

DEVELOPING ALTERNATIVE TEACHING CONTINUITY PLANS TO MOVE CLASSROOMS ONLINE AT COVID-19 ERA IN NIGERIA

CHAPTER ONE

COVID-19 PANDEMIC: TRANSFORMATIVE MOMENT FOR ONLINE LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study examined the challenges of transformative moment to online learning in higher education in Nigeria and suggested the way forward. The inevitable digital learning at higher education brought about by COVID-19 pandemic is unlikely to occur smoothly, evenly or equitably. The challenges of digital infrastructure, internet connectivity, network access and affordability, lack of adequate power supply, lack of capacity among lecturers and parents, poor funding of education and digital divide among others pose real obstacles to online learning at higher education level in Nigeria. The study identified massive investment in critical infrastructure, digital training for administrators and lecturers, public-private partnership in networks development and use of low-cost technology among others as the way forward. The study recommended that higher education course creator should work closely with their information technology (IT) departments to ensure that programmes are supported with low cost technology, public-private partnership in the provision critical infrastructure, digital literacy training for lecturers and administrators among others.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, transformative moment, online learning, Higher education

Introduction

Coronaviruses are a family of viruses that are known to cause illness ranging from the common cold to more severe diseases such as Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (World Health Organization, 2020). The most recent coronavirus (sometimes referred to as the novel coronavirus), called COVID-19, was first detected in Wuhan, China in December of 2019. It has spread to almost every country in the world as the virus is very contagious that people could be infected before any symptoms appear. The COVID-19 pandemic as at today has brought much pressure to every segment of human society in Nigeria and to the entire world. UNESCO (2020)

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stressed that most government around the world have temporarily closed educational institutions in an attempt to contain the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. The health, political, social, economic and religious sectors have been hit by the pandemic that is ravaging the world. As part of efforts to contain the spread of the virus, public spaces such as schools, markets and offices are closing down so that people can stay at home and prevent further spread. UNICEF (2020) stated that over 1.6 billion children are out of school in 161 countries due to the pandemic, one of the greatest threats to global education in a lifetime. It is forcing the educators, parents and students to think critically, creatively and collaborate in search of innovative solutions.

Measures that are taken to slow down the rates of infection include social distancing, limits on event size, and home quarantine when necessary. Online learning has become necessary to achieve social distancing which is one of the measures recommended by World Health Organization, (WHO) in containing the virus. According to WHO (2020) the chances of being infected or spreading COVID-19 can be reduced if an individual maintains at least 2 metres (6 feet) distance from others and avoid over crowded place. The essence of the social distance is to avoid close contact with someone that has the virus. This cannot be achieved in the school environment where most classes are overcrowded hence the need for online learning. Klomp (2020) agreed that COVID-19 pandemic and the seriousness of social distancing measures have set in motion an unstoppable wave of advancements in digital learning. Online learning is learning utilizing digital technologies to access educational curriculum outside of traditional classroom. It can be described as using digital technology to transform the learning experience. Online learning is learning that takes place over the internet which accelerates the integration of technology into education.

Michigan (2020) observed that before the pandemic, many higher educations never truly embrace online education. There are online learning programme and software available but the traditional face to face learning had been in operation over the years. The online learning brings about great changes in the education system and now it seems the education systems around the world are due for an update. Kennenth (2020) stated that the education sector has been conservative and resistant to change and this pandemic could profoundly change education for better. Students are going to experience new type of learning. Students will no longer go to schools and colleges to attend lectures, admission becomes easier like the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), costs such as hostel fees, commuting cost will be eliminated and students can learn at their own pace. According to Nwafor (2020), the COVID-19 pandemic is changing the ways humans live their lives and is digitizing the global economy. To be relevant in the global digital economy, not just students but teachers must have digital literacy skills. The digital literacy skills required

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for success in the digital economy are the same skills that allow teachers to move on line and manage their virtual classes.

Online learning provides an alternative that make education accessible. There are various means of virtual classes. These include integrated digital platforms using personal tablets, video lesson, Massive Open Online Courses, broadcast through Radio and Television, or assignments sent via WhatsApp or email. Online learning could help increase access to education for millions of Nigerian youths. The switch to technological platforms give new opportunities to students and teachers to try out different modes of education. Anderson (2020) opined that online learning enables student to take ownership of their learning, understanding more about how they learn, what they like, and what support they need. Tam and El-Azar (2020) opined that the coronavirus pandemic has changed how millions around the globe are educated as new solutions for education could bring much needed innovation. Online learning is not a threat to the traditional classroom but a way of extending the traditional learning practices into communities that city-based university campuses cannot reach (Klomp, 2020). Today, technology is enabling students to communicate and collaborate with their peers on platforms such as WhatsApp groups, e-mail and zoom platform. Online learning makes it possible for students to earn a degree from anywhere in the world and with varying schedules due to work or family obligation.

Online learning addresses the challenges that COVID 19 pandemic has created in the school environment. Some of these challenges are: enough desk to maintain social distance, teachers and student's ratio in the new arrangement, teachers using face mask to teach lessons in the classes and safety of students' books to be marked by teachers. Other challenges include: frequency of temperature test for students and teachers, provision of sanitizers, uses of face mask by students and if a student shows COVID-19 symptom during learning, is the teachers, the whole students or school going to be quarantine? According to Klomp (2020), the signal being sent to university educators all over the world during the COVID-19 crisis is clear- online distance education is viable, cost effective and rapidly improving way of empowering students regardless of their location, age, gender or social status. Oyanna (2020) opined that formal learning is now available online worldwide through the Massive Open courses, virtual classes and YouTube tutorials. The wall of the classrooms is no longer a barrier as technology enables new ways of learning, communicating and working collaboratively. With the limitation to face-to-face classroom engagement, due to the pandemic caused by COVID-19, switching to a virtual classroom to make learning continuous is the new alternative (Oyanna, 2020).

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Online learning will create new employment opportunities for digital skilled graduates and lead to up skilling of professional. Innovative digital learning technologies are already in the market and more people are connecting to the worldwide web. The unprecedented commercial rush on developing new educational services and technologies will create new employment opportunities for the skilled graduates in Nigeria. The investment in network infrastructure could lead to a virtuous cycle where improved quality and access to education, creates apprenticeship and up skilling opportunities and leads to economic empowerment. Klomp (2020) argued that the pandemic has enforced the necessity for universities to pivot rapidly to online learning as universities can not only continue largely unaffected, but can also thrive, when delivered completely online.

In a world that is defined by technology where knowledge is a mouse-click away, the role of the educator must change. The researcher is of the view that COVID-19 has become a catalyst for educational institutions all over the globe to search for innovative solutions to centuries-old lecture-based approaches and outmoded classrooms. This health crisis has presented Nigeria an opportunity to redirect her policies in this critical sector, education, as real change takes place in deep crisis. With effort to control the spread of the novel coronavirus, education is suddenly and rapidly moving online and any educational institutions that fail to embrace this transformative moment of online learning will soon be closed for ever. Online learning will reshape schools, the ideal of education, what learning look like in the 21st century and also revealing that there is another way to learning. This crisis offers a turning point, a unique opportunity to learn, reshape and build resilience into the nation's education system. Most parents, schools and students have tilted towards online teaching and lecturing to continue with the school curriculum. The purpose of this study is to examine the challenges of this transformative moment to online learning in higher education in Nigeria and highlights the way forward. The researcher is of the opinion that this study will be significant to policy makers to enable them turn this challenge into opportunity of transforming the education sector.

Challenges of Online learning in Higher Education in Nigeria

Online learning in higher education comes with many challenges. Some of these challenges are:

a. Exacerbating the Divide between Privileged and Underprivileged Students

The quality of online learning is heavily dependent on the level and quality of digital access. Unfortunately, many families rely on public school system for education and many students do not have access to computer or the internet in their home, making online instruction a distant prospect for most people in Nigeria. This will force many students to miss out on their education until further solution can be arranged as relying on a strategy

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to make education online risks exacerbating inequality. Tam and El-Azar (2020) argued that given the digital divide, new shifts in education approaches could widen equality gaps. Many homes in Nigeria are not connected to internet services and access to mobile phone is limited especially in the rural areas where networks penetration is low. COVID-19 is truly magnifying the educational inequality as those with access to digital learning resources will keep learning in the comfort of their homes while those without access are left behind.

b. Poor Funding of Education

Most education in low-and middle-income countries were grossly underfinanced even before coronavirus (Thomas, 2020). The coronavirus will impact budget in Nigeria with the fallen of oil price from \$63 per barrel to \$23 per barrel. Online learning may be difficult especially in public schools due internet availability and affordability. The coronavirus present explicit risk to the teaching force as government budget will be stressed. Most private schools are saddled with the challenge of how to keep up with the cost of virtual learning. Online classes require a lot of data consumption and equipment which students in public university may not afford and there is no budgetary provision to assist the poor students without corresponding gadgets. Olabisi (2020) opined that the problem in Nigeria educational system goes beyond underfunding as corruption is the bane of the sector. Government officials who are to oversee or monitor the institutions never visit to monitor or evaluate project but to collect money and add nothing to the schools. This is why the little funds injected into the system never give maximum returns. Many lecturers in the higher education never have official laptop and often borrow projectors for use in the class room. Universities borrow lecturers and equipment from one another for accreditation purposes due to poor funding.

c. Unqualified Teachers

Many teachers today are struggling with technological difficulties as many of them lack the technical competency to apply modern techniques in teaching and learning. Teachers are the head and the heart of the educational enterprise (Thomas, 2020). The issue of digital skills of teachers is key in online learning. Online capacity building for teachers is urgent at this transformative moment. The ever-changing global environment required that the teachers need important skills to effectively navigate in this challenging environment. Some of these skills are: creativity, communication, collaboration, empathy, teamwork and emotional intelligence. Oyanna (2020) opined that many school teachers are unprepared to use technology to support student learning as they lack the digital skills to effectively use technology in the classroom. In addition to digital skills, many teachers lack the resources to deliver live lessons or record a Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC) styled lessons.

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d. Lack of Critical Infrastructural Facilities

Infrastructural facilities that support online learning is a key challenge in Nigeria. The reliability of power and internet services is a thing of major concern at this transformative moment. Adedigba (2020) stated that most of the public universities and few private universities are not equipped for online learning as online classes are given in modules and it requires expertise to develop the curriculum. Adedigba (2020) further observed that there is no university in Nigeria that is approved by National Universities Commission to operate 100 per cent online learning but a few private universities with resources are taking advantage of classes online. Many families have no access to power supply, internet access or other educational technological resources, a situation that is creating a gap in academic progress at this period of pandemic. Most students in public universities live in rural areas, some do not have access to the internet and students need to use applications such as Skype and Zoom for online learning.

e. Lack of Parental Guidance

Many students in higher education in Nigeria are under age hence the need for parental guidance. With online classes, parents need to help younger students navigate school on the computer. Anderson (2020) opined that the crisis has cast a bright on deep inequalities not just in who has devices and bandwidth, which are critically important, but also who has the skills to self-direct their learning, and whose parents have the time to spend helping their children. In Nigeria, opportunities to learn within the homes are limited given that a parent's ability to provide educational support for their children depend on their own level of education. Parental involvement in children education process is key in online learning.

f. Concentration Difficulties

Many students find it difficult to concentrate to full capacity with online educational tools. Young students need the assistance of in-person instruction, and may find it difficult to concentrate in a typical frontal class conducted on a computer. These difficulties may require unique approach to online learning or may demand the extra assistance of parents as these students navigate a new educational paradigm. Online learning at home means parents must spend more time with children which is very demanding on the part of the parent. UNICEF (2020) stressed that parents need to be calm and proactive, stick to a routine, check in with them about what they are learning and monitor them.

The Way Forward

One lesson that must be learned from this pandemic is the need to embed more technology into the classroom. COVID-19 provides a transformative moment to online learning and

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this should be encouraged and sustained. Online learning can be achieved through the following means.

1. Provision of Critical Infrastructure

There is a need for massive investment in critical infrastructure by all stake holders in education. Online tools such as group video programme that allow teachers and students to meet and conduct classes over the internet should be given top priority by all the stakeholders in education. Olabisi (2020) suggested that government should focus on developing and deploying information and communication technology to learning in Nigerian schools and its higher institution. Students can continue their studies through distance education, which uses online programme that replace instructors with educational material that student's study on their own. Massive investment in infrastructure facilities that will decrease the access cost and increase quality of access is needed to bridge the digital divide. Investment in digital infrastructure to make sure that schools and families have good access to online learning is the way forward. This will enhance internet penetration and connectivity in education institutions. Hussain (2020) suggested that government should provide solar-powered educational devices, pre-loaded with offline academic to students at reduced cost.

2. Public-Private Partnership

Government alone cannot make the big difference in education, there is need for public-private partnership to source fund for the provision of educational equipment and facilities. Also, there is need for partnership among the diverse stakeholders – including publishers, technology providers, telecom network operators, educational professional—coming together to utilize digital platforms for online learning. Conscious effort is required to bridge the digital divide, by ensuring that the cost of technology adoption is low. Overall, introducing innovative technology into classroom could help in improving learning outcome across the board. Hussain (2020) opined that government should also partner with telecommunication companies to offer free or subsidized mobile data packages for learners and mobilized all the stake holders to prepare alternate learning programmes.

3. Digital Training for Lecturers and Administrators

Many teachers are novices in coaching students online. The absence of teacher training on online learning in the past in Nigeria is a key challenge. Michigan (2020) stated that many teachers are not up to scratch on ICT skills and they need new pedagogies — e - pedagogies. Teachers need constant reiterations of learning about emerging technology and how to use them. Newsletters, video messages, virtual classrooms, emails, phone calls, text messages, and posts on social media could all be useful to remain in touch. Teachers that

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lack digital skills will find it difficult operating technologies for online learning. Digital training for lecturers will improve their capacity to implement online learning programmes in the higher education level. All lecturers are to prepare their lecture notes in modules for online delivery.

4. Adequate Funding of Education Sector

The effect of the pandemic is just one out of many educational inequalities and there is the need for the provision of equitable and inclusive learning environment for all students irrespective of their social background and this required adequate funding (Thomas, 2020). Olabisi (2020) observed that a total of N3.9 trillion was budgeted for education sector in ten years by the federal government of Nigeria between the years 2009-2018 and compare this to Harvard's total funding value of \$40.9 billion for the 2019 fiscal year alone. There is a need for government to prioritize education spending within the budget to address the challenge of poor funding. International donor agencies and partners should prioritize financing for education. All leakages must be block and creative thinking by all the stakeholders on expanding social support programmes is key at this transformative moment to online learning.

5 Uses of Low-Cost Technology

Reaching the vulnerable population in Nigeria will required multiple learning delivery modalities. Radio and Television that are easily available to the poor compared to other means that are heavily dependent on internet connectivity and other network facilities should be incorporated into online learning. Asawo (2020) observed that many States and private schools in Nigeria have embarked on airing school lessons on Radio and Television. Oyanna (2020) also confirmed that students in rural areas without access to the internet or computer are learning through educational TV and radio programme. Free Radio and Television school options should be provided with other low-cost technology like whatsapp, Facebooklite, Telegram and Modules.

Conclusion

The study concludes that the inevitable digital learning at higher education brought about by COVID-19 pandemic is unlikely to occur smoothly, evenly or equitably. The challenges of digital infrastructure, internet connectivity, network access and affordability, lack of adequate power supply, lack of capacity among lecturers and parents, poor funding of education and digital divide among others pose real obstacles to online learning at higher education level in Nigeria. The study identified massive investment in critical infrastructure, digital training for administrators and lecturers, public-private partnership in networks development and use of low-cost technology among others as the way forward.

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Suggestions

This study has the following suggestions:

1. Higher education course creator should work closely with their Information Technology (IT) Departments to ensure that their programmes are supported and will be able to handle all lectures. The success recorded by the National Open University of Nigeria should be a reference point for all higher education in Nigeria.
2. Educational radio and television programming, which have ready potential to reach a great number of students and educators should be encouraged and sustained.
3. Government should protect and prioritize education spending within the budget to address the challenge of poor funding for critical online learning infrastructure.
4. Digital literacy training for lecturers and administrators must be encouraged and sustained.
5. The higher education regulators must prevail on the higher institutions in Nigeria to explore the possibilities of online learning and redefine the platform for delivering tertiary education. Create communities of lecturers and school managers to facilitate sharing of experience and discussion on coping strategies and support when facing difficulties.

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