't only give a false sense of community but are also time-consuming in between the connection problems. Besides these online communities, I have been faced with the reality that although I desired and I am grateful to pursue my doctorate in Germany, the social circumstances have changed and will remain different for the rest of 2020. In my innovative solitude, I have enjoyed long walks around the city of Tübingen, connecting with online prayer communities and getting used to online masses.

The KAAD community is a great sense of bonding and friendships but for us whose connections are left between the distant cities of the south, east, north and west still leave one in both isolation and need of a community in the new city. The truth is, the lockdown has unlocked the overwhelming desire of being around our loved ones, and when all of this is over, which is a matter of when, we will all need to get a moment to hug our loved ones.