



COVID 19 and Higher Education in Rivers State: Exploration, Utilization, Prospects and Challenges of Adopting Online Teaching and Learning

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ABSTRACT

The Federal Government of Nigeria announced the total closure of all educational institutions nationwide, following the declaration of the novel COVID-19 as Pandemic. As a follow up, the Governor of Rivers State, Chief Nyesom Ezeunwor Wike directed that the state owned higher education institutions should immediately resort to the use of virtual classroom for the time being. The class suspension during the school lockdown brought by the COVID-19 health crisis in academic communities has urged educators to explore some learning strategies that could better engage students while maintaining social distancing. The Rivers State University and Ignatius Ajuru University of Education in Rivers State, Nigeria immediately turned to online learning, especially the Zoom. It noteworthy that prior to the period of the Pandemic, the Higher Education Institutions in Nigeria only adopt online in their Distance Education Programmes. Therefore, this sudden migration to online learning in their regular programmes came with shock and several problems, and so doesn't go down well with the undergraduate programmes, while the graduate students accepted the online lectures with mix feelings. What are the reactions of some students and teachers on this sudden shift to online learning as an alternative mode of instruction? How ready are the students to function in this new learning environment ? This paper provides information on COVID-19 and Higher Education in Rivers State. This paper will cover the exploration, utilization, prospects and challenges of adopting online teaching and learning during the COVID-19 period in Rivers State, Nigeria. The paper will adopt survey of relevant literature. The paper will be found useful for higher education administrators, lecturers, students and parents who may wish to incorporate some of the suggestions provided here to improve their online instructional engagements.

Keywords: COVID 19, higher education, online teaching and learning

INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 is an acronym for Coronavirus disease identified in 2019. The novel virus is said to have originated from Wuha in China. The disease is found to be deadly, communicable and fast spreading through: physical contact with the affected person or carrier or by touching a surface of a contaminated object or by person exposed to droplets from sneezes or coughs from a carrier.

On the 11th of March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a pandemic as the disease and its resultant death toll got worsened and spreading to different countries of the world. This threat has brought the world to a shutdown of almost all the activities (social, economic, religious and education)

Nigeria reported its case of COVID-19 on 28th February 2020 (Hussain, 2020) In a quick move to appearance of the disease, the Federal Ministry of Education on 19th March 2020 announced the closing of all schools nationwide over the outbreak of the COVID-19 in Nigeria. The Ministry said that the closure was part of measures to contain the spread of the virus (Adedigh, 2020). Globally, the outbreak

of the COVID-19 has shutdown Universities and other higher education institutions in 175 countries, affecting more than 220 million higher education students (Martin & Furiv, 2020). As a result of the total education lockdown, educational practice, all over the world must look for a way out in order remain relevant. The business of education must guarantee the lives and safety of both the teachers and students if it must comply with the new world order of keeping social distancing between the teachers and students and between the students themselves.

In Nigeria, some State governments have directed their higher educational institutions to resort to online learning as a way to keep the torch of higher education keep burning. Rivers State is one of such states. Rivers State hosts three universities, three Polytechnics, one College of Education and two Colleges of Health Science and Management Technology. Out of these institutions, only two (Rivers State University and Ignatius Ajuru University of Education) provided online learning to their students at the postgraduate programmes.

This study attempts to highlight on COVID-19 and Higher Education in Rivers State with focus on the exploration, utilization, prospects and challenges of adopting online teaching and learning.

Brief Review on Online Teaching and Learning

Online teaching and learning is a mode of instructional delivery through the use of internet. It can also be called distance teaching and learning. It involves using different computer-assisted instruction methods to perform instructional tasks. Online teaching and learning is a type of instruction that incorporates the synchronous and asynchronous (anytime and anywhere) teaching technique. Online teaching and learning currently serves as the main factor upon which teaching and learning in higher institutions base its delivery of knowledge to students, it encourages and keeps higher institutions on track. Online teaching and learning involves the following:

1. **Digitalizing education:** Ekpo (2019) posits that digitalization of education refers to an enhanced use of computer (intranet and internet) software application and any digital technology for teaching across all levels of education systems.
2. **Connectivist learning:** According to Sahr (2019), students and teachers have moved from a closed isolated classroom to a repository of learning where other people in the society are connected through the internet and production network culture of learning takes place.

It is on this bases that this study is seen relevant.

The Reshaping of Education in the COVID 19 Era

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the mode of teaching and learning in a regular classroom instruction was the traditional face-to-face strategy adopted by schools and institutions especially in Nigeria. Many advanced countries of the world had made tremendous efforts to adopt online learning, especially in their Open and Distance learning programmes. This was not the case in Nigeria educational institutions until the arrival of the COVID-19. Therefore, until then the educational institutions didn't see the need and urgency to fully adopt online teaching and learning in higher education. With the emergence of COVID-19 and the need to avoid a seemingly gap to be created by a total shutdown in Nigeria educational provisions an alternative mode of Instruction has to be provided without delay, hence the system must embrace online teaching and learning. The adoption of online teaching and learning in Nigeria education system as a palliative instructional measure has helped Nigerian educational system join the developed world in the struggle to protect and sustain its higher education functions. On the other hand, the sudden introduction of online teaching and learning has put teachers and students under an unprecedented pressure in many ways. Since schools and institutions have been shut down, there is now a drastic change in the instructional delivery and learning process. Teaching and learning is now done (through some digital platforms such as Zoom, Edmodo, Web Ex, Google classroom, Microsoft team, Whatsapp etc. Technology is being improved in different ways. Educational Technologists and Open Distance Learning is also encouraged at this time. Teachers and students have now prioritized the purchase of digital or electronic gadgets and data subscriptions that can serve as a medium to enhance their leaning.

Exploration of online Teaching and Learning for Higher Education in Rivers State

Rivers State is one of the 36 States in Nigeria and its capital is Port Harcourt. As at 2006, Rivers State population was 5,198,176. The State is occupied by many ethnic groups with 23 Local Government Areas. Economically, Rivers State hosts the major multi-national oil companies for petroleum and gas products. Educationally, there are many tertiary institutions in Rivers State which include the University of Port Harcourt, Rivers State University, Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Rivers State College of Health Science and Management Technology, Federal College of Education (Technical), Captain Elechi Amadi Polytechnic, Kenule Beeson Saro-Wiwa Polytechnic (Rural school). Some of these higher institutions are located at villages where networking reception is not liberally available and accessible. Hitherto, a pilot investigation showed that none of the above higher institutions in Rivers State had been using the online teaching and learning mode of instruction before the novel Pandemic came to being in the State. However, in the course of containing a wide spread of COVID-19 and to guarantee the sustainability of educational responsibility in the educational institutions, the Federal Ministry of Education in a stakeholders virtual conference had directed the Vice Chancellors, Provosts and Rectors of Higher Educational institutions in Nigeria to adopt online teaching and learning as a measure to contain the spread of COVID-19 health crisis. As a result, online teaching and learning across the higher educational institutions in Rivers State has become a practice even when adequate preparations are not provided. Educators and educationists in higher institutions in Rivers State resolved to take a quick turn to online teaching and learning which has attracted many criticisms. The current situation is that higher educational institutions have adopted online teaching and learning, including online assessments. In the process, Rivers State educational institutions have developed strategies and means to successfully conduct learning activities using some of the online platforms listed above. However, what is obtainable are use of platforms that are cheap and non-sophisticated to navigate, allow easy internet access and easy to manage classroom on a screen and microphone to which Zoom cloud is considered the best among others. The exploration of online teaching and learning cannot be over emphasized. Teachers and students now see ICT competence as very paramount and a way of life which hopefully will survive even after the COVID-19 Pandemic is defeated in the State.

Prospects of Online Teaching and Learning in Higher Education

The choice of Adopting online teaching and learning in higher education during the COVID-19 period is to provide remote learning while the students and teachers are geographically isolated. This will no doubt reduce contact and reduce the spread of the virus. Some of the prospects in adopting online are presented below.

1. With online learning students can participate in their scheduled classes from anywhere in Rivers State. The asynchronous format of eLearning give students opportunity to study any time and at any pace in the comfort of their homes. With this in place students control their own learning experience and personalize their class discussions to meet their own specific needs. This no doubt makes provisions for individual differences.
2. In Rivers State, at the wake of school lockdown as result of COVID-19, students and teachers are migrated to their remote communities, many which are several kilometers away and apart and located at swapped coastal terrain, online learning becomes advantageous in the sense that there is no need for students and teachers to travel to a central campuses for study.
3. Students and teachers participation in online instruction exposes and promotes their skills and knowledge of the new electronic technologies. This effort has also instills a positive culture towards eLearning.
4. Online learning gives students access to huge amounts of information. This opportunity enhances their efficiency of knowledge and qualifications (Arkorfull & Abaidoo, 2014).
5. In the event of having fully developed learning resources, online learning helps to compensate for shortage of teaching staff (Perrotta, 2020).
6. Although the digital learning was forced into the mainstream of teaching/ learning in hurry, the online experiment is accelerating changes in teaching and learning which hitherto were only reluctantly accepted

by many higher education institutions (Dignan, 2020). As a result, many instructors are presently taking private classes to upgrade their competencies in eLearning.

7. Generally, it could be held that the adoption of online learning has the potency reducing the negative consequences related to students absenteeism in classes, enables the instructors reach a wider students population, does not allow for discriminating factors such as disabilities, dressing codes, gender or racial or age discrimination, allows for creative and critical thinking. Online teaching and learning can be advantageous in many ways. Some of these advantages are highlighted below:

Challenges Faced in Adopting Online Teaching and learning in Higher Education in Rivers State (in the wake of COVID-19)

Despite the popularity and benefits associated with online education in Nigeria higher educational system during the period of COVID-19, teachers and students have continually faced wity numerous challenges, leading to many protest across the educational. Some of such challenges are provided as following:

1. In a traditional, face-to-face setting, the need to teach a whole learner becomes critical in a school curriculum. Contrary to this, online learning lacks social interaction among students and between teachers and their students. Teachers experience a lack of connection with their students. The teacher's ability to communicate, create community of learners, and deliver the appropriate lesson effectively makes all the difference in students learning outcomes (Kebritchi, Lipsschuetz & Santiago, 2017).
2. Online learning doesn't provide experiences which require hands-on practical exercises. This limitation makes the online applications in certain domain of instructions, eg. Medicine, Sports, Engineering Technology, Public speaking, teaching practicum, nursing care and other practical oriented skills acquisition difficult. The reality of some subjects is much harder to transfer experience in online environments to the real job skills (Palompon, 2020).
3. Many students and some teachers lack the basic skills and knowledge in the use of technology. Technical competence and digital literacy needed some training time, which were not provided before being forced to participate in an emergency online lesson during the COVID-19 pandemic.
4. There is the issue of lack of some essential online learning tools and resources among the students. Unfortunately, many communities lack regular electrical power supply. In areas where they exist, many suffer modem malfunctions, partial network receptions, and laptop crash. All disrupts students study.
5. Online courses are found less structured which demands that students need a higher amount of self discipline and commitment to succeed.
6. Since the success of a student in online engagement lies in their hands, there is a big challenge as students activities cannot be monitored like in a face-to-face class management.
7. Sedentary life of students taking online Instruction can pose come health challenges, eg. eye sight, cervical issues and headache (Pandey, 2020).
8. Many students lack the enabling learning environment, serene atmosphere and the Internet access to make them fully benefit in online classes. In Rivers State many communities are located where there are no communication masts are not available, making communication difficult.
9. There some administrative hiccups which are disruptive to the successful implementation of an online programme. Many teachers who are uncomfortable with change and working with computer or feel that online programmes cannot offer quality instruction often inhibit the process of online implementation.
10. It's worthy of note that at the wake of COVID-19 pandemic, many instructors joined the league of facilitators without adequate training in the skills of writing and hosting online instructional delivery. Consequently, such an online programme is bound to be weak to function in the virtual classroom.
11. Online learning is considered by many instructors as a less effective mode of instruction when it comes to improvement in learners' communication skills (Arkorful & Abaidoo, 2014)
12. The issue of piracy and plagiarism tends to be abused as instructors may be tempted to choose the easy way to copy and paste in their lesson materials.
13. In some areas where there are many users, online learning engagement may lead to congestion of websites. This has been a complaint for those using Zoom in the capital city of Port Harcourt in Rivers State.

CONCLUSIONS

It is ideal to adopt the online teaching and learning in our educational system but it is also important to consider both the pros and cons of it in other to be prepared when challenges arise. To this end teachers and learners should be fully ready to adapt to this new paradigm with varying degrees of enthusiasm and concern as online teaching and learning have come to stay.

RECOMMENDATIONS

At the wake of Higher Education lockdown, resulting from COVID-19 outbreak in Rivers State, the higher education institutions quickly switched to online learning as an alternative mode of teaching students. This action came with so many challenges, ranging from students, teachers and institutional factors. To contain some of these challenges, the following recommendations are proffered:

1. The teachers revolving in the online teaching should be assisted with funds to offset the cost of buying data for teaching.
2. Stakeholders in education, such as the Ministry of Education, Education Trusts Fund(ETF), TETFund, National Board for Technical Education (NBTE), , National Council for Colleges of Education (NCCE) and the education unit of Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) should provide intervention funds to assist the higher education institutions in providing robust online educational support programmes during the COVID-19 period.
3. The higher education institutions should collaborate with Television and Radio broadcasts to take learning to the students. This will provide instruction to those students who may not have access to the Internet in the rural communities.
4. Instructors should explore the Learning Management Systems (LMS) to schedule and class check- ins ahead of dates and times.
5. The lack of student's motivation which is inherent in online learning can be minimized by use of gamified apps and programmes. These apps are designed for learners' engagement environments. Virtual group exercises can provide elaboration, using chats, discussion board and cloud tools.
6. The teachers and students should be provided with proficiency training to help them handle their assignments. Such indications should provide instructions on computer literacy and hardware fundamentals.
7. Students attendance can be improved through a Screen Capture by recording the online lecture. Students should be informed that attendance is mandatory and will be recorded. A specific time should be fixed and enforced for students and teachers, especially in the case of synchronous and asynchronous learning.
8. The higher education institutions' libraries should partner with and assist instructors by providing e-Books, Open Assess Resources and online data based in to support the online programmes.
9. The Higher Education Institutions Centres for ICT should have its own virtual site equipped with e-tutoring, e-assessment and e-forum features which allow students study off their classrooms (Chin, 2020).
10. In any online session, some definite rules should be placed on the students. This rule will heighten students' consciousness that they are in a digital environment and so students are expected to be properly dressed, well behaved and guaranteed that all the distracting events are suppressed.

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