

Academic flaws in the face of the COVID - 19 Pandemic: A case of University of Zambia students

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic and resulting economic crisis has brought unprecedented challenges to higher education. The COVID-19 pandemic has subsequently left higher institutions of learning struggling on how to provide quality education to all. Globally, students have faced unprecedented challenges stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic. Irrefutably, this austere pandemic has disrupted the teaching and learning process and it has affected the provision equitable and quality education. This paper aimed to provide a comprehensive report on the challenges facing University of Zambia Students in the face of the COVID-19 Pandemic. This was achieved by analyzing 400 University of Zambia students' responses to the survey-based questionnaire. A descriptive statistical method was used to test the validation of the study. The students were sampled using simple random sampling. The study revealed that the major challenges included poor network connectivity, failure to access and upload educational materials on the platforms and lack of digital skills. In order to curb these challenges, the study recommended that the government and private network providers should improve the network provision to all parts of the country. In addition, the study recommended that there is need to have blended learning so as to enhance understanding in the learners for concepts which were not clear when taught during online. It was proposed that the University of Zambia management should also put a deliberate programme to train all students in digital skills.

Key words: Academic flaws, Covid – 19, Learning and teaching, Pandemic, Strategies

I. BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The COVID-19 epidemic has spread across the globe, affecting practically all countries and territories. The epidemic was initially discovered in Wuhan, China, in December 2019. Countries all throughout the world warned the people to exercise caution. Handwashing, wearing face masks, physical distance, and avoiding big gatherings and assemblies have all been used as public health initiatives. In order to flatten the curve and control the spread of the disease, lockdown and stay-at-home techniques have been implemented (Sintema, 2020). As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to spread around the world, school systems everywhere are in crisis management are struggling to provide continuous instruction via combinations of in-person, virtual, and hybrid learning modes.

The COVID-19 pandemic has wreaked havoc on education systems around the world, affecting approximately 1.6 billion students in over 200 nations (Mahyoob, 2020). More than 94 percent of the world's student population has been touched by school, institution, and other learning facility closures. This has resulted in significant changes in every part of our life

(Sintema, 2020). Traditional educational techniques have been considerably disrupted by social alienation and limited movement policies. Reopening schools when restrictions have been lifted is another problem, as many new standard operating procedures have been implemented (Mahyoob, 2020).

During the pandemic, e-learning tools were critical in assisting schools and universities in facilitating student learning during the shutdown of universities and schools (Subedi et al., 2020). Staff and student readiness must be assessed and supported while adapting to the new adjustments. Learners with a fixed mindset have a hard time adapting and adjusting, but learners with a growth mindset adapt easily to new situations. For online learning, there is no one-size-fits-all methodology. There are a range of subjects to choose from, each with its own set of requirements. Various disciplines and age groups necessitate various ways to online learning (Doucet et al., 2020). Physically challenged students can also benefit from online learning because it allows them to participate in learning in a virtual environment with limited movement (Basilaia & Kvavadze, 2020).

In other nations, the epidemic struck just before exam and assessment season, and there was little enthusiasm among students for final exams to be canceled or postponed, especially given the uncertainty about how long the current situation would last. So far, universities have taken a variety of methods, with many of them still keeping their plans under wraps. Some colleges have cancelled all non-final year examinations, leaving final year students with the choice of taking final exams online or pursuing an undeclared degree. Other colleges are considering using a moderation method using students' tutors to award grades (Kanchebele-Sinyangwe and Daka, 2022). This may relieve some of the strain on exam takers, but it also raises the possibility of allegations of favoritism, bias, or discrimination, which could lead to a variety of academic processes, including appeals against grades and complaints as explained by other researchers (Daka, Banda and Namafe, 2017; Daka, Namafe and Katowa – Mukwato, 2020). Some universities provide a "safety net" for final exams, ensuring that students do not earn a degree classification lower than their second-year tests if they pass. The various approaches all emphasize the complex balancing act between preserving universities' reputations for academic rigor, the wellbeing of individual students, maintaining the integrity of "final" grades, and ensuring that students have what they need for future labor market entry (Bevan, 2020; Daka, Banda and Namafe, 2020).

In light of this context, the purpose of this study was to look into the academic flaws or challenges that University of Zambia students are facing in the face of the COVID -19 pandemic. In this study academic flaws refer difficulty grasping course material, difficulty uploading and organizing to complete assignments or study tasks and inconsistent online class attendance.

The Problem Guiding the Research Paper

The COVID-19 pandemic has already had devastating impacts that are likely to have long-term social and economic consequences. The crisis has exacerbated already-widespread educational inequalities due to factors relating to gender, disability, and immigration, learning difficulties or other sources of socioeconomic disadvantage. Indeed, 40% of the world's poorest countries have been unable to support their disadvantaged learners in recent months, and the many adverse consequences of school closures have been particularly severe for disadvantaged children and their families, as well as for all learners with learning difficulties and special needs (UNESCO, 2020). The epidemic has brought to light the vulnerability of our educational systems, even those that were previously seen to be stable. Alejandra (2021) claims that the COVID-19 pandemic in America caused students and universities to struggle. Students encountered financial difficulties that jeopardized their education, changing living arrangements that made learning difficult, and a lack of resources that prevented them from even logging into class online. Learning institutions spent time and money to move classrooms, activities, and services online in a matter of days, but they lost vital tuition and auxiliary revenue in the process. Despite this, little is known about the obstacles faced by Zambian university students in the face of COVID-19 due to the paucity of research on the subject.

Purpose of the Study

As a result, the purpose of this study was to look into the challenges that University of Zambia students are encountering in the context of the COVID -19 pandemic and propose workable measures to mitigate them.

Research Objectives

More specifically the study was guided by the following objectives:

1. Ascertain the challenges facing University of Zambia students in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic.
2. Propose viable measures that can enhance teaching and learning at the University of Zambia students in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Theoretical Underpinning

This study was guided by the Transformative learning theory. According to Jack Mezirow's transformative learning theory, learning begins with an experience that leads to what is called a disorienting dilemma (cognitive dissonance, or the discomfort that comes from realizing your current understanding of the world does not fit with current evidence).

COVID -19's unanticipated, unplanned, and abrupt change to online learning has undoubtedly generated cognitive dissonance, as our ideas about education have been questioned, and severe injustices in our system have been worsened (Hart, 2020). This theory was chosen for this study because it has the potential to assist students, educators, and educational institutions in embracing COVID -19 and the associated challenges for education as a transformative event that will lead to creativity and a whole new world for educators and students.

Academic flaws during covid – 19 era

The number of studies on schooling during the Covid - 19 crisis is growing. Although the research's particular objectives vary, they all focus on the impact of Covid –19 on education, assessment, and its numerous stakeholders, including students, instructors, school administrators, and families (Kapasia et al., 2020; Sintema, 2020). It's also clear that, as a result of the abrupt closure of learning institutions around the world, most research focus on evaluating the move from traditional face-to-face education to e - Learning (Naciri et al., 2020). As a result, the focus of this research was solely on the challenges that University of Zambia students experience in the face of the COVID -19 pandemic and measures of mitigating them.

During the COVID19 outbreak, another study looked into the challenges of online learning in medical education from Alfaisal University's college of medicine in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia (Rajab, Mohammad, Gazal, & Alkattan, 2020). According to the conclusions of this study, there are several obstacles that students face as a result of e-learning. Limited time management, poor internet connection, anxiety, and coronavirus disease stress are only a few of the difficulties.

Wolfinger (2016) looked at a case study in Pennsylvania for characteristics of adolescent online learners. The study focused on achieving entirely online virtual learning by the middle school level. Academics, social support, learner characteristics, and educational support were all considered in the study. The findings demonstrated the relevance of teachers in virtual learning, as well as how parents' engagement can help their children attain academic success.

The International Association of Universities 2020 performed a survey to determine the impact of COVID19 on higher education institutions around the world. The study's findings revealed that the COVID-19 crisis had an impact on all of the participating institutes' activities. The findings also revealed a negative impact on activity quality and inequity in educational chances. Ali (2017) investigated the use of Blackboard as a motivator in English language learning and teaching. The study discovered that some students were inspired to work more in their English classes utilizing the Blackboard platform, while others were demotivated to use it.

There are few studies on the problems experienced by students and administrators in remote education during the Covid-19 period in the literature. In their research, Apriyanti (2020) discovered that during the Covid-19 pandemic, kindergarten and primary school parents face issues such as being unable to

guide their children to learn and children's lack of concentration, unwillingness to learn, desire to go to school, inability to learn online, and limited comprehension of the material. In their research, Fauzi et al. (2020) discovered that instructors confront challenges in the Covid-19 epidemic, including a lack of opportunity, network and internet use, learning planning, implementation, and evaluation, and engagement with parents. Mailizar et al. (2020) discovered that the four components of problems experienced by teachers throughout the Covid-19 period were teacher, school, curriculum, and student. Teachers confront issues in distance education applied in the Covid-19 program, according to Rasmitadila et al. (2020), such as technical impediments, student conditioning, student involvement in education, and online education experience.

Measures to mitigate challenges of online learning

Students, on the other hand, praised the effectiveness of online learning during the pandemic. Yildiz (2020) did a meta-analysis study on recent trends in educational technology from 2015 to 2020. The study's findings showed that incorporating educational technology into teaching and learning is a good idea. The influence of the pandemic on entrepreneurial education is discussed in an essay by editorial board Liguori and Winkler (2020). More research and resources on the issues of online entrepreneurship education are needed, they said. Another study looked at the value of online learning and looked into the strengths, shortcomings, obstacles, and potential of online education during the pandemic (Shivangi, 2020). During natural disasters and epidemics, the study presented some tips for dealing with online learning issues.

At Qassim University in Saudi Arabia, Alturise (2020) did a study on learner and instructor satisfaction in an online learning paradigm utilizing the Blackboard platform. The study found that while e-learning is a step forward in education, more effort is needed to develop online learning applications. During COVID-19, some researchers look into the challenges and obstacles in e-learning based on their educational environment and the resources supplied by various institutes. The goal of this research is to identify the challenges faced by university students during the present global crisis, as well as potential solutions that can help students improve their performance and overcome these issues in the future.

II. METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN

In order to assess the obstacles faced by University of Zambia students in the context of the COVID -19 pandemic, this study used a quantitative research approach. A descriptive research design was used to support this investigation. Descriptive research design is a sort of study that tries to collect data in order to characterize a phenomenon, condition, or population in a methodical way (Chipindi, Serenje – Chipindi and Daka, 2021). Before conducting additional investigation, descriptive research allows academics to properly analyze the backdrop of a research problem. To explore the variables in question, the descriptive technique of research might involve the use of a

variety of research methods. It mostly uses quantitative data, however qualitative data is occasionally employed for descriptive purposes. It is vital to stress that, unlike experimental research, the researcher does not control or influence any factors in descriptive research (Phiri, Musonda and Daka, 2020; Mulenga and Daka, 2022). The variables are just recognized, observed, and measured in this case.

The study's target group included students from several schools at the University of Zambia. A total of 400 male and female students at the University were included in the study. To choose responders from the student population, the researchers utilized basic random sampling. Because this method of sampling ensures that every person of the population has an equal chance of being picked as a study sample, it was used (White, 2003). Simple random sampling is a sampling strategy in which every item in the population has an equal probability of being chosen for the sample. Because the selection of items is solely based on chance or probability, this sampling methodology is sometimes referred to as a method of chances. Simple random sampling is a basic sampling approach that can easily be incorporated into a more complex sampling scheme. This sampling method's major feature is that every sample has the same chance of being chosen. This sampling method's sample size should ideally be greater than a few hundred to allow for proper use of simple random sampling. They claim that while this strategy is conceptually simple to grasp, it is challenging to put into practice. Working with big sample sizes is difficult, and establishing a reasonable sampling frame can be difficult at times (Patton, 2002).

Quantitative data was obtained using self-administered questionnaires that were given to students as part of the research instruments. A questionnaire is a research tool that consists of a set of questions or other forms of prompts designed to gather data from a respondent. A research questionnaire usually consists of a combination of closed-ended and open-ended questions (Cresswell, 2011). Researchers chose questionnaires in this situation because they are an effective way to collect demographic data, personal opinions, facts, or attitudes from respondents. Uniform design and uniformity are two of the most important characteristics of a research form. Every respondent is presented with the same set of questions. This aids in the acquisition of data as well as statistical analysis of that data. The questionnaire had questions related to age as the young and the old perceive online differently. In addition, issues to investigate challenges faced by students in the three admitting schools were included. The three schools cover more than 90% of University of Zambia students. Furthermore, the items included the proposals from the respondents of the measures to mitigate the perceived academic flaws. The questionnaires were distributed by the researchers to ensure a 100% response rate. A hundred questionnaires were distributed to each year of study from 1st year to 4th year.

The quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive statistics. Quantitative data was analyzed using the Statistical Package for

Social Sciences (SPSS version 22) computer software for descriptive and inference purposes. SPSS stands for Statistical Package for Social Sciences, and it is a popular statistical analysis software package. Because of its user-friendly Graphical user interface, it is one of the most widely used statistical analysis tools today. SPSS was chosen for this study because it allows for the automation of a number of processes, including data purification and organization, as well as the creation of charts and other sorts of output. It also enables processes like data coding, missing values analysis, and import/export to be automated (from tools such as excel).

To guarantee that volunteers were not hurt emotionally, physically, or psychologically, the researchers considered a number of ethical considerations. In addition, the researcher took the time to clarify the study's goals and relevance to participants at each stage of data collection. Furthermore, the researchers took precautions to ensure that the information supplied by participants was kept anonymous and confidential. As a result, the researcher did not force any volunteer to engage in the study at any point; it was entirely voluntary.

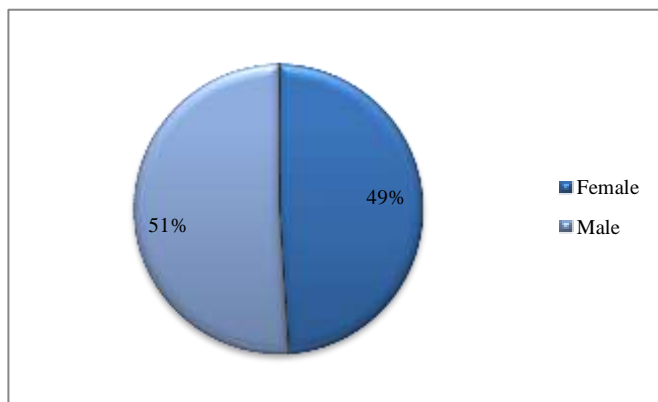
III. FINDINGS

Demographic characteristics

Gender of respondents

As regards the gender, the table below shows that the 51% (204) of respondents in this study were male students and 49% (196) were female students. This information is tabulated in the table below.

Figure 1: Gender of respondents



Source: Field Data (2022)

Age of respondents

The age range of the respondents was 18-33 years of age. The majority of the respondents were between 18 and 25 years old (311). A smaller fraction of respondents was between 26 to 33 years (89). Table 1 presents the age range of the respondents.

Table 1: Age of respondents

Age group					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	18-25 years	311	77.8	77.8	77.8
	26 to 33 years	89	22.3	22.3	100.0
	Total	400	100.0	100.0	

Source: Field Data (2021)

Respective schools of respondents

As regards the respective schools of respondents, 53% (212 students) of the respondents indicated that they belonged to the school of Education, 18.2% (73 students) of the respondents indicated that they belonged to the Humanities and Social Sciences and 28.8% (115 students) of the respondents indicated that they belonged to the School of Natural Sciences. The aforementioned schools were picked on the basis that they were the principal admitting schools. This information has been illustrated in the table below.

Table 2: Respective schools of respondents

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		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Education	212	53.0	53.0	53.0
	HSS	73	18.3	18.3	71.3
	Natural Sciences	115	28.8	28.8	100.0
	Total	400	100.0	100.0	

Source: Field Data (2022)

Year of study

Table 3: Year of study

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		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	2nd Year	104	26.0	26.0	26.0
	3rd Year	68	17.0	17.0	43.0
	4th Year	152	38.0	38.0	81.0
	5th Year	64	16.0	16.0	97.0
	6th Year	12	3.0	3.0	100.0
	Total	400	100.0	100.0	

Source: Field Data (2021)

With reference to the table above, the findings on the year of study of students indicated that 26% (104 students) of the respondents were in second year, 17% (68 students) of the respondents indicated that there were in third year, 38% (152 students) of the respondents indicated that there were in fourth year, 16 % (64 students) indicated that they were in fifth year and the sixth years were represented by 3% (12 students). The study did not encompass first year students because they were not in school when the researcher was collecting data. This was mainly due to the fact that the university under study could only

accommodate senior students as an adherence measure to curb the spread of corona virus.

Facing Challenges

The table below shows that almost all the students (388) faced challenges as a during the COVID-19 pandemic except for 12 (3%) students who indicated that they didn't face any challenges.

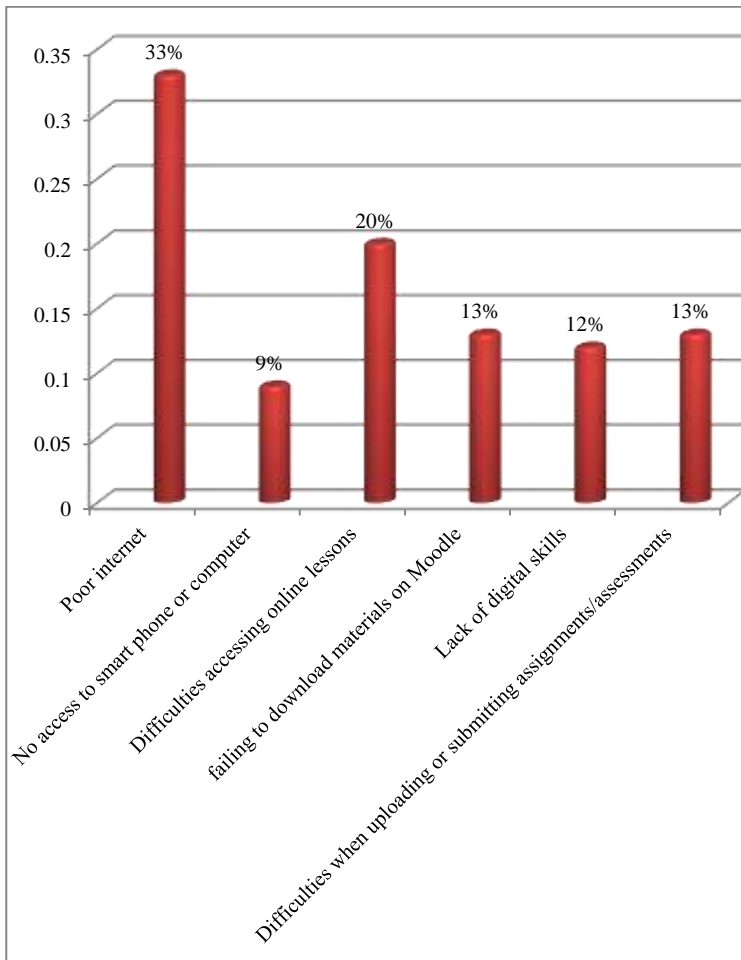
Table 4: Facing Challenges

Do you face any challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	388	97.0	97.0	97.0
	No	12	3.0	3.0	100.0
	Total	400	100.0	100.0	

Source: Field Data (2021)

Challenges faced by students in the face of the COVID pandemic

Figure 2: Challenges faced by students in the face of the COVID pandemic



Source: Field Data (2021)

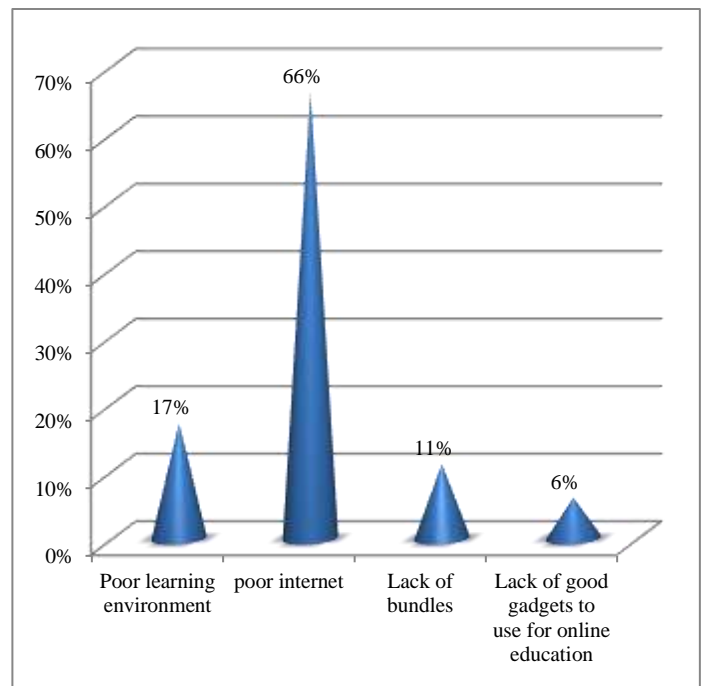
As regards the challenges faced by students in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, the figure above illustrates that the major challenge that students face is poor internet access (33%).

9% (33 students) of the respondents indicated that they didn't have access to smart phone or computer, 20% (80 students) of the respondents indicated that they had difficulties accessing online lessons, 13% (52) of the respondents indicated that the fail to download materials on Moodle, 12% (48 students) of respondents indicated that they lacked digital skills and 13% (52 students) indicated that they had difficulties when uploading or submitting assignments/assessments.

Experiences of students in online education

As regards to the experiences of students in online education, 66% of the respondents indicated that they did not have a good experience because of poor internet. Similarly, 17% of the respondents indicated that they had poor experience because of poor learning environment. Additionally, 11% indicated that they lacked backed bundles and 6% indicated that they do not have good gadgets to use for online education. This information is presented in the table below.

Figure 4: Experiences of students in online education

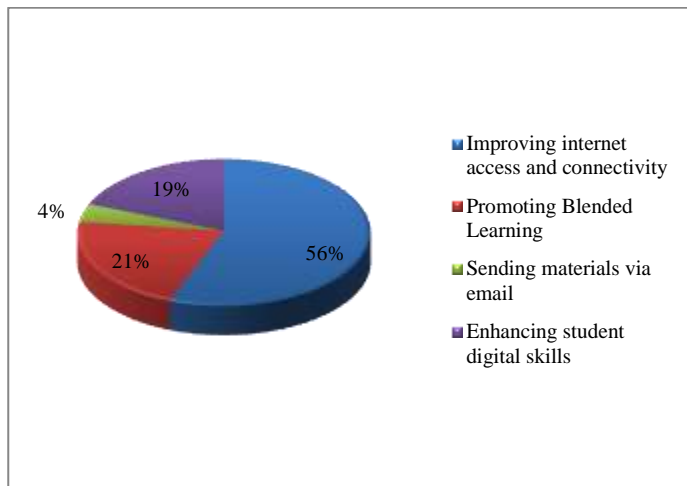


Source: Field Data (2022)

Measures to mitigate the challenges facing student

The study found that several measures have been employed to Measures to mitigate the challenges facing student. The mitigation measures that have been employed are shown in the figure below

Figure 3: Measures to mitigate the challenges facing student



Source: Field Data (2021)

Improving internet access and connectivity was predominantly (56%) cited as the major mitigation measures put in place to mitigate the challenges facing students. The foretasted measure was preceded by promoting blended learning (21%). Enhancing student’s digital skills and sending materials via email are other measures that are put in place to mitigate the challenges facing students.

IV. DISCUSSION

The discussion was based on the research objectives of the study. These were (1) to ascertain the challenges facing University of Zambia students in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, (2) to propose viable measures that can enhance teaching and learning at the University of Zambia students in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic.

a) Challenges faced by the University of Zambia students in the face of Covid – 19

The study revealed that 97% students at the University of Zambia experienced learning challenges during the Covid - 19 times. This situation is not only unique to the University of Zambia students but even in other tertiary institutions in other countries as reported by Maatuk, Elberkawi and Aljawarneh (2022) and Sarfraz, Daka, Zubair and Sarfraz (2022) that in almost all countries students have faced challenges in learning as a shift from traditional learning of face to face and changed to online. In each country, respective learning institutions have faced different type of challenges. In this study, poor network (30%) was reported as a major challenge in learning. If students fail to go online due to poor network then it means that students will fail to join lessons. Poor network has been reported as a major challenge even in other countries though common in rural areas. This challenge was also stated by Sarfraz, Daka, Zubair, Sarfraz, Rehan and Khan (2022) in their study on the effectiveness of PowerPoint and Prezi in teaching. These authors explained that despite coming up with best methods of presentations, if there is poor network, the methods cannot be applied. As if poor network is not enough, this study revealed

that some learners lacked digital skills which make them have difficulties to access online materials and also fail to upload assignments to the platform. This then results in challenges when assessing the students. The study further showed from documents of students’ continuous assessments that many learners had incomplete Continuous Assessment resulting into higher failure rates. To make matters more worse, the study revealed that some learners did not have access to smart phones and computers. This meant that they never had access to teaching. So if they didn’t have access to teaching, how then can they pass the examination? It can therefore be concluded that no learning took place to such students.

b) Measures that can be employed to curb challenges students face

After looking at the challenging experiences by students, the study further looked at measures to be put in place to curb challenges faced by students during Covid – 19 era. The study came up with different ways of overcoming the above challenges. The first and very important measure that the University of Zambia management was requested in the study to curb challenges was to improve internet access and connectivity. This can help students to access internet easily from within campus if they are within the University of Zambia. In addition to this, the respondents proposed that the network providers like Zamtel, Mtn and Airtel should be engaged and improve network coverage. The measure of improving network and connectivity was also proposed in the study by Sarfraz, Daka, Zubair and Sarfraz (2022). In this case, there is need for deliberate collaboration between government and the private sector to create holistic strategies to overcome the barriers to connectivity. Not only connectivity but also affordable rates which could be a game-changer for learning, especially in remote areas. Furthermore, the respondents in the study recommended blended learning so that issues which learners were not clear could be discussed on the face to face lessons. A study by Sarfraz, Daka, Zubair and Sarfraz (2022) indicated that some concepts are difficult to explain online and blended learning can help curb this challenge.

Students complained that the platform used at the University of Zambia like Astria and Moodle has contributed to learners not having access to educational materials. When lecturers upload their notes on Astria, students fail to access these materials as the system is very unreliable. Therefore, most respondents proposed that lecturers should send materials through emails. Students stated that it was easy for them to download materials sent to them through emails and whatsapp groups than on Astria. Since students come from different parts of Zambia including the rural areas (Kakupa, Daka, Tembo, 2015), the study revealed that one other lasting solution to online learning was by enhancing students’ digital skills. Some students didn’t how to access the online materials despite having knowledge of social media activities as reported by Daka, Jacob, Kakupa and Mwelwa (2017). There is a need to have a deliberate programme to orient all learners in digital skills especially during orientation as they report.

V. CONCLUSION

From this study, it can be concluded that Covid – 19 has brought in a lot of challenges for students in as far as learning is concerned at the University of Zambia. The major challenges included poor network connectivity, failure to access and upload educational materials on the platforms and lack of digital skills. In order to curb these challenges, the study recommended that the government and private network providers should improve the network provision to all parts of the country. In addition, the study recommended that all there is need to have blended learning so as to enhance understanding in the learners for concepts which were not clear when taught during online. University of Zambia management should also put a deliberate programme to train all students in digital skills. There is need to do a further study in the School of Medicine to investigate how clinical subject areas can be taught better during the Covid – 19 era.

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