

Review Article**Experiences and Challenges of Adapting to Online Learning during Covid - 19 Induced Lockdown: The Case of Gweru Urban Tertiary Students in Zimbabwe***Richard NYIKA¹  Motalenyane Alfred MODISE² **Abstract**

The novel Corona virus resulted in lockdown measures being put in place in order to curb the spread of the virus. This led to the closure of all schools and tertiary institutions. In Zimbabwe, the Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education, Innovation, Science, and Technology Development (MHEISTD) announced the suspension of face-to-face teaching and learning and indicated that learning would continue online. This was an unexpected new experience for tertiary students. This study sought to explore the experiences and challenges faced by tertiary students in Gweru in adapting to online learning during the lockdown induced by COVID-19. The study was a netnographic study in which a cybercommunity of fifty tertiary students from five different tertiary institutions in Gweru was created. Purposive and snowball sampling were used to select the students who participated in a WhatsApp group. The students participated in text discussions, voice calls, and group discussions and responded to questions probed by the researcher. The results showed that online learning was a new frontier in their learning experiences, and they faced several challenges in adapting to its use. The study concluded that tertiary institutions should embrace blended learning in order to adequately prepare for online learning by both lecturers and students in times of disasters and pandemics like COVID-19, which restrict face-to-face learning. The study recommended that tertiary institutions equip students and lecturers with the skills to adapt to online teaching and learning. Students should be provided with the requisite online learning tools in order to effectively participate in online teaching and learning activities.

Keywords: Blended learning, corona virus, lockdown, COVID-19, online learning

1. INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 is a highly infectious disease that is caused by the novel Corona virus. The disease is reported to have originated in Wuhan, China, in 2019. The disease was unstoppable, uncontrollable, and quickly spread in many countries throughout the world. The number of COVID-19 deaths across the world rapidly increased, with no end or immediate solution in sight. Zimbabwe was not spared. The World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic on March 11, 2020. WHO issued guidelines to mitigate the spread of the pandemic, and lockdown was one of the key recommended preventive measures. On March 23, 2020, Zimbabwe introduced lockdown measures in order to contain the spread of disease. The COVID-19-induced lockdown led to the closure of all learning institutions. Many countries adopted lockdown as a reactive and proactive measure to the outbreak of the disease (Erika & Nicholas, 2020). Reactive measures were the reactions upon the discovery of coronavirus cases, and proactive measures were the steps put in place to prevent the disease before it reached the doorstep.

A COVID-19-induced lockdown was a mass quarantine that included an order to stay home or obliterating entire movements of individuals in order to curb the spread of COVID-19 (Mali et al.

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2020). This meant that social life in public communities was restrained. Private organisations, businesses, and Educational institutions were temporarily closed. On March 24, 2020, the government of Zimbabwe announced the closure of all learning institutions. The decision to close institutions was in line with the principle that large gatherings of people would constitute a serious risk regarding the spread of the virus (IESALC, 2020). In Gweru, Mkoba Teachers College and Gweru Polytechnic were the two tertiary institutions in the province that were designated as quarantine centres for some Zimbabwean citizens returning from other countries.

The closure of tertiary institutions meant the cessation of face-to-face teaching and learning activities in tertiary institutions. This was a huge disruptor of student life and the functions of tertiary institutions (UNESCO, 2020). Students were restricted to their homes. Movement from one place to another was also restricted. The disease had brought an unprecedented way of life to the students. The pandemic added not only a fundamental transformational change to the way people lived but also to how students were taught throughout the world. Educational institutions had to resort to online teaching and learning. In Zimbabwe, the Minister of Higher Education, Innovation, Science, and Technology Development instructed that learning in tertiary institutions would continue to be taught online. This meant that tertiary institutions had to adapt to the use of ICT as pedagogical tools to ensure remote teaching and learning. Students were also expected to adapt to the use of ICT as learning tools. The remote learning meant that students had to forgo learning in a regular face-to-face class with lecturers in lecture rooms. Students had to learn from where they lived, usually through electronic means. This ushered in the intense use of technology-based learning. It was important to explore the experiences and challenges faced by tertiary students in adapting to this new mode of learning.

Gweru Urban is home to most students from Midlands State University, Gweru Polytechnic, Mkoba Teachers College, Zimbabwe Open University, foreign students, and other institutions throughout the country. Students from these institutions were trapped in their homes during lockdown. A new way of life and learning was ushered in by the announcement of lockdown. Some students had barely a fortnight of learning after opening, while others were just beginning industrial attachment and teaching practice. Students were left wondering what would become of their studies. COVID-19 posed challenges and complications of unprecedented magnitude to all students. Online teaching and learning was adopted in order to navigate the challenges caused by the restrictions of social distance and face-to-face learning. Online learning meant a situation in which students had to learn over the internet from where they lived. The type of learning required accessibility, connectivity, flexibility, and the ability to provoke different types of learning interactions (Moore et al., 2011). It was an innovative approach to the way teaching and learning had to take place.

1.1. Statement of the Problem

Online learning was a novel mode of learning that was adopted by tertiary institutions in Zimbabwe in order to ensure that teaching and learning continued during the COVID-19-induced lockdown. Most tertiary institutions did not have an online teaching and learning platform before COVID-19 (Tarisayi & Munyaradzi, 2021). Students and lecturers were not ready and fully prepared for the new mode of teaching and learning. There is limited information regarding the experiences and challenges experienced by tertiary students adapting to online learning during COVID-19 induced lockdown. It is in this context that the study was undertaken. The study sought to explore the experiences and challenges faced by students in adapting to online learning during lockdown.

1.2. Research Questions

The study was guided by the following research questions:

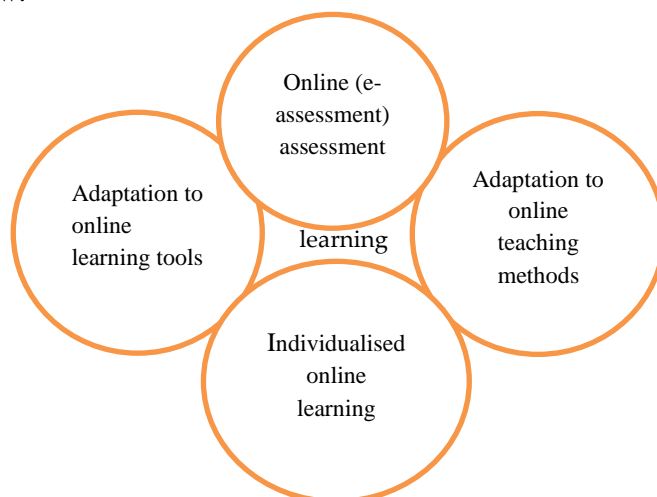
- Did tertiary students in Gweru urban manage to adapt to online line teaching learning mode and how did this affect their learning during lock down?
- What were the challenges faced by students in adapting to online learning?

- Which strategies did students proffer in order to ensure successful implementation of online learning in in future?

1.3. Review of Related Literature

1.3.1. Conceptual framework

The study looked at online learning as the central issue and how the students adapted to it in terms of four key aspects, namely, adaptation to the use of online learning tools, adaptation to online teaching and learning methods, online assessments, and individualised online learning, as shown by the diagram below.



Adaptation to online teaching methods entailed the use of Google Classroom, Moodle, Google Meet, Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and other online teaching and learning modes as teaching and learning tools. Students were expected to download and log in to these applications in order to take part in the learning process. The process required high technological competencies and literacy. The study thus wanted to explore the students' experiences with and challenges of adapting to these new modes of teaching and learning and the extent to which they managed to adapt to the use of the new learning modes.

Adaptation to online learning tools entailed students' ability to use ICT infrastructure in order to take part in online teaching and learning activities. The gate pass to taking part in online activities was possession of a computer or smart phone, access to the internet, and the ability to log on to links in order to be part of the virtual class. Students need to have the requisite ICT tools and ought to be able to use them (Rasheed, 2020) argue that a lack of technological competencies was a major challenge faced by students in adapting to online learning.

The study also wanted to explore students' experiences with and challenges of individualised home online learning. Lockdown restricted students to the home environment. There was a need for sufficient learning resources and adequate online learning space. Virtual lessons required students to have good time management skills, the ability to use online peer learning strategies, the ability to use complex technology (video projection, microphones, and speakers), and to be comfortable being the centre of attention during online lessons.

Assessment is a crucial component of teaching, for it helps monitor students' progress and offer required study material. During COVID-19, assessment changed from traditional face-to-face to online. Teachers were supposed to produce tests or exercises in order to access students' progress online. The study wanted to explore students' experiences with and challenges in adapting to this mode of assessment.

1.4. Online Learning

Online learning is a method of teaching and learning that enables educators to use internet and computer network media to provide learning material to learners during lockdown (Ompusunggu & Sari, 2019). This meant that lectures' communication and assessments were carried out in virtual environments. The method of teaching had two main approaches, namely synchronous and asynchronous learning (Watts, 2016). Synchronous learning is a situation where learners learn together in a virtual class, allowing greater participation and a sense of community. Asynchronous learning entailed a situation when students studied on their own using forums such as emails, materials, and messages at the expense of group interaction. If well adopted, online learning could present a lot of benefits to students and lecturers. Teaching and learning could be carried out anywhere and anytime. A significant amount of money could be saved since students and lecturers would not need to commute daily. Students with physical disabilities could also benefit from participating in virtual lessons since they would be spared the challenges of moving from one place to another. In a way, it is another platform for providing equality in educational provision. Above all, it was the best way to ensure that physical distance was maintained.

1.4.1. Experiences and challenges of online learning

There has been an explosion of studies on the effects of COVID-18 on education. Many studies zeroed in on the experiences faced by students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Students had to adapt to the new normal. The closure of educational institutions prompted a switch from face-to-face learning to online learning. This was meant to ensure that learning continued during the pandemic while curbing its spread. Studies by Kapisa et al. (2020) and Hew et al. (2020) indicated that students faced many obstacles during the online home learning environment. They lacked mastery of technology due to the high cost of internet and limited interaction between and amongst fellow students. The COVID-19-induced lockdown made significant disruptions to students' learning experiences. The home confinement to which students were exposed had a negative effect on their performance. On the other hand, a quantitative descriptive study by Singh et al. (2020) indicated that students appreciated and enjoyed the use of online learning. This could be a result of the students having adequate online learning tools and experience with online learning pedagogy.

Poor learning space was another challenge faced by tertiary students during lockdown. This was confirmed by a study by Barrot et al. (2021) which concluded that many students lacked access to fieldwork and laboratories. They also lacked appropriate ICT learning devices. A parallel study carried out in Ghana by Adarkwah (2021) also indicated that students faced similar challenges. Teachers who were used to the conventional teaching approach were forced to adapt to online learning despite their lack of ICT competencies. Online learning thus demanded the use of online learning equipment and competencies, which the students and lecturers did not have. Lockdown also deprived students of access to essential learning facilities like laboratories and workshops. Students who were majoring in practical subjects that required the development of skills through hands-on activities were the most disadvantaged. They were expected to learn with limited learning facilities, and this had a negative bearing on their performance. It can be concluded from the studies carried out that technical (poor internet infrastructure), methodological (content delivery), and personal challenges militated against the adaptation of online learning by tertiary students during COVID-19-induced lockdown.

1.5. Significance of the Study

The study is important in that it highlights individual and technology problems faced by students in trying to adapt to online learning. Furthermore, the study will help the Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education Innovation, Science, and Technology Development take proactive actions regarding online learning so as to mitigate the effects of pandemics and disasters that may require the use of online teaching and learning in the future. The study also unpacks and adds literature to online learning about the challenges faced by students and strategies that can be used to overcome them. The

results will also help in removing, reducing, or solving the barriers related to distance learning that have been adopted by many tertiary institutions. The study also sheds light on the need to devise comprehensive strategies related to educational, emotional counseling, and stress management for students who have been psychologically disturbed. Provisions of solutions to the challenges faced by students in adapting to Online learning is another profound significance for the student. The study gives contextual solutions based on the students' lived experiences.

2. METHODOLOGY

This was a qualitative ethnographic study. A netnographic study is a research method that is used to access community members' knowledge and experiences online (Kozinets, 2002). The method uses online environments such as social media to collect data. The method was the most suitable for collecting data during the COVID-19 period since it enabled the collection of data while maintaining physical distance between the researcher and the participants. The researchers created a cybercommunity of fifty tertiary students from five tertiary institutions in order to facilitate research without physical contact. Moreover, the concealment of the physical presence of the researcher in the cybercommunity gave the netnographic study an advantage over other forms of ethnography. Virtual communities enable one to gather information on a collectively created topic without any physical contact (Chen et al. 2012). In this study, the researcher wanted to collect data on students' diverse experiences and challenges in adapting to online learning during lockdown. (Udenze & Ugoala, 2020) argue that a netnographic study is a bottomless pit capable of automatically archiving a quantum amount of data. It is also capable of narrowing and handling large digital data sets. The approach is also able to digitally analyse and contextualise data and navigate difficult online ethical matters.

A WhatsApp group made up of fifty students from five different tertiary institutions was created. WhatsApp was easy to use and convenient, and it was an affordable interaction platform during lockdown (Tarisayi & Munyaradzi, 2021). It provided an environment that reflected and included features of real life and was valuable in studying interactions among the students. WhatsApp also enabled the exploration of experiences and students' behaviours for monitoring their development over time. The researchers were also able to experience a sense of immersion and share experiences, attitudes, beliefs, and challenges faced by students in adapting to online teaching and learning.

Purposive sampling was used to select the first five tertiary students in the Midlands. Snowball sampling was further used to identify and supply contact details of fellow students from their respective institutions. The sampled tertiary students participated in text and voice call discussions. The data was automatically archived on the WhatsApp platform, which made it easy for the researchers to analyse it through conversational threads and themes. The researchers adopted an interpretivist paradigm to understand, explain, and demystify social reality through the eyes of different participants (Cohen et al., 2018). Meanings were developed through the interactions of social processes involving students in the cyber environment. A social constructivist approach was also used in order to understand the multiple meanings that the students made of the phenomenon under study. Furthermore, the apparent absence of a pre-discursive reality in cyberspace encouraged the adoption of constructivist frameworks (Udenze & Ugoala, 2020).

Procedure

Students who participated in the study received WhatsApp messages that explained the purpose of the study and invited them to take part in it. The students would give consent to participate through written WhatsApp messages. They were then included in a WhatsApp group named "Online Teaching and Learning Experiences." This became the cyber community in which the researcher presided during the WhatsApp focus group discussions, which took place over a period of one month.

3. FINDINGS

3.1. Adaptation to Online Learning Methods

Conversation threads indicated that a number of challenges militated against students' ability to adapt to online teaching and learning. The following table shows the students' responses.

Table 1. Main challenges face by students N = 50

Challenge	Number of students	Percentage
Access to good and uninterrupted Internet connectivity	3	6%
Unsuitable online learning space	45	90%
Inability to purchase e-learning bundles	50	100%
Technological complexities of joining virtual classes	46	92%

The majority of the students (94%) indicated that they had internet connectivity challenges. Data from the archived WhatsApp platform was saturated with responses that indicated that students' homes were not connected to the internet, as shown by the following popular responses:

1. 'We are not connected to the internet'
2. 'Our family cannot afford internet charges'
3. 'We are not connected'

Lack of internet connectivity presented a major limiting factor in students' endeavours to adapt to online learning. (eLearning Africa 2020) argues that the success of online learning depends on the availability of the internet. The use of e-learning data bundles could have been a solution to this problem. However, all the students indicated that they could not afford to purchase e-learning bundles. Their family incomes were financially crippled by the fact that breadwinners were not working during lockdown. The few students who had the privilege of having internet connectivity complained of the technological complexities of joining the virtual classes. Female students confessed that they were not tech-savvy, and as a result, they could not benefit much from the online teaching and learning activities that were going on.

The students in the cyber community also complained about the unsuitability of the home as a virtual learning environment. Responses indicated that there was unlikely to be a quiet room or other quiet place to carry your virtual lessons. The home was a crowded place considering that everyone was at home during lockdown. It was very difficult to have a free virtual learning space. As a result, the students did not manage to take part in online teaching and learning activities in which they were scheduled to participate. Most of them failed to complete their coursework.

Social cohesion, which is consistent with cooperative learning, was also greatly disrupted. By learning alone at home, students felt they no longer belonged to an institution or a class. The social solidarity in which students helped each other to do tasks and assignments was missing for some students, as indicated by one student.

'I feel like in a quarantined learning environment. This is not different from being Covid 19 victim'

The remark showed that the student lost social capital due to lack of interaction with peers and lecture mates. Moiseyenko (2005) argues that social cohesion enhances the social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from connections among individuals. Due to lockdown students missed connection and reciprocity.

Fear of being a victim of COVID-19 was another life-threatening experience that the students had. All students expressed fear of death. Hearing and seeing loved ones die of COVID-19 made them feel that death was waiting for them somewhere outside. The fear of being victims of COVID-19 ruined their peace of mind. Their dreams, prospects of finishing their studies, and hopes of continuing to live were locked down. They confessed to seeing darkness everywhere. They had no hopes of a bright future. This had a negative bearing on their studies, which were carried out in an unusual

learning environment using a new mode of learning. They were worried as to when they would be able to return to face-to-face learning.

3.2. Assessment during Covid 19-pandemic

Before to the pandemic, students were used to immediate written or verbal feedback from lecturers. They would receive marked written assignments, and lecturers would discuss their performances verbally. The lockdown presented assessment challenges to learners. Assessment and feedback are now provided online. Students felt that lecturers also faced challenges with the shift to online teaching and learning since some lecturers never communicated or gave feedback on the assignments they sent. Some students did not manage to submit assignments or participate in online testing due to a lack of internet connectivity. Technological complexities also inhibited them from accessing assignments and study material from the internet.

The technological complexities and lack of ICT competencies required when one wanted to join online teaching and learning activities were a motivating factor in participating in these activities. On short notice, students were flooded with new terminologies and skills that they were supposed to know and use. The terms Zoom, Zoom Link, Meeting Passcode, Google Classroom, Class Code, and Google Meet were now in use, and students did not know what to do, as some students remarked;

1. *'The lecture said use the code to join the google class and get tutorials. I did not know where to get the google class and enter the code'*
2. *'I did not know what to do when I was asked to join google meet for a lesson'*
3. *'The application needed me to download the application and I had no internet'*
4. *'I wanted to say something. I did not know what to do on the Google Meet platform'*

Noteworthy from the remarks was the fact that students did not have prior learning on the use of online learning modes of learning. Students could have found it easy to adapt to online modes of learning had they been given orientation on how to use online teaching and learning technologies. Online learning was abruptly introduced to them without their having had prior orientation on how to use it.

Table 2. Ability to use online learning platform used by lecturers

Platform	Total number of students expected to use the platform	Total number of students who were able to use it	Percentage
Online class platforms			
Google classroom	50	5	10%
Google meet	10	5	50%
Mobile Conversations	50	50	100%
Zoom	40	8	20%
Material Sharing Platforms			
E-mail	50	35	70%
WhatsApp	50	50	100%
Institutional websites	50	5	10%

Four different online learning platforms, namely Google Classroom, Google Meet, Mobile Conversations, and Zoom, were adopted by five institutions whose students participated in the cyber community. All the institutions used Google Classroom as a platform for online teaching and learning. Only 10 percent of the students indicated that they were able to use the platform for learning. This meant that the majority of the students were not able to access study material, submit assignments, or receive them through the application. An inquiry on the reason why the students did not use the platform indicated a saturation of the following responses:

1. *'It was a completely new method I needed training on how to use it'*
2. *'It was a complicated approach and I did not know how to join the class'*
3. *'From nowhere I was asked to join a class with a code. I did not know how to do it'*
4. *'There was no internet I never attempted to join the said classes'*

Noteworthy from the responses was the fact that the students were not capacitated to use the platform. To them, it was a complicated and novel method of teaching. This could be an indication that the students have no self-efficacy towards the use of ICT tools. Liaw et al. (2007) argue that the use and willingness to use ICT tools depends on one's confidence and ability to use the tools. Furthermore, these online learning platforms were not usable in the absence of the internet, which most of them had no access to. (eLearning Africa 2020) asserts that online learning platforms are only accessible to those with internet access. The net effect of the lack of internet connectivity and the inability to use the platforms was the inability to submit assignments and benefit from e-assessment. This had a negative bearing on their performance and mental health.

Fifty percent (50%) of students from one institution indicated that when Google Meet was introduced by their institution, they were able to successfully use the platform for learning. Thirty (30%) of these students indicated that they were quick to adapt to the Google Meet platform because they were studying information science. Those who failed to use the platform cited lack of training on the use of the platform, the internet, power outages, and home disturbances as factors that militated against their use of the platform.

Mobile communication was used by all students. The reason for the popular use of the platform was that it used smart phones, which most students used for communication. WhatsApp was the most popular mode of communication and material sharing platform (Maphosa et al. 2020; Rambe & Chipunza 2013) agree that WhatsApp has revolutionised communication due to its ease of use and affordability. It can enhance autonomous, collaborative, and learner-centered education. WhatsApp and e-mail were cited as the most used material sharing platforms during the pandemic. Institutional websites were not used by many students. It demanded good connectivity, which students and lecturers could not access.

3.3.1. Availability of online learning tools

The availability of online teaching and learning tools is key to successful participation in online teaching and learning activities. The study explored the teaching and learning tools to which the students had access. The results are shown in the table below.

Table 3. Online teaching and learning facilities accessible to tertiary students during lockdown N = 50

Online learning tool	Number of students who could accessed the facilities	Percentage
Wi-Fi connection	3	6%
Laptop	30	60%
Smart phone / Tablet	50	100%
E-learning bundles	0	0%

Results showed that about half of the students did not have the requisite online teaching and learning tools. Many students did not have access to the internet. This was made worse by the fact that all the students could not afford to purchase e-learning bundles. This had a negative bearing on the students' participation in online learning activities. As a result, many students did not manage to submit the required coursework and sit for the examinations. All the students admitted that their performance was lower in the end-of-term and semester examinations.

3.4. Students' Suggestions on how to Enhance Smooth Online Teaching and Learning

Because connectivity was the major challenge faced by students, they suggested internet connectivity should be a ubiquitous resource.

- 1 We should have access to the internet any time anywhere for us to participate in on line learning
2. Internet connectivity is the fuel that drive online learning vehicle. Without it no learning takes place
3. The government should negotiate with internet providers for subsided data bundles for students

The sentiments expressed by students indicated that adequate provision of the internet could enhance the smooth implementation of online learning. Nazan et al. (2011) argue that the internet is a storage house of information that offers communication without boundaries, interactive learning, and online research. Students can be deprived of these benefits if they do not have access to the internet. Students also suggested that they should also be provided with adequate ICT infrastructure for them to participate in online teaching and learning activities. These include computers, laptops, and smartphones and their use. They should also be able to make use of emerging online teaching and learning modes.

4. CONCLUSION

Higher and tertiary institutions did not fully embrace online teaching and learning during COVID-19 lockdown. Students had challenges adapting to the online teaching and learning method. They faced challenges with connectivity, an inappropriate online learning space at home, and the technological complexity required to participate in virtual online learning activities. The students suggested that internet connectivity should be a ubiquitous resource in order to ensure successful and smooth adaptation to online learning activities. They also need to be capacitated with ICT skills for online learning in order to remove the technological complexities faced when one wants to participate in online teaching and learning activities. Technically, both teachers and students lost teaching and learning time in terms of the coverage of the syllabus in time for examinations. COVID-19 exposed the government's reluctance to expedite online learning, which was proposed by the 1999 Presidential Commission on Education.

Recommendations

The study made the following recommendations:

1. Internet connectivity should be a ubiquitous resource in order to ensure the successful implementation of online teaching and learning. The government should enter into partnerships with internet providers so they could avail affordable "e-learning data bundles" for students.
2. Tertiary institutions should ensure that there is adequate and uninterrupted internet connectivity in order to enable teaching and learning activities online.
3. The government should assist students in acquiring online learning technologies so that they can successfully participate in online teaching and learning activities.
4. Higher and tertiary institutions should capacitate students and lecturers with online learning skills in order to remove technological complexities that are encountered when one wants to participate in online teaching and learning activities.
5. Lectures and students should be equipped with knowledge of a variety of online teaching and learning platforms.

Acknowledgment

The data used in this study was confirmed by the researchers that it belongs to the years before 2020.

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