

Zimbabwe in Covid-19 Lockdown: The Benefits and Shortcomings of Online Learning in Open Distance e-learning Institutions of Zimbabwe

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Abstract: During the lockdown period for Covid-19, online learning has been the best platform to keep learners/lecturers engaged and safe by maintaining social distancing. Through online learning, students often face a number of challenges to their full participation in coursework units. The online environment also presents challenges for many academic staff that increasingly require higher levels of technological competency and proficiency on top of their regular academic workload. This study adopted the qualitative research paradigm in which a case study design was used. The design was considered appropriate because it enabled the researchers to interact with the participants in their natural settings on the phenomenon in its original form. The study was confined to Zimbabwe Open University, Bulawayo Regional Campus students and tutors only and it sought to establish the challenges learners experience in using the online learning platform during the Covid-19 lockdown. The findings show that participants still lack the knowledge on what online learning is all about and the different types of media used and how to use them in different environments.

Key Terms: Covid-19, Lockdown, online learning, open distance e-learning, e-learning, ICT.

I. BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

The COVID-19 pandemic is a worldwide health crisis. In Zimbabwe, the government has decided to close schools, colleges and universities. The closure of schools, colleges and universities not only interrupts the teaching of students around the world; the closure also coincides with a key assessment period and many examinations have been postponed or cancelled. The Zimbabwean government had no choice but to close its institutions of higher learning as part of their lockdown measures to contain the spread of the Corona virus. A lock-down is the restriction of movement (entering or leaving a place of residence) of people. The aim of the lock-down is to limit the spread of the COVID-19 virus. To achieve this, it is necessary that people do not move around and come into contact with other people who may be sick or who could be carriers of the virus. In short, this means that people should stay at home and not leave their places of residence unless it is absolutely necessary to do so or in case of any emergency. Universities had no option but to have recourse to the use of information and communications

technology (ICT) to deliver their programmes online from a distance to their enrolled students.

The Covid-19 lockdown crisis has provided an opportunity for all higher education institutions to quickly improve and maximise their ICT operations. Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU), an open distance e-learning institution, has suspended all face-to-face learning activities and tutorials and its fully delivering all its programmes online. The move by ZOU has been met with disgruntlement from student leaders, who have since raised concerns over students who are said to have no access to network and devices. Some students live in households that are not conducive to learning and accessing their MyVista learning platform. Computer laboratories are no longer accessible to the students for their use on their practical courses. It is against this background that this study sought to investigate the benefits and the shortcomings that learners are experiencing through online learning during the Covid-19 lockdown period.

Online Learning encompasses a range of technologies such as the worldwide web, email, chat groups and texts, audio and video conferencing delivered over computer networks to impart education. It helps the learner to manage their learning at their own pace and convenience. Online Education requires a great deal of resources and careful planning. In this, educators act as facilitators rather than transmitters of content knowledge, and ICT are regarded as a resource reservoir that enhances the learning experience of students. Learners learn by using e-learning tools which are available to all. E-learning refers to the use of the internet as either a resource utilised by the students to aid their study or as a means for delivering distance learning courses.

E-Learning has brought back the joy in learning through its innovative and interactive content delivery and has proved to be more appealing among students. Online Learning systems enable students to determine and process their learning styles, content, aim, current knowledge and individual skills. Online discussions carefully monitored by instructors promote co-constructed knowledge through activities such as: sharing, negotiating, elaborating, evaluating, (Ioannou, Demetriou & Mama, 2014) and facilitates students' higher order thinking

(Kwon & Park, 2017). When lecturers give importance to collaborative learning, students become more aware of benefits (Gomez, Barbera & Fernández, 2016). The interaction in online forums helps students to exchange different points of view on a subject (Duran, Cornejo, & Flores, 2017). One of the advantages of online forums following Arasaratnam & Northcote (2017) is having time for reasoned comments, which in the face-to-face sessions may not always be possible. Zimbabwe Open University uses MyVista as its online learning platform.

The online learning platform for Zimbabwe Open University (MyVista)

The learning platform is a way of structuring the instruction that fosters optimal organisation of content and interaction

with students, and it is used by most of the Universities (Gomez, 2016). Learning platforms seek to exploit the most valuable aspects of the training scenarios to become open spaces to the intellectual and emotional enjoyment of all participants, taking advantage of the communication resources. The learning platform in distance higher education must be adapted to the knowledge and practices of virtual environments, promoting usefulness, autonomous learning and interaction with tutors throughout learning tasks and using communication tools, thus at Zimbabwe Open University, the MyVista learning platform has become a useful tool for online learning which is used by students and tutors. The use of MyVista during the Covid-19 lockdown encouraged the interaction of tutors, administration, students and subject matter specialists as shown in figure below.

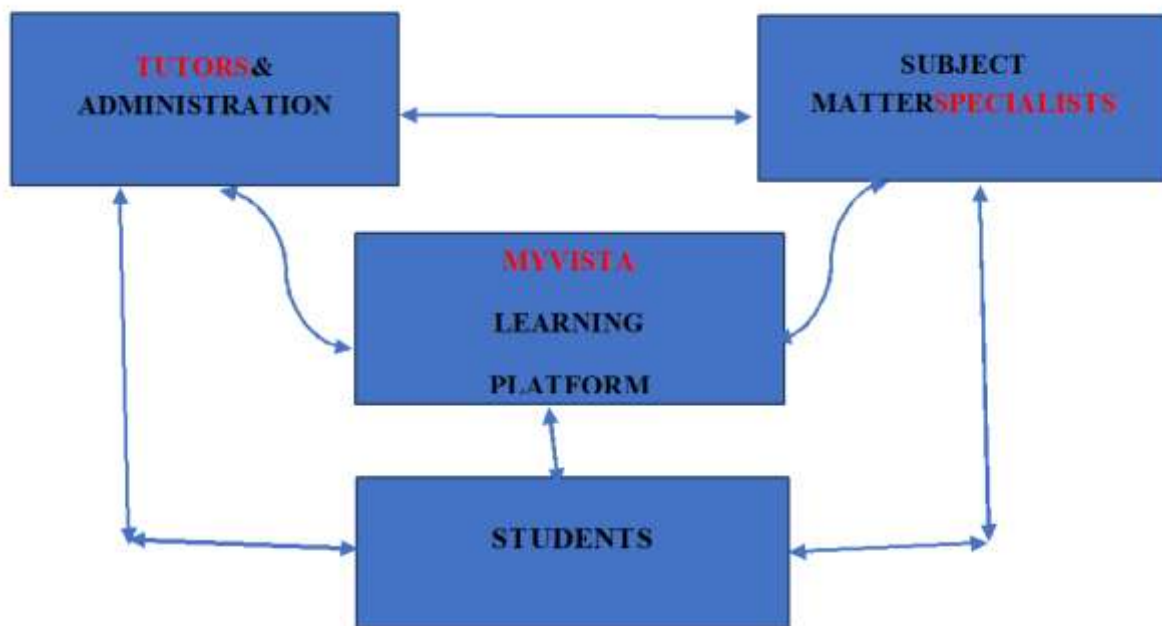


Figure 1: Interactions on MyVista Learning Platform

The interaction among the various components is essential to promote a mediated learning (Bates, 2019). The learning platform opens a new stage which exceeds the traditional space-time to motivate and make available to students, colleagues and various groups, a set of instructional options. The interaction in online forums helps students to exchange different points of view on a subject (Duran, Cornejo, & Flores, 2017). One of the advantages of online forums is having time for reasoned comments; which in the face-to-face sessions may not always be possible. E-Learning platforms seek to exploit the most valuable aspects of the training scenarios to become open spaces for the intellectual and emotional enjoyment of all participants, taking advantage of the communication resources available.

II. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Despite the effort by Zimbabwe Open University to integrate e-learning into its teaching and learning through MyVista learning platform, it has not been effectively embraced by the students. It is faced with challenges such that there is the need to understand and effect change of attitudes of both students and tutors and to enable their training. The persistence of these challenges and lack of knowledge about the use of ICT in education hinders readiness and utilization of e-learning. The study sought to discover students' challenges in using online learning platform (MyVista) during and after Covid-19 lockdown at Zimbabwe Open University, Bulawayo Regional Campus, and to improve the educational learning process in distance higher education.

2.1 Research questions

- What challenges have learners experienced in using the online learning platform during the Covid-19 lockdown in Zimbabwe?
- How would the institution improve the use of online platforms by students on Open Distance learning during and after the Covid-19 lockdown in Zimbabwe?

III. METHODOLOGY

This study adopted the qualitative research paradigm in which a case study design was used.

A case study is an in-depth investigation of an instance of a phenomenon in its natural context and from the perspective of the participants involved in the phenomenon. The design was considered appropriate because it enabled the researchers to interact with the participants in their natural setting on the phenomenon in its original form. The study was confined to Zimbabwe Open University, Bulawayo Regional Campus students and tutors only and it sought to establish the challenges learners experience in using the online learning platform during the Covid-19 lockdown. Consent to carry out the study was obtained from both the participants and the tutors. The researchers used thirty students and ten tutors from different faculties of the university as research sample. The students were stratified and randomly selected to ensure that views from all faculties were captured. Purposive sampling was used to choose the ten tutors participating. According to Cresswell, and Plano Clark, (2011) purposive sampling is a procedure which enables the researcher to select informants that are likely to be information-rich with respect to the purpose of the study. This procedure would suit this study as the informants would give a deeper understanding on learners' experience in using the MyVista online learning platform during the Covid-19 lockdown. All the thirty learners and ten tutors responded to the questionnaires distributed through WhatsApp platforms. The learners were coded according to the faculties they were registered in.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Results are discussed under the main themes drawn from research questions of this study to discover students' challenges in using online learning platform (MyVista) during and after Covid-19 lockdown at Zimbabwe Open University, Bulawayo Regional Campus, and to improve educational learning process in distance higher education.

4.1 Challenges that learners experience in using the online learning platform during the Covid-19 lockdown in Zimbabwe

4.1.1 Students' responses

Participants complained of delayed and critical feedback from instructors. This finding is contrary to the report by Baker (2010), who found that learner instructor interaction was the strongest indicator of students' satisfaction in the online

course program. While students can go "underneath the radar" in both online and face-to-face learning environments, unless a student reaches out or makes their issues known to the facilitator, the online environment means that students that may benefit from additional support or assistance may be misused. A struggling face-to-face student may turn up in class and not ask any questions, but the facilitator can still determine that they are in need of support through observing the interactions, participation, and circulating during the learning activities. The student's physical attendance may be their silent request for help. This is in contrast with the online learning environment where the facilitator may never actually "see" any of the students. They may see the posts online or various levels of interaction and engagement, but without being able to use tools commonly used by teachers to identify those in need of further assistance or support, those in need of help may go unnoticed.

Most of the participants highlighted that they were still computer illiterate, they have not come across the benefits of online learning and chances are high the pass rates will not improve as anticipated. Some of the participants still lack the knowledge on what online learning is all about and the different types of media used and how to use them in different environments. In some situations, participants could not access electricity which is a source of power for the online gadgets. Slow connections can also make accessing course platforms and materials frustrating.

Most of the students do not own a computer and have Internet access only from the universities internet cafes. They felt that taking an online course presupposes that a student can navigate the Internet. Some of the participants said they were not initially proficient using computers, but after three to four online courses they now feel confident searching for anything online

4.1.2 Lecturers' responses

Most of the staff do not have the adequate knowledge on how to use the online learning programmes. Some tutors without reliable internet access and/or experience in the use of technology struggle to participate in digital learning. In other words, they lack appropriate computer skills. Based on the responses from the questionnaires, the challenges identified by lecturers were: poor infrastructure (constant power outages, inadequate computer laboratories, and poor Internet services), inadequate IT support, lack of e-learning policy as well as lack of university management support.

Some lecturers felt that availability of computers at home is an issue, hence most learners will depend on university computer laboratories to use the e-learning systems. Literature from Sife et al. (2007) and Oroma et al. (2012) show that for African countries in general, ICT infrastructure is poorly developed and is unevenly accessed. Internet access must be right for learners and their lecturers in this kind of environment.

In extreme cases, academic staff believed that unauthorised learners may participate in course discussions and submit assignments for other learners. As a recommendation, the online learning policy can include the penalties of misusing the system. The policy should clearly state that learners are responsible for their accounts and should not allow third-parties to log onto the system on their behalf.

4.2 How ZOU would improve the use of online platforms (MyVista) by students on Open Distance learning during and after the Covid-19 lockdown in Zimbabwe?

4.2.1 Students' responses

Participants pointed out that there is need to have IT personnel available on standby at all times to help with Internet issues, especially after a power outage since it has been observed that when the Internet normally becomes unavailable there is no IT personnel to assist the students. There is need to develop an online learning policy and create a plan to rationalise online learning activities such as optimisation of existing resources. The university may also consider having a member of staff from the IT department who will be able to offer support to the online learning community at the university.

Tutorial support provides motivation. Learners often need guidance and support from instructors, coaches, tutors or technical staff. However, this is also a question of cost—how much financial means an online programme has been allocated. The findings of the study further revealed that most commonly encountered were issues such as unreliable Internet connection and slow access to web sites due to narrow bandwidth and limited numbers of computers connected to the Internet. One participant pointed out that:

Online learning is a self-directed activity, and it is a learner-centered approach, which enables us to develop autonomy and independence in our study habits. It also shifts the responsibility for learning on us.

The participants felt that sometimes it could be overwhelming, and faculty-student interaction may be the only source of receiving encouragement to stay and do the assignments.

4.2.2 Lecturer's responses

The participants pointed out that because of possibilities of plagiarism in the use of online learning systems, post checking should be incorporated into online learning systems to reduce its corrupt use.

Another participant suggested that “*the university should ensure that all instructors undergo online professional training on feedback response.*” Some participants pointed out that, “*Alternative modes of communication like video conferencing should be mandatory for students with their instructors to discuss issues arising from the online course and make suggestions for improvement at least once per semester.*” From the findings, participants would like to see improved course design and delivery methods, including instructor training to give immediate, unambiguous, and non-

threatening feedback. Participants also indicated support for the continuation of mandatory freshman computer-use courses, and they recommended new social communication tools to foster learner-learner interaction.

V. CONCLUSIONS

The current study supports the use of online learning in institutions of higher learning as online learning modalities encourage student-centered learning and they are easily manageable during this lockdown situation. Online learning has certain challenges in that it can hamper the communication between the learner and the educator, that is, direct communication and human touch are lost. The students may face many technical difficulties that hinder and slow-down the teaching–learning process. Students may experience non-serious behaviour that can create problems in their studies such as failure to meet due dates of assignments.

Online learning faces many challenges ranging from learners' issues, educators' issues, and content issues. It is a challenge for institutions to engage students and make them participate in the teaching–learning process. It is a challenge for teachers to move from offline mode to online mode, changing their teaching methodologies, and managing their time. Some students without reliable internet access and/or technology struggle to participate in digital learning.

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

Online Learning is the most common method of distance learning today. During the lockdown period for Covid-19, online learning was the best platform to keep learners/lecturers engaged and safe by maintaining social distancing. The Corona Virus outbreak is the chance to make the best from the current situation. Online Learning method utilises various applications of the internet to distribute classroom materials and help learners and educators interact with one another. Using the various technologies available for Online Learning, educators can provide a more interactive distance learning experience by delivering real-time, synchronous video conferencing.

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