

Experiences, Challenges and Prospect of e-Learning in Higher Education in Uganda

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Abstract

E-Learning has helped higher education scale through the huddles that interrupted process had posed during the COVID-19 total lockdown period in 2020. Due to the challenges of online instruction using available e-learning models, many higher educational institutions fail to handle the continuation of the educational process during the lockdown. This paper, using a document review of already done research, moved beyond diagnosis to describe students and institutional experiences, challenges and the prospects of e-learning for higher institutions in Uganda. In developing essence, the study found that higher education in Uganda has forged ahead with its role of teaching, research, community development and storage of knowledge, despite all the challenges. In contribution to the ongoing conversation, these findings x-ray the need for higher institutions to embrace the new normal, to increase access to higher education in Uganda. This paradigm shift has not, in any way, changed the role of higher education in Sub-Saharan Africa, and in Uganda in particular.

Key words: e-Learning, online learning, Experiences, Instructional material, Higher Education, University, Post COVID-

1. Introduction

For many years, e-Learning was not considered a major pedagogy in Higher Education. It was regarded as substandard means which had less content and it was believed to have less time for learners to grasp the full content as specified in the curriculum. However, this new normal called e-Learning or online learning in education has forcefully been accepted by all institutions of higher education, owing to the COVID-19 pandemic. E-Learning, in full means “electronic learning” by the use of a computer, internet connection and all the platforms connected to

computers, laptops, and smartphones. Presently, all levels of education have resorted to e-Learning but the quality has to be assured in order not to lower the standard of education. According to studies, experiences and several challenges have been identified as constraints to effective instruction using e-learning platforms (Volery and Lord (2000) in Martinez (2009). In their study, Leidner and Jarvenper (1993 in Martinez 2009), outlined the factors affecting e-learning instruction as technology, teacher characteristics (competency) and students' characteristics. In this study, experiences, several challenges and prospects are examined.

In 2020, World Health Organization declared COVID-19 as a pandemic that has posed a contemporary threat to the health and well-being of human beings (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020).

The experience of the whole world cannot be described in a single paper but that of higher education in Uganda can be easily described in this study. After the assessment of the rapid spread of the virus and the severity of its deadly impact, the government of Uganda, under President Museveni Yoweri Kaguta, shut down all educational institutions as a means of curbing the spread of the COVID-19 Pandemic. Higher institutions were forced to use the internet and some other technologies like radio and television, to develop teaching methods and materials causing a paradigm shift in teaching and learning. Traditional classrooms became very impossible as physical contact with individuals was avoided due to the method of spread of COVID-19 (Mohammed, 2020). Higher education has now migrated to online learning by compulsion or compliance.

Online learning means the teachers and learners use the internet and some other technologies to develop and deliver instructions and also manage assessments (Fry, 2001). National Council of Higher Education (NCHE) Uganda came up with a monitory exercise to assist Universities not to get grounded by the COVID-19, insisting that they engage in online teaching and learning. The question, therefore, is what are the experiences, challenges and prospects of e-learning in higher education in Uganda as found in research already done in this regard?

2. Experiences and Challenges of e-Learning in Higher Education in Uganda.

The higher education sector suffered the worst setback from the COVID-19 pandemic as federal government in Uganda forced all universities and

colleges to close down and keep their doors closed till further notice (Gutte, 2021). Most of the universities were not prepared for the new development because they never envisaged a total lockdown. Although e-Learning has many merits, the traditional method of instruction has become the culture and custom of most universities irrespective of their age of establishment. Gutte (2021) also found out in a survey, that 77% of 800 college students prefer physical contact in class to e-Learning or online methods. This is simply because they are used to traditional classroom instructional methods. As outlined by Gutte (2021), in the same study, the following are the challenges, but they are not limited to these;

1. Students' lack of motivation.
2. Infrastructural inadequacies.
3. Low level of digital literacy in both students and teachers.
4. Lack of technical know-how in terms of handling the online platforms like learning management system (LMS).
5. Lack of competent Human resources in teaching online classes.
6. No passion for special needs (Physical or Physiological challenges).
7. The curriculum and course structure is not tailored for online paradigms.
8. Most universities' online programs are not accredited by the National Council of Higher Education, (NCHE) Uganda.
9. Fluctuations in power and power outage cause interruptions during online lectures.

2.0 Student Learning Challenges

There are so many challenges listed by Gutte (2021), that have not been overcome by most higher institutions especially universities, where many disciplines are not tailored for online learning. Some disciplines are not tailored for distance and online learning and this made the experiences more immersive.

In Universities where online has managed to forge ahead despite all odds, many categories of challenges such as digital content solutions, digital engineering and technology, digital products and platforms and digital transformation services are not available. According to Khan (2021) Universities are still struggling to respond to these challenges and have suspended most of the programs or belated full resumption of studies even in blended learning mode (ie mixture of traditional and online learning modes).

Despite all the challenges battled by Universities, online learning has a lot of merits such as accessibility at low costs, flexibility for the best teachers and learner student-driven outcomes. According to Martinez (2020), many people especially students are used to traditional classrooms, working spaces and libraries. They find it difficult to adjust to online learning. Which requires no physical space.

In the study by Malnez (2020), it was also found that visual learners are at an advantage while other types of learners may find the adjustment difficult, according to research, 10% of the information which is presented verbally is retained and usually, only 65% can be remembered, the remaining 25% of the information is usually lost in the average. It is possible to replace text on slides with images and

learning becomes more effective for visual learners and others. From all indications, e-Learning may not still replace the traditional method of learning which requires physical contact between learner and teacher.

3. Instructional and Institutional Challenges

In the study of Pappas (2015), who studied instructional challenges in e-Learning in his research, observed that the adoption of online learning has a lot. It is obvious that the e-Learning platform has made the role of the teacher more complicated and complex. A teacher has to collect, collate, prepare and present information through the internet (Bwire, 2020). Teachers also lacked the required skills for designing and delivering online courses even where the institution has adequate infrastructure such as computer laboratories, an adequate number of computers and a steady connection to the internet. In their study, Bwire, Bagarukayo and Muyinda, (2020) discovered that the majority of the teachers had never designed any online instruction and most of the teachers still preferred the traditional classrooms.

In previous years before COVID-19, public Universities in Kenya attempted to cope with the increasing demand for e-learning between 2012 and 2014. In a study, Mutisya and Makokha (2016) discovered that 420 lecturers and 210 students, used in analyzing the need for e-Learning adoption, failed to accept learning because of poor internet connectivity, lack of laptops/computers, inadequate computer laboratories, limited ICT skills and insufficient time for online interaction between the teacher and learner. In Uganda, Universities were thinking of going online as a way of increasing access to higher education as in other Sub-Saharan countries, even before COVID-19 Pandemic (Bart and Kipkoech, 2012). Many

authors in their studies have agreed that limited internet and lack of skill are hindering e-Learning from growing in East African Universities (Kasse and Balunywa, 2013).

4. Prospects of e learning in Higher Education in Uganda

It is no gainsaying to emphasize that e-learning is the most credible way to open access to higher education, not only in Uganda but globally. In a study of prospects of e-learning in higher education in Nigeria, Aboderin (2015) found that e-learning will promote distance learning if adequately utilized, and will expand the frontiers of knowledge. Studies also show that e-learning influences computer literacy and ICT competency. e-Learning can make teaching and learning experiences happen anywhere, anytime and the system can adapt to the aims of improving communication, collaboration and knowledge transfer and sharing among diverse students (Blezu and Popa 2008, Mohammed, 2020) According to Popa (2008), the prospects of e-learning paradigm include; time flexible, geography independent, competitive cost/ value, learner-centred, technology embracing, and ethnic diversity. In another study, Odegbesan et al (2019) asserted that adoption of e-learning in higher education means performance gain, public sway adequate support of higher education and proficiency in instruction. From the previous studies, it is obvious that the e-learning paradigm has come to increase access and improve technology-based education globally and in Uganda specifically. According to Blezu and Popa (2008), the future of higher education is found in the shrinking of the distances between continents and nations which is made possible by the internet. This means that students and teachers can be anywhere at any time and still study together.

5 Methods

This study used a qualitative approach to the review of research done during the COVID-19 pandemic period - between 2020 and 2021. The study also used inductive methods of emerging ideas through consensus obtained from previous research before 2020. The thematic approach helped to identify related literature to support the study's arguments. The philosophy behind the study is phenomenological, analyzing data from significant statements, textual and displaying the essence of experiences.

6. Conclusion

It has been established, from all the studies in e-learning that it has become a new normal since the 2020 global lockdown that disrupted the progress of many academic programs around the world. In Uganda, many cross border students left their studies and rushed back home and did not study during the lockdown. Consequently, many transferred to universities that are easily accessible to them, in terms of geographical access is concerned.

E-Learning has become the best option and it is making virtual campus reality for all higher education in Uganda and the rest of the world (Blezu and Popa, 2008). The experiences and challenges have made the full implementation of e-learning in higher education imperative (Mohammed, 2020). The technological advancement in the world has made e-learning credible enough to produce proficient, competent and responsive individuals using higher education (Volery and Lord; 2000). The higher institutions in Uganda must adapt to e-learning models that will take classrooms to next level through the creation of a virtual community of learners irrespective of their geographical location.

E-Learning is more comprehensive than distance learning where resources are put online for

students to use: e-learning involves interaction and a closer relationship between teacher and learner in some synchronizing timelines or synchronizing models of interaction. Universities and other higher educational institutions in Uganda are presently having hard experiences in establishing or setting up synchronous online learning which includes videoconferencing or teleconferencing. Live chatting through learning Management systems and live-streamed lectures can take place in real-time.

From researches and a cursory look into post-covid19 experiences, higher educational institutions in Uganda still run most of their programs as traditional classrooms instead of stepping up the standard of their e-learning instructions to ease the stresses and strains of the pandemic. Universities in Uganda should improve their technical knowledge to utilize virtual platforms for e-learning instructions. Most programs are not supporting e-learning such as sports, medicine and nursing. This means curriculum mapping should be done to make such programs run on blended learning where practical areas are mapped out for the traditional method and the theoretical aspects of such programs use e-learning models.

The paradigm shift is in making some percentage of higher education learning experiences as virtual instructions and a lesser percentage of the learning experiences should involve physical interactions between teacher and learner. This is because some disciplines may not produce credible graduates if all the required learning experiences are studied online; such disciplines as Medicine, Engineering and Nursing.

In conclusion, the study has established that improving the state of infrastructure, human resource motivation and training of staff and students have become imperative if any university is to maintain relevance and gain a competitive advantage in both quality and quantity.

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