

**THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON THE HIGHER EDUCATION SECTOR IN ZAMBIA:
THE CASE OF PUBLIC HIGHER LEARNING INSTITUTIONS**

BY

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ABSTRACT

The study investigated the preparedness of public higher learning institutions in providing remote learning. Clearly out of the six public higher learning institutions covered by the study, only one institution has been conducting assessment via their e-learning platform. Before the COVID-19 pandemic set in, all the public higher learning institutions conducting distance learning studies were receiving assignments from their students via post and email. Following the closure of learning institutions in Zambia due to covid-19, public higher learning institutions offering distance learning programmes were all forced to begin using their e-learning platforms to deliver contents to learners. Lecture notes and continuous assessments were carried out via their e-learning platforms. The study has also established the need to continue with the use of e-learning platforms post the covid-19 era.

Three out of six public higher learning institutions covered by the study conducted their final semester examinations online while one conducted physical or on-campus examinations.

Internet connectivity proved to be a hindrance to conducting e-learning classrooms in real time. Recorded video and audio lectures were mostly used to deliver contents to the learners.

KEY WORDS: Distance Learning, E-learning, Public Higher learning institutions

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) was first reported in November 2019 in Wuhan, China and in less than six months, it had become a global crisis. Globally, the pandemic has claimed more than 500, 000 lives (WHO, June 2020).

Governments across the world with reported cases of COVID-19 have taken a number of measures to avert both economic and healthy catastrophes. Total and partial lockdowns have been implemented across the globe. In both cases, schools, colleges and universities have either completely shut down or shifted to remote learning aided by Information Communication Technology (ICT).

The Zambian government decided to close all schools to prevent the spread of COVID-19. It further restricted any meetings of people more than 50. The closure has deprived the students to raise their skills. Every student and pupil had been pushed into a distance mode of learning.

1.1 Statement of the problem

Going to school is the best public policy tool available to raise skills (Burgess and Sievertsen,2020). It is believed to increase the mental ability of a learner. At a time when huge efforts were being deployed to transform and improve higher education in Zambia, there was a danger that COVID-19 would destabilize the sector, with serious consequences. The Zambian government closed all schools including higher institutions of learning. However, it encouraged remote learning which was new to most institutions. This study assessed the capacity of Zambian public higher learning institutions to conduct classes remotely.

1.2 Purpose of the study

The purpose of the study was to assess the preparedness of public higher learning institutions in Zambia to conduct remote learning and measures being undertaken to teach remotely.

1.3 Research questions

1. Do public higher learning institutions have the capacity to conduct lessons remotely?
2. What are the effects of Covid-19 on higher education system in Zambia?

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Distance education

The history of distance learning can be traced to almost two centuries ago (Spector, Merrill, Merrienboer & Driscoll,2008) and made a significant change to how learning occurs. It was done via postal service.

Distance learning describes the effort of providing access to learning for those who are geographically distant. The advent of computers enhanced the delivery of education via the distance learning mode and added a new dimension to the definition of distance learning which embraced electronic media. According to Moore (1990), distance learning is the delivery of instructional materials, using both print and electronic media. It involved a lecturer who was located in a

different area providing the instruction at a particular time. Dede (1996, p. 1) elaborated on the definition by including a comparison of the pedagogical methods used in traditional environments and referring to the instruction as “teaching by telling.” The definition also stated that distance education uses emerging media and associated experiences to produce distributed learning opportunities.

Furthermore, Keegan (1996) suggested that the term distance education is an “umbrella” term, and as such, has terms like correspondence education or correspondence study that may have once been synonymously used, being clearly identified as a potential offspring of distance education.

2.2 Online Learning

Urban and Weggen (2000) defined online learning as a web-based training, e-learning, distributed learning, Internet-based learning, web-based instruction, cyber learning, virtual learning, or net-based learning. They further defined it as a subset of distance education and embraces a wide set of technology applications and learning processes including, computer-based learning, web-based learning, virtual classrooms, and digital collaborations. The definition encompasses delivery of course content via multimedia such as the internet, satellite broadcasts, audio/video tapes and interactive TVs.

Campbell (2004) argues that the emphasis of online learning in higher education settings is on the development of metacognitive as well as reflective and collaborative learning. It acknowledges the value of unplanned and the self-directedness of the learner to maximize incidental learning and improve performance. Some courses also favour certain learning styles over others. For instance, those that rely primarily on visual content may favour visual learners. Others deliver material through recorded audio lectures, which can be helpful for auditory learners. Although there are still misconceptions that online courses are isolating, most online education programs have adopted active learning environments that incorporate activities, peer-to-peer communication, and student-instructor interactions.

In a **traditional course**, multiple students gather to learn at a specific time and place. Students may attend lecture discussion sessions, independent study groups with peers, or interact with the instructor after class or during office hours. The style of instruction at traditional universities is

most often teacher-driven, in that the knowledgeable instructor lectures on the subject of his or her expertise.

Some **online courses** actually follow the same model, with synchronous online class sessions and question-and-answer sessions that serve as instructor office hours. However, other online courses allow students the flexibility to choose the time and place to learn that is most convenient for them. The style of instruction in online programmes is more user-driven. Depending on the course, students may experience varying levels of control over the pace of learning and when they attend the class.

2.2 The Barriers to Online Learning.

In many institutions, faculty members are expected to participate in online distance education as a part of their regular duties as faculty (Kim & Bonk, 2006). Nonetheless, most lecturers are hesitant to convert their traditional courses to an online format. This resistance is attributed to a lack of support, assistance, as well as training by institutions of higher education (Allen & Seaman, 2008; Keengwe, Kidd, & Kyei-Blankson, 2009).

Correspondingly, inadequate hardware and software, slow internet connections, learners' procrastination, lack of technical expertise among the instructors, insufficient orientation for learners, and a lack of release time for instructors to develop and design their online courses have been cited as barriers to faculty participation in developing and teaching online courses (Nkonge & Gueldenzoph, 2006). Supporting faculty becomes significant because of the number of faculty who begin the online teaching experience with little knowledge of the process of designing, developing, and instructing an online course (Cuellar, 2002).

Rockwell et al., (1999) evaluated the types of education, assistance, and support that faculty felt were needed to be successful in online teaching and learning. Faculty responded with the assertions that assistance and support for developing instructional materials, developing interaction, and for applying certain technologies were critical to their success in online environments.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

An exploratory research was deployed to assess the preparedness of the public higher learning institutions to offer remote learning amidst the closures due to the COVID-19. Six (6) public higher learning institutions offering degree programmes were selected out of fourteen (14). These were:

INSTITUTION	LOCATION	FOUNDED
UNIVERSITY OF ZAMBIA (UNZA)	LUSAKA	1965
COPPERBELT UNIVERSITY (CBU)	KITWE	1987
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION (NIPA)	LUSAKA	1963
MULUNGUSHI UNIVERSITY (MU)	KABWE	2008
CHALIMBANA UNIVERSITY (CHAU)	CHONGWE	1939
ZCAS UNIVERSITY (ZCAS-U)	LUSAKA	2016

Purposive sampling was used to select lecturers and students for this study, as schools had closed due to COVID-19 in purposive sampling, the units are selected according to the researcher's knowledge and opinion about which respondents they think were appropriate to the topic.

The research was done via telephone interview with the selected students and lecturers of these institutions. Observations were also used in this study.

4.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

TABLE 1: USE OF E-LEARNING PLATFORMS PRIO TO COVID-19 PANDEMIC

INSTITUTION	E-LEARNING	DISTANCE EDUCATION	ASSESEMENT VIA E-LEARNINH
UNZA	YES	YES	NO
CBU	YES	YES	NO
MU	YES	YES	NO
NIPA	YES	YES	NO
ZCASU	YES	YES	YES
CHAU	NO	YES	NO

It was found that most of the institution were not conducting any studies via their e-learning platform. The continuous assessments (CA) were submitted via post or email except for ZCAS University that has been using its electronic platform. At the time the schools closed, Chalimbana

University had no E-learning platform despite having a big number of students doing distance learning.

The following was the position of these six institutions during the closure due to COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

TABLE 2: USE E-LEARNING DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

INSTITUTION	E-LEARNING	TEACHING	SOFTWARE USED	EXAMS	CA
UNZA	YES	YES	ZOOM	PHYSICAL	EMAIL/POST
CBU	YES	YES	ZOOM	ONLINE/PHYSICAL	EMAIL/ONLINE/POST
MU	YES	YES	ZOOM	ONLINE	EMAIL/ONLINE
NIPA	YES	YES	ZOOM	ONLINE	ONLINE
ZCASU	YES	YES	ZOOM	ONLINE	ONLINE
CHAU	YES	YES	ZOOM	PHYSICAL	EMAIL/POST

The closures due to COVID-19 made three public institutions begin to use their e-learning platforms to send lecture notes, conduct virtual classes, webinar and conduct continuous assessments. Chalimbana University acquired its e-learning platform and trained its academic staff how to use the platform. CHAU immediately began to conduct lectures via zoom using its platform. The study found that the two biggest public institutions did not use the e-learning platform to conduct classes but sent their assignments via emails. UNZA and CBU are yet to have their examinations.

During the closures, three institutions, namely, NIPA, ZCAS-U, and MU conducted their semester examinations online via their platforms. CBU conducted online examinations for its distance learning students.

It was found that most lecturers were not conversant with delivering content online. Despite being trained during the pandemic, some lecturers continued to send their materials and assessments via email and not e-learning platforms. The new normal of studying online, regardless of the mode of study one had enrolled for, posed challenges to both the lecturers and learners. For institutions that depend heavily on part-time lecturers, no incentives were given to motivate them to use the new pedagogy approaches.

The other challenge was internet connectivity which proved too poor in some parts of Zambia to offer live lectures. Hence, most institutions resorted to recorded video or voice lectures.

5.0 CONCLUSION

The pandemic has resulted in investments in both e-learning platforms and staff training which has changed the way people perceive distance or online learning. Post the pandemic era, lecturers are expected to blend face-to-face learning with e-learning.

The pandemic has created opportunities for public institutions to expand the educational process beyond the traditional classroom to include geographically dispersed audiences via online. The schools need to adopt the new pedagogical approaches to the learning and teaching process to match with the "new normal". They also need to create incentives for the educators to use electronic educational platforms. The need for the sustained use of new technologies will help institutions to develop competencies required to conduct successful distance learning via e-learning platforms.

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