

Report: Research stay at the University of The Gambia from 16 March – 5 June 2020

Friday, 26 June 2020

I arrived in the Gambia on 12 March 2020. The Gambia at this point has not registered a case of Covid-19. However, 2 weeks after my arrival, the President of the Gambia in a televised speech announced a state of public emergency (SoPE) part of which include closing academic institutions such as the University of The Gambia (UTG).

The closing of UTG to students, academic and support staff as a result of the SoPE upends part of my research stay plan. UTG eventually resorted to virtual lectures and when I made inquiries from the faculty of medicine and allied health sciences about giving virtual lectures as part of my stay, I was informed to wait until all pending/ missed lectures are delivered to students.

Because of the Covid situation, UTG canceled or postponed most of their planned conferences and symposia. Notwithstanding, I attended 2 virtual webinars hosted by the department of public and environmental health called Epidemiology hour series (Epi hour series). Presentations during the webinar and academically engaging discussions on different themes of Covid-19 and global health issues are useful and helpful to my research project.

I and two Gambian graduate students - Samba Bah, PhD candidate at Ohio University and Ebrima Baldeh, Masters student at New York University in the United States are co- hosts to weekly Zoom Covid panel discussion streamed live on Facebook. We conceived this idea to contribute our quota collectively towards the fight against Covid-19. Our discussions which is still ongoing revolves around Covid-19 in the context of Gambia, Africa and the wider world and has wider viewership in Gambia and abroad.

Themes discussed thus far include amongst others- evolution of Covid-19, outbreaks in the context of developing countries, epidemiological response to Covid-19, importance of surveillance (community and laboratory) and contact tracing, risk communications, enforcement of state of public emergency from the lens of law enforcement etc. Our panelists with diverse backgrounds- epidemiologists, laboratory scientist, public health specialists, legal scholars, activists, students and law enforcement officer are drawn from Gambia, Brazil, United States, Guyana, Senegal, Madagascar etc. The panel discussions are academically engaging and very useful to the hosts, panelists and global audience.

Few weeks ago, following the easing of the SoPE in the Gambia, I met the provost of the school of medicine and allied health sciences together with other department heads and administrative staff to discuss my proposed lectures. They offered me two slots on Google Meet to deliver my lectures (virtually) on 11 June and 18 June 2020.

I delivered my first lecture on Thursday, 11 June to approximately 45 students (mostly nursing students) on basic literature search. The lecture lasted over an hour and include questions and answers. Feedbacks I received from the coordinator assigned to supervise the lecture and students were positive.

The second and final lecture was delivered on 18 June 2020 to over 20 students. The topic was introduction to scientific writing and lasted about 2 hours. The last 30 minutes of the lecture was used to demonstrate EndNote referencing which the students requested for through the coordinator. The feedback received from both the coordinator and students suggest good understanding of the topic and EndNote demonstration was quite interactive and engaging.

Other students that missed the lectures have reached out to me to organize similar lectures for them after their final exams. I am also in discussions with a lecturer at the Gambia College School of Nursing and Midwifery and School of Public and Environmental Health to deliver similar lectures with the same themes. I am also using part of my leisure time to support UTG students currently working on their research projects. I feel proud reciprocating support I received during my undergraduate days and giving back to my alma mater.

Despite the Covid situation in the Gambia and globally, I made best use of the little time I had at the UTG. The webinars I attended and our weekly Covid panel discussions were quite enriching academically and the networking was great. I have and continue to learn a lot from these discussions, and I hope the experience gained will make me a better researcher and global health analyst. The two lectures I delivered to students was also academically engaging and I hope the students gained a lot from the substance delivered.

I am highly satisfied with the experience and the opportunity given to me by the NRSNGH to undertake a research stay at the UTG. The experience is 100% positive and the facilitation from the coordinator and staff of the NRSNGH at NUST and UIO was impressive. Let me use this opportunity to thank the coordinator and members of NRSNGH board for giving me this opportunity.

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