JELR | JOURNAL OF E-LEARNING RESEARCH

ISSN: 2669-235X

VOLUME 2, ISSUE 1

Students' Experiences of E-learning During Covid-19 in a Selected State University in Zimbabwe

Admire Mhindu

Department of Curriculum Studies, Great Zimbabwe University, Masvingo, Zimbabwe
amhindu@gzu.ac.zw

ABSTRACT

The outbreak of Covid-19 and its declaration as a global pandemic by the World Health Organisation (WHO) forced universities in Zimbabwe and beyond to abandon the usual face to face teaching and learning after national lockdowns were instituted by governments to curb the spread of the deadly pandemic. E-learning became the new normal. This study explored the e-learning experiences of university students from different socio-economic backgrounds during the national lockdown at a selected university in Zimbabwe. The case study research design which derives from the qualitative research approach and interpretivist paradigm was used. Data were gathered from fourteen purposively sampled Master of Education students through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. It was established that students could not afford data bundles for e-learning as they were very expensive. Also, a number of students from both affluent and poor backgrounds lacked meaningful knowledge on how to use Google Classroom e-learning platform as they had only received a one day training before universities closed. Connectivity challenges also affected all students across the social divide, leading to the adoption of WhatsApp as an e-learning platform which could be accessed with limited network connectivity. Due to these and other problems, e-learning was viewed as a preserve for the rich and computer literate while those from poor backgrounds remained out of the google classes due to lack of resources. It was recommended that universities support e-learning through proper training of students and provision of data to those who cannot afford it.

Keywords: Covid-19, e-learning, google classroom, lockdown, pandemic

Cite this article as: Mhindu, A. (2023). Students' Experiences of E-learning During Covid-19 in a Selected State University in Zimbabwe. *Journal of e-learning Research*, 2(1), 1-11. https://doi.org/10.33422/jelr.v2i1.294

1. Introduction

In March 2020, the novel coronavirus (a virus that causes Covid-19) deteriorated into a global pandemic. This resulted in school closures across the world. Institutions of higher learning were not spared as the spread of the virus forced them to make the difficult decision to shut their doors, forcing a sudden and nearly universal shift to e-learning that proved disruptive for teachers, students, and parents alike. The shift to distance learning which seemed like a temporary precaution to curb the spread of the novel coronavirus slowly paved way for a 'new normal' where students at all levels of education were forced to resort to remote learning.

E-learning was not fully utilized by institutions of higher learning in developing countries before the outbreak of the Covid-19 as a global pandemic. However, the current crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic forced the entire world to rely on it for education (Zalat et al., 2020). The Covid-19 epidemic is infectious in nature (Mhindu, 2020) and for this reason, national lockdowns were instituted in different countries to try and contain the spread of the deadly virus. This left institutions of higher learning with no choice but to fall back on e-learning.

During this critical moment of the COVID-19 pandemic, most countries around the world shifted to online teaching (Yamin, 2020; Sintema, 2020; Hashemi, 2021). However, research has shown that e-learning has presented challenges to students even before the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. For example, a study by Wang et al (2014, as cited in UNESCO, 2016) shows that students lacked experience of using technology for learning because they often used it for entertainment and communication rather than producing knowledge. Lack of experience presents challenges to e-learning as students may find it difficult to maneuver through their technological devices for meaningful e-learning to take place. Thus, it is critical to establish how students at the selected state university experienced e-learning during the lockdown; a new phenomenon to them that was necessitated by the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic.

2. Statement of the Problem

The outbreak of Covid-19 and its escalation as a global pandemic forced universities and other institutions of learning to abandon face to face teaching and adopt e-learning as the new normal. Lockdowns were instituted to try and curb the spread of the lethal virus at a very short notice. In Zimbabwe, the government instituted a national lockdown on 30 March 2020; after giving a notice period of two weeks. This means that universities had two weeks only to prepare both staff and students for e-learning. The current study sought to establish the experiences of students in using e-learning platforms recommended by the university during the Covid-19 induced lockdown at a selected state university in Zimbabwe.

2.1. Research Questions

The study endeavored to answer the following research questions:

1. What were the students' experiences of e-learning during Covid-19?
2. Why did they experience e-learning the way they did?
3. How could their experiences be improved?

2.2. Conceptual Framework

This study is informed by Andersson & Gronlund's (2009) Conceptual framework of emerging issues of e-learning in developed and developing countries. In their framework, they identify a number of challenges encountered in the implementation of e-learning in higher education institutions. For example, they cite Dhanarajan (2001), Heeks (2002) and Rajesh (2003) stating that in many developing countries there is a lack of important e-learning gadgets such as computers, electricity and skills. Lack of these gadgets obviously impact on students' experiences if learning is to be done online.

Affordability of electronic gadgets is another issue that Andersson & Gronlund (2009) identify as an enabler or disabler of meaningful implementation of e-learning. In developing countries, as noted by Andersson & Gronlund (2009), the issue of cost of e-learning technologies is largely discussed; focus being on the need to have affordable and low-cost ICTs and user charges. This means that there may be problems if e-learning gadgets are beyond the reach of the majority of students as it may be difficult for them to buy them. This also includes the cost of data bundles which should be within the reach of every student. This study sought to establish if students at the university under study had access to requisite ICTs and data bundles for use during Covid-19 when e-learning was the only available option.

The conceptual framework of emerging issues of e-learning in developed and developing countries also highlight the need to for students to have technological confidence to facilitate

successful implementation of e-learning. According to Andersson & Gronlund (2009), students need not only access to technology by also necessary computer skills and feel confident in using computers. In addition to that, internet connectivity should be reliable accessible. Andersson & Gronlund (2009, p.6) further note that access also involves "… the reliability of the connection and bandwidth…" With a reliable internet connection and relevant ICT gadgets, meaningful e-learning can be guaranteed. This will in turn determine the kind of experiences students will have in e-learning. Submissions from this conceptual framework were useful lenses in understanding students' experiences of e-learning at the selected state university in Zimbabwe.

Institutions should also offer support to both students and staff for successful implementation of e-learning. Andersson & Gronlund (2009, p.5) suggest that, "The school can support the teachers by providing technical support, training, assistance or just showing the commitment of the institutional leaders." Such training will enable teachers to develop relevant teaching and learning activities which evidently will determine whether or not students will enjoy them. If these activities are not well thought out, or if teachers do not know how to upload them on e-learning platforms, students might find e-learning less enjoyable compared to face-to-face learning.

Having discussed these and other issues as central in e-learning, Andersson & Gronlund (2009) outline a summary of the challenges for e-learning in their conceptual framework. Some of the challenges they identify for students are lack of: motivation, technological confidence and support for students from faculty, among others. They also identify contextual challenges which include training of teachers and staff, knowledge management, economy and funding among others. These challenges as summarized by Andersson & Gronlund (2009) were useful lenses in the analysis of findings of this study in its endeavor to understand the students' experiences of e-learning during Covid-19.

3. Literature Review

Before the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, conventional higher education institutions in Zimbabwe and beyond "relied mostly on physical face-to-face teaching…" (Mhindu, 2020, p.345). E-learning was not a priority since lecturers and students had enough face-to-face contact time on campus. In this section, I will discuss factors that need to be taken into consideration before introducing e-learning and this will help in illuminating into the possible e-leaning experiences of students in the selected state university in Zimbabwe.

The concept of blended learning (which involves both face-to-face and e-learning) may sound simple in theory but very intricate in practice (Wang et al., 2015). Several issues need to be considered if e-learning is to succeed. One such issue is to ensure that teaching staff is equipped with the requisite skills to use online technologies to involve students (UNESCO, 2016). Without these skills, it may be difficult for students to access online learning. Staff, therefore, require proper training to develop their skills in using digital platforms for teaching. UNESCO (2016) suggests that one way of training staff is to allow those amongst them with experience in using these platforms to model their practices to colleagues at team, departmental or institutional level. Learning from their colleagues will help the inexperienced staff members to refine their skills in using online technologies, which will in turn, ensure meaningful e-learning for students.

Lecturer preparedness to go digital in lecture delivery is of critical importance as it will facilitate students' access of knowledge through e-learning. Unfortunately, Munro & Walsh (2005) note that, because e-tutoring is a contemporary development, many lecturers did not experience it themselves as students and as such, most of them tend to feel uncomfortable about

using it to deliver educational knowledge. This means that, lecturers' confidence in e-teaching needs to be boosted through proper and adequate training on how to maneuver through e-learning platforms for them to use them efficiently and effectively to generate knowledge. This study sought to establish if such training was offered to academic staff at the selected state university in Zimbabwe and how that impacted on the students' experiences of e-learning during the national lockdown.

Another issue that needs to be considered if e-learning is to succeed is to ensure that all students have the requisite technological devices for use during e-learning. Prensky (2001, as cited in UNESCO, 2016) brands today's students as 'digital natives' but that does not necessarily mean that every student owns such devices like smartphones, laptops or tablets required for e-learning. UNESCO (2016, p.12) notes that, "…not all students own digital devices that support online learning." This means that institutions of higher learning should ensure that those students who do not own these devices are catered for through provision of such before the onset of e-learning. This would enable such students to enjoy the benefits of e-learning. Thus, the current study sought to establish if the university under study took this issue into consideration when students were supposed to learn online due to Covid-19.

UNESCO (2016) suggests ways in which higher education institutions can offer support to students from low income families. One such suggestion is "…loaning laptops or tablets to students in need to bridge [the] digital divide in Higher Education Institutions, and hence, improving educational equity." Doing so will ensure equity in as far as access to education is concerned. If this is not done, surely those learners from poor backgrounds will face serious challenges in accessing knowledge through e-learning. In addition to this, students also require training on how to use these gadgets for e-learning. Donnelly and McSweeney (2009, p.64) cite Salmon (2000) as saying that "students using online learning for the first time often have serious difficulties gaining initial access." Thus, adequate training is required to ensure that e-learning is not a burden to students. The current study examines the lived experiences of e-learning during Covid-19 taking into cognizance the training they had received before they were asked to learn through the Google Classroom e-learning platform.

Students' attitudes towards the use of Information Communication Technologies (ICT) in learning are also critical if e-learning is to succeed. A study by Concannon (2005 as cited in Donnelly and McSweeney, 2009, p.58)) which established that, there was a broad variation in the willingness to use ICT for learning among students, even within individual learners, there was inconsistency as their attitudes varied from context to context. This shows that some students may be reluctant or unwilling to use ICT for learning; maybe as a result of technophobia or lack of knowledge in using them. In a situation where e-learning is the only option available, such students are likely to have difficult experiences in learning using online platforms. The current study sought to find out if the problem of technophobia did not affect students in the selected state university at a time they were expected to access education through e-learning only.

4. Methodology

4.1. Research Design

The study employed the case study research design which derives from the interpretivist paradigm and qualitative research approach. Kumar (2011) says that case studies are useful when exploring an area where little is known. In this case, little was known about students' experiences of e-learning during the Covid-19 induced lockdown at the selected state university in Zimbabwe. Thus, it was necessary to employ the case study design for me to generate an in-

depth and multifaceted understanding of a complex issue in its real life context (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). This enabled me to collect qualitative data which, according to Miles et al., (2014) focuses on naturally occurring events in natural settings, enabling us to have a strong handle on what 'real life' is like. Data collected gave an insight on how students experienced e-learning and how they made sense of those experiences.

4.2. Sample and Sampling Technique

A sample of fourteen purposively selected Master of Education Languages (English) students was used. Flick (2018, p.88) notes that, "The key idea underlying purposive sampling is to select instances that are information rich with a view to answer the research questions." Thus, the fourteen Masters students (nine at level 1 semester 2 and 5 at level 2 semester 1) were information rich as they learnt through the e-learning mode due to the Covid-19 induced national lockdown. Their socio-economic status was also considered; where 10 came from low socio-economic backgrounds while 4 came from affluent backgrounds.

4.3. Data Gathering Tools

Data were gathered using semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. Brinkmann & Kvale (2015:6) note that the semi-structured interview is defined as "…an interview with the purpose of obtaining descriptions of the life world of the interviewee in order to interpret the meaning of the described phenomena." Five level 2 semester 1 students were interviewed through the WhatsApp call feature at an agreed time between the interviewer and individual interviewees. The semi-structured interview was chosen as it allowed the interviewer to focus"…the conversation on issues that he or she deem[ed] important in relation to the research project." (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018, p.1002). This enabled me to reach an understanding of students' perspectives on their lived experiences of e-learning"…as expressed in their own words" (Taylor, et al., 2016, p.132)

The focus group discussion was also used. Rubin & Rubin (1995, as cited in Taylor et al., 2016, p.132) note that, "In focus groups, the goal is to let people trigger one another, suggesting dimensions and nuances of the original problem that any one individual might not have thought of." Thus, 9 level 1 semester 2 students were engaged in the focus group discussion that helped them 'trigger one another on their e-learning experiences during Covid-19 and this led to a better understanding of the participants' lived experiences of e-learning during the national lockdown. As Taylor et al. (2016, p.140) rightly note, "Sometimes a totally different understanding of a problem emerges from the group discussion."

5. Results and Discussion

Participants indicated that e-learning had both advantages and disadvantages; depending on one's socio-economic status. The disadvantages, from participants' point of view, posed serious challenges in adopting e-learning during the national lockdown. From the semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions conducted, three themes emerged which point to a number of e-learning challenges encountered during Covid-19 and those from poor backgrounds were affected the most. The themes are: poor internet connectivity and high cost of data, inadequate training and lack of technical support from University and techno-phobia and resistance to change. Mechanisms that can be put in place to improve their e-learning experiences were also suggested. I will discuss what the participants identified as advantages of e-learning. The subsequent discussion tackles the challenges that the students encountered in e-learning.

5.1. Advantages of E-learning

Findings from interviews and focus group discussions show that some participants enjoyed e-learning. Pseudonyms are used in this analysis to make the participants' responses remain anonymous. Participants gave the following responses on how they felt about e-learning:

It was a great experience especially using WhatsApp which connects with limited network strength. It kept us abreast with our studies- Amanda.

It was exciting to have a new experience. It was time saving and convenient as it was virtual without being physically present- Tinotenda.

For some of us it's cheaper to be online than to travel to (name of town withheld) Learning continued regardless of the barriers imposed by COVID 19. It saved us traveling expenses – Makanakaishe.

E-learning made pressure management easier compared to face to face learning. It allowed us to record presentations and listen to them first before sending them to the e-learning platforms. This made it easy to make corrections and send a more polished presentation-Tadiwa.

All things equal, *e-learning is a good innovation*-Felly.

The above responses show that participants who had technical know-how on the use of electronic gadgets and had enough money to buy data bundles enjoyed e-learning. Makanakaishe and Amanda concurred that e-learning kept them abreast with their studies despite the national lockdown. Makanakaishe adds that e-learning was cheaper than travelling for face to face lectures at her university. This seems to suggest that, for her, the cost of data bundles was cheaper than travelling to school for face to face lectures. This made her enjoy e-learning.

Tadiwa felt that e-learning offered an advantage of allowing him to record and listen to his presentation before sending it to the e-learning platform. In face-to-face teaching, there is no room for the 'rehearsal' of the presentation and e-learning offered a chance to students to come up with polished presentations as they would only send them when they were satisfied that they were good enough for the class' consumption. In the focus group discussion, participants agreed that all things equal, e-learning was better than face-to-face classes as it offered a plethora of advantages. They highlighted advantages in terms getting opportunities to revisit their presentations before uploading them as well as enabling them to learn in the comfort of their own homes among other things. Asked what she meant by 'all things equal' Felly indicated that there were a lot of challenges associated with e-learning especially for people like her who came from a low income family. In agreement, other participants indicated that they encountered serious challenges in using the recommended e-learning platform; Google Classroom. Their challenges are discussed in the subsequent discussion.

5.2. Poor Internet Connectivity and High Cost of Data Bundles

The main challenge that participants highlighted as having affected them negatively in e-learning was the problem of poor internet connectivity and high cost of data bundles. Below are some of the responses they gave with regards to connectivity challenges:

Considering Zimbabwe's poor network connectivity, high cost of data and unreliable power supply, e-learning was just a fuss as we failed to access the much anticipated Google classroom-Takudzwa.

I remember I had to walk 3 kilometers from my home to the fields to get a 4G network to register for google classroom after which I had torrid time in accessing it-Kudzai.

We had challenges with connectivity especially with the Google classroom platform. It was almost impossible to be online overall (Felix).

The responses above show that internet connectivity is generally a challenge and this affected students' access to the Google classroom e-learning platform. The situation, according to Kudzai, was exacerbated by unreliable power supply and high cost of data bundles. This seems to suggest that even those who afforded bundles or had internet connection in their homes still faced challenges in using the e-learning platform due to connectivity challenges. Kudzai indicates that he had a torrid time in trying to access the e-learning platform to an extent that he had to walk for about 3 kilometres to a place where he could access the 4 G network which would enable him to join the Google classroom. For Felix, accessing the Google classroom was almost impossible due to connectivity challenges. This shows that some participants suffered seriously and had to make huge sacrifices such as walking long distances just to access internet connection. This confirms, Andersson & Gronlund's (2009, p.6) submission that "access involves not only physical access to a computer and an internet connection, but also to the reliability of the connection and bandwidth…" Without a reliable internet, students' experiences become very difficult as confirmed by findings of this study.

Participants from the focus group discussion confirmed what was said by their counterparts during interviews. This is what they had to say:

Poor internet connection, high cost of data, power cuts and lack of suitable gadgets to enable us to use the most effective platforms like Google Classroom, Windows and zoom were among other challenges- Makanakaishe.

Data bundles were expensive and I could not afford them. I was kept out of the google classroom until lecturers started using the WhatsApp platform whose bundles are affordable – Blessing.

I went into the examination without accessing both Google Classroom and WhatsApp because I did not have money to buy data bundles. They were out of my reach. As a result I failed one of my modules because I had not been out of the class for the whole semester – Charity.

Responses above show that lecturers ended up using WhatsApp as an e-learning/e-teaching platform but still not all students could access it. For Blessing, it was fortunate that at least she could afford WhatsApp bundles and that is when she managed to join e-learning classes. Charity's response points to a pathetic situation where she failed to access both Google Classroom and WhatsApp. According to her, data bundles were out of her reach. Lack of money to sustain her efforts to access education ultimately led her to failing one of her modules! Poverty shut out some students at the university under study and partly, the university is to blame for not following up on such extreme cases to alleviate their challenges. In the subsequent discussion, I shift my focus to the issue of lack of support from university and how this contributed to the sad e-learning experiences that students had during Covid-19.

5.3. Inadequate Training and Lack of Technical Support from University

Another challenge encountered was that both students and lecturers had not received adequate training on how to navigate the Google Classroom e-learning platform and trying to adopt it as a teaching and learning platform and that made their e-learning experiences very difficult. Below are some of the responses that came from the participants:

We were only trained for some few hours a day before the national lockdown. Trying to implement the things that I had been taught in a few hours was next to impossible- Tamupiwa.

We didn't have enough exposure to the Google Classroom e-learning platform and accessing information sent on that platform was a nightmare to most of us-Loice.

Responses above show that participants lamented inadequate training they had received as it did not fully equip them to use the Google Classroom e-learning platform. Tamupiwa found it difficult to implement things she had been 'taught' in a few hours. For Loice, trying to access information on the e-learning platform was a nightmare because she did not have exposure to the Google. Classroom e-learning platform. This shows that lack of adequate training on how to navigate the Google classroom platform made the e-learning experiences of students in the university under study 'nightmarish.' This confirms submissions from Andersson & Gronlund (2009) that training of both staff and students is critical if e-learning is to succeed.

For some students, it was not only lack of know-how on the use of Google classroom as an e-learning platform but also failure to afford gadgets and data bundles. Below are some of their responses:

For some of us who come from poor backgrounds, e-learning was a real challenge. University took a straight-jacket approach in recommending one e-learning platform which needed expensive data bundles which most of us could not afford-Jaydin.

There was no support in providing data bundles and gadgets to those who could not afford to buy for themselves-Amanda.

E-learning was for the rich as it required a lot of money to purchase modern gadgets like smartphones and laptops as well as money to buy data bundles. For people like me who come from poor backgrounds, e-learning was a big challenge- Loice.

These responses indicate that in addition to training on the how to use the Google Classroom e-learning platform, participants expected university to offer support through provision of data bundles and gadgets like laptops and smartphones to those who could not afford them. Jaydin felt that there was need to recommend cheaper e-learning platforms instead of sticking to Google Classroom whose bundles were very expensive. In the semi-structured interview, it emerged that the requirement to buy expensive data bundles for use in e-learning put pressure on some who could not afford them. Mutsawashe had this to say, "Firstly, I feared that I was going to be left out because I could not afford the data to access the Google Classroom platform. Fortunately or unfortunately, we all ended up failing to access the facility due to other reasons." Lack of support to purchase suitable electronic gadgets made Loice feel that e-learning was for the rich as poor people like her were literally shut out of the Google Classrooms as they failed to purchase the required gadgets. As such, e-learning through the Google classroom platform presented serious challenges to people like her. Further discussions showed that, the platform was abandoned due to connectivity challenges and lack of knowhow on how to use it. However, some participants felt that the Google Classroom e-learning platform was not that difficult to maneuver but some stakeholders had techno-phobia and this affected their acceptance of the platform. The discussion below tackles this issue in greater detail.

5.4. Techno-Phobia and Resistance to Change

Research participants indicated that both students and lecturers seemed reluctant to shift from face to face teaching to e-learning. Below are some of the responses that emerged:

There is a phobia of trying new things. Some of the online platforms are user friendly but there was that lack of enthusiasm or lack of faith in use of online platforms (Felix).

Sometimes when it comes to ICT tools we are sort of resistant especially towards innovations that take us out of our comfort zones –Mutsawashe.

Some lecturers and students who are from before this digital era would prefer face to face teaching and learning, hard copy assignments and use their yellow paged notes for teaching. Anything contrary is viewed with suspicion- Amanda.

I think some lecturers had challenges because a few were using Google classroom. Google accounts were opened but they preferred using WhatsApp instead of google classroom-Jaydin.

In the preceding discussion, participants pointed to challenges that contributed to the difficulties they faced in trying to use the Google Classroom e-learning platform. In this section, it is interesting to note that participants acknowledged that some among them had techno-phobia and this affected their acceptance of the 'new normal.' From the responses above, it is clear that techno-phobia existed in both lecturers and students. Felix is of the view that some platforms may not be as difficult as people may think as most of them are actually user friendly but the problem is that there is a phobia in trying new things. Jaydin points out that some lecturers chose not to even try using Google Classroom but chose to teach through WhatsApp which they were apparently used to. According to Amanda, some lecturers viewed e-learning with suspicion because they wanted to stick to their old ways of doing things. It was difficult for them to embrace new innovations and according to Takudzwa some lecturers sent module outlines and assignments only resulting in confusion on what the module entailed. He added that such modules brought fear evoked feelings of fear towards the final examination. This seems to suggest that techno-phobia and resistance to change by lecturers negatively affected students as they did not receive enough guidance by their lecturers. These findings are consistent with Munro and Walsh's (2005) observation that, because e-tutoring is a contemporary development, many lecturers did not experience it themselves as students and as such, most of them tend to feel uncomfortable about using it to deliver educational knowledge. Unfortunately, this caused feelings of fear as students approached the exams for such modules where lecturers had simply sent assignment questions and module outlines with no further assistance offered.

5.5. Ways in Which Students' Experiences Could Be Improved

Participants proposed ways in which their experiences of e-learning could be improved. Below are some of the responses that came from participants during focus group discussions and interviews:

If my memory serves me right, at one time, paid up students were promised to be availed with data bundles for the Google classroom access but nothing materialized. If this had been done, we would have enjoyed the Google classroom e-learning platform -Tinotenda.

We should have received adequate training on Google Classroom before trying to implement it. I think university waited until it was too late to train us on Google classroom. One day training was not enough for people who were used to face-to-face learning and had never used e-learning before-Blessing.

It may be difficult for universities to buy laptops for all needy students. I think the government should chip in to help students who cannot afford the gadgets required for e-learning- Charity.

Internet service providers should provide cheaper data bundles for e-learning so that nobody is left out- Mutsawashe.

A look into these suggestions point to the fact that university and government support is indispensable if students at universities are to enjoy and benefit from e-learning. Tinotenda felt that if the university had fulfilled its promise to avail data bundles, they would have enjoyed e-learning. A suggestion by Blessing encourages universities to act swiftly when emergencies like lockdowns happen so that students are fully equipped with requisite skills for e-learning. Mutsawashe felt that internet service providers should play their part by availing affordable data bundles for e-learning. These responses show that it is critical that stakeholders come together in addressing the challenges encountered by students during Covid-19 so that their experiences could be improved.

Overall, the findings of this study point to the fact that most participants of this study did not enjoy e-learning during Covid-19 owing to the challenges highlighted. The last part of the paper concludes this study and suggests recommendations based on the findings.

6. Conclusions

The study revealed that students faced serious challenges in using the Google classroom e-learning platform that the university had recommended as the sole means through which they could access education during the Covid-19 induced lockdown. Network connectivity and power cuts affected students' access to google classroom. Some had to walk long distances to connect to a 4G network for them to get access to the Google classroom e-learning platform. The findings revealed that students from poor backgrounds were the worst affected as some of them could not afford to buy gadgets like laptops and smartphones for e-learning purposes. Some of those with the gadgets could not afford the data bundles which were very expensive. As a result, some of them were shut out of the Google classroom while those from affluent backgrounds got access as long as their network connectivity allowed. Lack of know-how on the use of the recommended e-learning platform also made e-learning a nightmare for students. However, the adoption of an alternative e-learning platform, WhatsApp, eased the situation as both lecturers and students had knowledge in its use. WhatsApp bundles were also fairly cheap compared to those required for Google classroom so participants adopted it and this, at least, saved a precarious situation where the majority had been literally shut out of the Google classrooms owing to the expenses involved. Some lecturers, from the participants' point of view, lacked expertise in e-teaching and as a result ended at just sending the module outlines and assignment questions with no further assistance offered to students. University had not given adequate training to both staff and students on google classroom, hence, the challenges in its use. The research concludes that, in the selected state university, e-learning remained a preserve of those from affluent backgrounds and for those from poor background (who were in the majority) e-learning made their learning experience during Covid-19 very difficult.

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. University should offer support to students from low income families by loaning them gadgets for use during e-learning.
2. Staff and students should be adequately trained on how to use e-learning platforms for meaningful teaching and learning to take place.
3. University should also provide data to those who cannot afford it.
4. Internet service providers should avail cheaper data packages to make e-learning accessible to all.

References

Andersson, A., & Gronlund, A. (2009). A conceptual framework for e-learning in developing countries: A critical review of research challenges. *The Electronic Journal on Information Systems in Developing Countries, 38*(8), 1-16. https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1681-4835.2009.tb00271.x

Brinkmann, S. & Kvale, S. (2015). *Interviews: Learning the craft of qualitative research interviewing*. (3rd ed.). London: Publications.

Denzin, N.K. and Lincoln, Y.S. (eds) (2018). *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (5th ed.). SAGE

Donnelly, R. and McSweeney, F. (eds.) (2009). *Applied e-learning and e-teaching in higher education.* Hersley. https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-59904-814-7

Hashemi, A. (2021). Effects of COVID-19 on the academic performance of Afghan students' and their level of satisfaction with online teaching. *Cogent Arts and Humanities, 8*(1), 1-23. https://doi.org/10.1080/23311983.2021.1933684

Kumar, R. (2011). *Research methodology: A step-by-step guide for beginners*. SAGE.

Flick, U. (2018). *The SAGE handbook of qualitative data collection*. SAGE. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781526416070

Mhindu, A. (2020). Harnessing WhatsApp group communication for university teaching and learning during Covid-19 in Zimbabwe: Successes, challenges and prospects. *Journal of New Vision in Educational Research. 1*(2), 341-364.

Miles, M.B., Huberman, A.M. & Saldana, J. (2014). *Qualitative data analysis. A methods sourcebook* (3rd ed.). SAGE.

Munro, M., & Walsh, E. (2005, May 26-27). Online tutors as online students: Preparing tutors to teach online. Paper presented at the Sixth Annual Irish Educational Technology Users' Conference, Dublin, Ireland. http://ilta.learnonline.ie/course/view.php?id=18

Sintema, E. J. (2020). Effect of COVID-19 on the performance of grade 12 students: Implications for STEM education. *Eurasia Journal of Mathematics, Science and Technology Education*, *16*(7), 1–6. https://doi.org/10.29333/ejmste/7893

Taylor, S.J., Bogdan, R. and DeVault, M. (2016). *Introduction to qualitative research methods: A guidebook and resource* (4th ed.). John Wiley & Sons Inc.

UNESCO (2016). *Blended learning for quality higher education: Selected case studies on implementation from Asia-Pacific*. Paris: UNESCO.

Wang, Y., Han, X., & Yang, J. (2015). Revisiting the blended learning literature: Using a complex adaptive systems framework. *Educational Technology and society*. *18*(2), 380-393.

Yamin, M. (2020). Counting the cost of COVID-19. *International Journal of Information Technol*ogy, *4*(20), 1–7. https://doi.org/10.1007/s41870-020-00466-0

Zalat, M.M, Hamed, M.S., & Bolbol, S.A. (2021). The experiences, challenges, and acceptance of e-learning as a tool for teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic among university medical staff. *PLoS ONE 16*(3). e0248758. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0248758