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Calamities Abound: Impact of COVID-19 Face-to-Screen Induced Learning among University Students in Zimbabwe

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Abstract: *The outbreak of -COVID19 on Mother Earth prompted for reactions, adjustments and novelties on all aspects of life, including the education sector. In universities world-wide, modes of lesson delivery were compelled to change from the usual face-to-face to online teaching strategies. Researchers of this qualitative study explored the impact of COVID-19 on the public university students' learning in Zimbabwe. Data was collected through interviewing students online and observations. Thematic approach was used for data analysis. Findings showed that university students' shift from face-to-face to online learning brought a plethora of challenges which include: lack of e-learning hardware, limited technical know-how, expensive data bundles, network challenges, frequent power-cuts, home-learning disturbances and low-teacher online response. There were also some advantages, for instance, technological development on the part of the students, lecturers and universities towards world standards. The study recommended for universities and national intervention especially on: engaging mobile network operators to subside data costs and e-learning gadgets funding. There is also need for lecturers and students' online instructional enhancement and electronic gadget operation workshops to make the involved parties prepared for this new-normal at hand.*

Keywords*: Zimbabwe, COVID 19, face-to-screen learning, e-learning, public universities*

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1. Introduction

Our world is always evolving and bringing changes to humanity. Covid-19 outbreak prompted changes that could be felt in all sector, including the delivery of education. Universities decided to teach online. These changes affected students in variegated degrees, according to their countries. Those from developed countries were the least affected while those from developing countries have stories to tell.

Developed countries, most of them with their already-in-use e-learning facilities, such as Spain and China, successfully switched on to distance learning (UNESCO, 2020). In USA, virtualization of education has been a practice for most of its top universities, therefore, adapting to Covid-19 new normal of minimizing contact between teachers and students had minimum hustles for most tertiary centers (Lukins, 2020). For their students, online learning meant less expenditure on their education and this became a motivator for most of them coupled with professor efficacy, it meant a successful paradigm shift for

all concerned (UNICEF, 2020). For universities like the Lima, the semester for April to June, 2020, was already successfully 100% virtual and only some few adjustments were needed to improve delivery and thus enhance performance (Gallagher & Palmer, 2020). Research in the USA has shown that, unlike in most countries of the world, participation in lessons was higher in virtual format than in face-to-face setup (Lukins, 2020).

In other less developed countries, the story was different. In India, the government and the responsible ministries, as in most countries in the world, were caught unaware by the pandemic. To mitigate the effects of Covid-19 on university education, they made it compulsory for all universities to adopt online teaching in all tertiary institutions (Mishra, 2020). However, not all tertiary institutes in this country were readily prepared for online teaching (UNESCO, 2020) although both students and lecturers found themselves compelled to move over to online learning.

Africa had its own unique experience. The Kenyan government closed all schools, its universities and colleges nationwide as a response to Covid-19 in March 2020 (Jelimo, 2020). The country also proceeded to ban face-to-face lectures across the country (Makoni, 2020). This in essence disrupted about 17 million learners countrywide. The effects have been more severe for the underprivileged (UNESCO, 2020). Tanzania also faced similar challenges, for instance connectivity issues, (Mkwizu & Ngaruko, 2020) while in Uganda, over 15 million learners were shut out of classrooms and confined to their homes without access to instruction and uncertain of their future (Kymazima, 2020).

In South Africa, Covid-19 gave rise to the question of feasibility in the benefits of online learning for all university students because of the magnitude of inequalities in the country's context (Mpungose, 2020). Research in South Africa has shown that the majority of black tertiary students were still disadvantaged as far as e-learning is concerned (UNESCO, 2020). Mpungose (2020) argued that this digital divide emanated as a result of gender, race, geographical location and also social class. While e-learning can be possible when students are on campus in South Africa, it is a real challenge to realize 100% online teaching and learning for universities with students accessing lessons from their homes (Schoonwinkel et al, 2020).

The Zambian experience was also a difficulty one; all universities were called upon by the government to adopt online learning. This was a great challenge to most universities and students alike, while some students were challenged with accessibility to internet, lecturers had efficacy problems (UNESCO, 2020). Zambia already lacks a robust education system and it was hard hit by the pandemic in terms of delivery as the majority of students were already marginalized (Zeleza & Okanda, 2020).

In Zimbabwe, the trend was also similar to that of other developing countries. Soon after the schools were closed, Shumba , Mutanga and Mucha (2020) said that implementation of alternative education options (online techniques) were used to reach out a total of 182,000 learners, though with the following challenges: inadequate human and financial resources, despite setting up the Education Cluster COVID-19 Preparedness and Response Plan. The financial situation was perpetuated by the already economic crisis in the country which was worsened by the lockdown which incapacitated industrial functions, (Simango & Mwayera, 2020).

This study focused on the impact of COVID-19 on students in the public, state owned universities in Zimbabwe. The country has thirteen public universities and six non-state (private) universities, a total of nineteen all of which are regulated and monitored by the Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education (ZIMCHE).

2. Literature Review

A lot of valuable literature on Covid-19 and education is available online. In USA, research by Gallagher and Palmer (2020) showed that most universities in the USA were pushed into online learning although the pre-pandemic era education was geared to change to meet 21st century internet requirements. UNESCO (2020) found out that most of these USA universities reduced and discounted their fees to adopt online learning completely at 100% for all learners. This came as a relief for most tertiary learners whose participation on online learning was discovered to exceed face-to-face interactions with tutors (Lukins, 2020). This was attributed by the fact that students would do their lessons when they had time and at a place of their choice. Coupled with less tuition fees, the motivation for participation became quite high (UNICEF, 2020). However, like in all new innovations,100% adoption of online education had its teething problems which helped to develop and smoothen the whole process for the proceeding semesters (Gallagher & Palmer, 2020).

The case of Singapore differs greatly with cases elsewhere in the world. Lim (2020) said that face-to-face contact greatly reduced and universities decided to go fully online for teaching and learning. Although most of the faculty members already had competencies in online teaching, more background preparation was needed to make infrastructure, students and lecturers ready for a 100% online program of education (Lin, 2020). Fortunately, there were not as much challenges in the area of access to internet or hardware as all the tertiary students were already involved in blended learning at school (UNESCO, 2020).

A study conducted in India indicated that the country initiated online learning platforms like Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC) which hosted online courses for tertiary students across the country (UNESCO, 2020). However, UNESCO (2020) recorded that this served to

enhance and bring to light gaps in accessibility and affordability of internet by way of the students in the country. The good part is that it helped India begin improving online accessibility hardware and infrastructure across the vast country for its learners, an ongoing process which may take some time.

In Africa, the scenario was rather different. In Kenya, the government adopted a remote and digital mode of learning which has since seen an increase in learning gaps. Kenya's response included the Education regulator body, the Commission for University Education (CUE) issuing guidelines to help universities programs meet quality thresholds (Makoni, 2020). CUE required all universities to fully disclose capacity and preparedness or lack thereof in distance learning delivery targeted for virtual learners and foreign students (Waruru, 2020). Jelimo (2020) argued that most learners were excluded from online education due to internet access challenges and reliable electricity, meaning that most of the student population were marginalized (Miller, 2020).

Despite coming up with the afore said measures in making sure universities adopt online learning for students, research has shown that, according to Waruru (2020), there has been a lot of resistance from both lecturers and students in various universities. Their argument being that access to a reliable broadband was an elusive to most of them. Even though some universities partnered with network providers to make rate affordable, this was not the case for all universities making the bridging of the digital divide between urban and rural Kenya too glaring (Miller, 2020).

For Tanzania, e-learning is not a new phenomenon, the Open University of Tanzania has for quite some time been offering all study programs purely through distance-learning mode since when it was established in 1992 (Ngalomba, 2020). Similarly, Tanzania's oldest university, the University of Dar es Salaam, has put a number of initiatives in place through information and communications technology (ICT) for e-learning purposes (UNESCO, 2020). Again, as Ngalomba (2020) stated, a dedicated center for virtual learning was put in place. However, the center lacked mandate to facilitate eLearning for all universities and there was also a fragmented approach with each university operating its own Learning Management System (LMS) leading to duplication of money, effort and time.

As in most African states, Tanzanian students faced the same challenges like power outages and poor internet connectivity (Mkwizu & Ngaruko, 2020). The other factor that is unique in Tanzania is that eLearning programs are donor funded, which is a huge disadvantage for the country as it will kill the whole process if the donor community pulls out (Ngalomba, 2020). For most of Tanzania, higher education is blended learning where eLearning is put together with face-to-face lectures. This has seen most students leaning heavily on face-to-face classroom education as most cannot readily access learning materials online (Mtebe & Raphael, 2020). The majority of university students in Tanzania lack access to internet, those who can access, cannot afford data bundles and most teaching staff were found to also lack efficacy in the implementation of online lectures and programs where infrastructure was available (Ngalomba, 2020).

Ugandan reacted to the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic closuring its education centers to contain the spread of the virus (Kymazima, 2020). The Education Ministry response plan included distribution of home study kits and broadcasting lessons on both radio and television directly to learners at home. Although the idea of online and blended learning was on higher education agenda for two decades, (Nakayiwa, 2020) and optical fiber cable-based network was put in place, there were challenges. Most universities failed to put in place processes for online learning; the development of ICT infrastructure was not sufficient for online learning in Uganda (ICODL, 2020). Also, the staff attitude was negative (Nakayiwa, 2020) the issue of unaffordability of both hardware and data come into play (Kymazima, 2020) making online learning in higher education in Uganda a long way off-board. Some universities in Uganda therefore turned to other platforms like WhatsApp group chats (ICODL, 2020).

In some South African universities, lack of access to online learning coupled with lack of digital skills for both students and lecturers has given rise to the risk of the students being left behind by their privileged peers in good universities (UNESCO, 2020). Kupe (2020) reported that some universities managed online lectures blended with telephone calls and e-mail communication. Other universities engaged in step-by-step guide on online skill acquiring (Schoonwinkel et al, 2020). These moves show that 100% online learning was something new and an unchartered ground for all universities that were not originally distance learning centers (Kupe, 2020). Challenges included lack of connectivity and lack of appropriate hardware for a significant number of students (Mpungose, 2020; Schoonwinkel et al, 2020).

Zambia was also affected in a similar way. The pandemic posed enormous challenges causing accelerated and profound changes in its higher education, for instance, calling for reprioritization in operations which eventually affected higher education culture in all its universities. This exposed serious gaps in terms of infrastructure and 21st century compliant material for the system (UNESCO, 2020). Zelela and Okanda (2020) argued that the country was definitely caught unaware and off-guard; while serious efforts were being made in making education at all levels accessible to its citizens, elitism was fast showing itself in the country with the majority of students unable to access online learning.

In Zimbabwe universities, Mukeredzi and Mashininga (2020) observed similar changes and challenges in Zimbabwe, inadequate resources, such as, infrastructure,

e-learning gadgets and unaffordability of data bundles being the major challenges. Gora (2020) added erratic power supplies, limited access to internet networks and data costs, especially to students in rural and other remote areas of the country where the students have to travel for long distances for the service. Gora (2020) also raised the e-learning difficulties that the students living with disabilities face as well as the challenges associated with students that require practical or hands- on activities.

Research questions

1. What were the university experiences due to the outbreak of COVID 19
2. Which changes benefitted them?
3. Which are the challenges that the students encountered?
4. What are the possible mitigation measures?

3. Methodology

This study used a qualitative research design, an approach that focuses on illuminating and clarifying social actions of the participants as well as their situations. Austin (2014) argued that it seeks to obtain information that discloses existing phenomenon by asking participants about their experiences of the things that happen in their lives, hence, their perceptions and attitudes. This means that, the researchers obtained perceptions and attitudes of 10 university student informants on the impact of COVID-19 on their learning experiences.

The researchers analyzed the data using the thematic approach. The themes that existed were furnished with quoted real information from the informants, explanations and related literature.

4. Results and Discussion

The emerging themes can be classified as university experiences, changes that benefited the students', challenges experienced by the students and possible mitigation measures.

4.1 University experiences

Universities in Zimbabwe, just like universities across the globe as reported by UNESCO 2020, switched to online learning as a result of COVID-19 outbreak. Unlike the situations observed by Lukins (2020) in developed countries where teachers and students had minimum hustles in the shift, there were many challenges that were encountered in Zimbabwe universities.

The online learning adopted in Zimbabwe is similar to that described by Kupe (2020) in South Africa where some universities managed online lectures blended with telephone calls and e-mail communication. Such an operation has its own challenges.

Although the Education Cluster COVID-19 Preparedness and Response Plan was set up in Zimbabwe for the smooth running of the online programmes, as Ngalomba (2020) observed in Tanzania, the introduced online learning lacked mandate to facilitate e-learning for all universities.

It is due to these challenges that some lecturers and students resisted the online teaching and learning called for by the Zimbabwean government. Similarly, Waruru (2020), revealed that in Kenya, there has been a lot of resistance from both teachers and students in various universities to online learning mainly due to unreliable broadband supply and effectiveness.

4.2 Changes that benefited the students

Despite a plethora of challenges faced by public universities in Zimbabwe in their shist to online learning, university students experienced some advantages. They enjoyed payment of limited school fees for they paid tuition fees only and no accommodation fees, "It becomes relatively cheap for us", one student happily remarked.

Again, despite the challenges encountered, some informants were happy that the outbreak of COVID-19 gave them learning opportunity to develop technological skills; "On the brighter side, the whole COVID situation helped me as a student to become more accustomed to technology, a development which could have not happened during a normal face to face learning." He went on to say that universities were also forced to improve on their online teaching endeavors. Another one echoed that even the country benefitted, "I feel Zimbabwe was a bit backward as far as technological assisted learning is concerned and it improved a lot".

4.3 Challenges encountered by the students

The majority of students encountered challenges due to the introduced online learning as revealed by the informants.

Students, whose courses required them to have practical or laboratories, suffered a lot for they could not be done online. One informant complained, "I was greatly affected in my studies because I did not manage to do my practicals. This delayed our progress as a class."

Lack of data bundles was common among informants; one of the said, "Data bundles are very expensive and very few of us (students) can afford them.

She went on elaborating other related problems, "Even when you buy your bundles, they are challenges of network connectivity. At one time, my data bundles almost expired before I used them. At another occasion, I had no connectivity and an assignment was sent. I could not see it. A friend served me by calling me on the third

day. This was the due date and I had to rush over the assignment."

Challenges revealed by this study are similar to those by Mukeredzi and Mashininga (2020) in the same country who found inadequate resources, such as, infrastructure, e-learning gadgets and unaffordability of data bundles being the major challenges.

Another informant said, "It's not a question of bundles only. Even when you struggle to get money and buy them, you still have a prohibiting challenge of network.'

He concluded that, "Everyone can actually query the learning that takes place under those conditions; it's compromised."

Similar findings were observed in Uganda where, over 15 million learners could not access instruction (Kymazima, 2020) and in Tanzania where accessing internet was a challenge to students, (Ngalomba, 2020).

This situation encountered in Zimbabwe is similar to experiences in many African counties, for instance, in Kenya where Jelimo (2020) said that most learners were excluded from online education due to internet access challenges and reliable electricity.

While some universities tried to curb the data bundle issue, other challenges emanated mainly because of disparities among mobile network operators whom they engaged. One informant unhappily recounted, "The online class sessions were complicated due to poor and biased data bundle distribution by the university". Inquired on the issue it was noted that particular university had negotiated with two mobile network operators to subside the data bundle costs, which they did at different levels. The result was that some students with one network lines got 19 GBs data while those subscribed to the others network got 9GBs for the same amounts they paid to the university.

When asked on their learning preferences between the traditional classroom face to face learning and the COVID-19 face-to-screen encounter, the informants spoke with the same voice. One of them said, "For me, I would prefer face to face lectures on campus." She explained her preference saying, "When you're at home, my parents would not understand that I have school work to do. They give me household chores. Whenever they see me on WhatsApp, they think that I am socializing, yet I would be researching. They don't give me time to do my researches and assignments. This is a great challenge".

On the same note, another informant has this to say, "There was need for at least face to face introduction of courses because some of the courses were really new to us and it was very difficult for us to understand the contents of such courses on our own. I am saying on our own because we hardly got useful explanation from our lecturers. In most cases, we got volumes of notes on WhatsApp and on our emails with no explanation given."

Some informant also brought out the issue of unpreparedness for the end of semester examinations, one of then sadly said, "When we have not yet grasped the concept, we were told that it was already exam time and so we sat for the exams. Anyone can query such type of learning".

There was a double blow on some university students for they got very little from their lecturers and could not significantly gain from fellow students due to limited face to face encounters. A worried informant who said that he just wrote the final examinations retorted, "We could not engage in group discussions even when preparing for end of semester examinations. Neither was there someone to ask for explanation. The lecturers hardly responded to our plights. Some of them were not responding to our calls. They just gave us notes which we could not understand since we were never taught.

4.4 Possible mitigation measures

The informants were able to suggest some useful possible solutions to the problems that they encountered on online teaching. They all agreed that the time factor should be seriously considered. One of then argued, "It is crucial to lengthen the due dates of assignments for the times are not normal and when considering the network challenges that we have. For me I have to travel to get it; I have to go to a nearby mountain for connectivity. I am sure my colleagues in such rural areas suffer the same".

Another informant echoed the same sentiments saying, "There is also a crucial issue of time. We were given limited time for the assignments and online test. More often than not, due date arrived while we were still struggling with challenges."

While there is need for the introduction of online classes to universities that are just dwelling on WhatsApp teaching and emailing of notes, there is also improvement of the online class operations. Some informants sensed lecturer incapacitated on such operations. One informant said, "We need to have online classes and not only heaped notes in our emails and WhatsApp platforms. These lecturers need to be taught how to do it".

The students also questioned the credibility of online assessments. Some informants said that cheating was a great possibility on the part of the students when doing online tests and quizzes. However, they refused to explain the cheating mechanisms that they mentioned. One informant said, "We also do quizzes online which has its own challenges. In Maths, at times we are given problems with multiple answers, for instance: A, C and D. If you write, A, B and C, two answers are correct, but the answer is marked wrong."

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

The pandemic has greatly impacted the education system delivery and other services. There were advantages and challenges in embracing this new normal modality of virtual learning. Accountability and shared purpose are essential for universities to fully address the needs of both teachers and students to be able to reach optimum results of learning.

5.2 Recommendations

Universities should engage mobile network operators to subside data costs and e-learning gadgets funding. There is also need for lecturers and students' online instructional skills and electronic gadget operation workshops to make the involved parties prepared for this new-normal at hand. The universities and the state should also help in order to easy the challenges at hand.

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