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PROMOTING VIRTUAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS IN NIGERIAN HIGHER INSTITUTIONS: A NEW REALITY IN THE ERA OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic is forcing sudden transformation in many areas of our economy and has greatly devastated the traditional formal learning structure in Nigeria. With the advent of COVID-19 pandemic, the traditional classroom learning process in Nigerian Higher institutions was temporarily suspended. This suspension in formal learning brought a new reality in teaching and learning. As part of preparedness to forestall reoccurrence of similar situation in the educational system, the Nigerian scholars should adopt, promote and design an additional learning environment which does not require physical classroom activities. The aim of this paper is to promote Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) in Higher Institutions of Learning as a standing alternative in the event of subsequent lockdown orders. The increasing COVID-19 variant is an indicator for sustaining or creating alternative methods of learning and teaching where necessary. As many students had to stop formal learning in the wake of the COVID-19 outbreak due to insufficient or non-existing VLEs. Even though, few tertiary institutions adopted the use of VLEs in their curriculum to aid in mitigation against spread of the dreaded virus that has bedeviled the globe. The role of virtual learning environments in tertiary institutions is necessary for the continuation of learning process during pandemics. Indeed, to avert future disruption of formal learning across the country, VLEs can enable the continuation of academic activities through digital devices.

Keywords: COVID-19, higher education, Nigeria, students, virtual learning environment.

Introduction

All around the world, formal structure of learning was suspended due to the spread of the novel coronavirus disease. In Nigeria, COVID-19 pandemic had a massive impact on higher education institutions as all formal classroom learning was deferred. With the disease claiming the lives of millions globally (WHO, 2020), schools in Nigeria were temporary suspended (Jacob, Abigeal & Lydia, 2020) to avert the spread of the disease. The virus spreads faster from one human to the other hence, the restriction of human contacts especially within school settings. As UNESCO (2020) estimates that COVID-19 pandemic has affected majority of students - 890 million in 114 countries due to the closure of schools. Of course, the situation was not different in Nigeria as an underdeveloped country. Majority of schools in the country were not prepared to migrate to the use of VLEs and other online learning platforms due to a lot of challenges. Agbele and Oyelade (2020) noted that majority of schools lack technological facilities like virtual learning environments, network connection, electricity etc to support the continuation of learning. These challenges are very common in our higher institutions, however, there is need for schools to embrace the use of VLEs especially with the outbreak of disease that call for lockdown.

Students attending higher education in Nigeria are students who have completed secondary school education. Jaja (2013), define Higher education as the "western type of education which is organized after college education". Learning at this level is not like the other levels where students sometimes rely completely on the tutor for information. Students at this level are required to take control of their learning process. When students participate actively in their learning process, they become better citizens of the society. According to Asiyai (2013), higher education is the gateway of knowledge acquisition for the development of the individual and the society. Students at the higher education are expected to take responsibility for their learning process. However, students are yet to be provided with alternatives that will help them become autonomous learners. One would expect students to continue learning even during the COVID-19 pandemic. Unfortunately, formal learning was put on hold for a majority of students in the public tertiary institutions. Students'

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learning was disrupted because most of the institutions have not properly adopted the use of VLEs yet. Despite knowing about the importance of this aspect of technology, many of the public higher institutions are yet to implement and familiarize themselves with this technology. Even though the traditional method of teaching in Nigeria is still being practiced in public schools, there is need for students to participate fully in their learning process. Basilaia and Kvavadze (2020) listed main educational methodologies as:

- The traditional classroom education, where books, blackboards are used by the teacher as a teaching aid.
- Modern classroom education, where the classrooms are equipped with white boards, projectors or audio-visual display equipment and digital boards.
- Online education, where the information technologies and communications are used to help in the development and acquisition of knowledge from the different remote locations. It uses the internet and video/audio and text communication and software to create the learning environment.

As earlier on stated, traditional method of teaching is still being practiced in Nigerian public schools except for a few. Students at the higher education are already familiar with learning in the classroom environment even with less learning equipment. On the other hand, tutors at the higher education institutions are faced with a lot of challenges. For example, they are not provided with the latest classroom equipment and information communication technologies (ICTs) to enhance the learning process of their students. Tutors sometimes go out of their way to make sure that students are provided with a conducive learning environment. At their best, tutors at the higher education institutions always ensure that all students are provided with the appropriate knowledge required of them at their fields of study.

Literature Review

The key to successful learning is to have a balance support learning environment. In Nigeria, students are faced with challenges that impede learning process (Asiyai, 2013). Unlike the developed countries where VLE is used in most of the tertiary institutions, tertiary education students in Nigeria have no VLE to support them to succeed in their studies (Nwabude, Ogwueleka & Irhebhude, 2020). Majority of students in the higher education are ready to take advantage of the new technology to enhance their learning process, but this non availability of VLE in their institution poses great challenges. As Asiyai asserted that, most of the tertiary institutions in Nigeria lack information communication technology facilities. It is important to note this new technology is not widely available for tutors and students in the public tertiary institutions. This lack of VLE in higher education hinders learning, especially with COVID-19 pandemic. A majority of students were deprived of formal learning because of the non-availability of VLEs in their institutions. The Nigerian government is yet to introduce the use of VLEs in their tertiary institutions. It is pivotal to provide VLEs in all higher institution for all students to have access to learning within and outside the school environment.

Despite the situation in China, Chinese students were not deprived of formal learning even with the closure of schools. When it was uncertain about how long the coronavirus crisis will last, Chinese government immediately introduced "Suspending Classes Without Stopping Learning" (Zhang et al., 2020, p.1). For Nigerian students, no alternative was provided by the Nigerian government for them to learn from their homes (Obiakor & Adeniran, 2020). While some students from other part of the Globe were still engaged in formal learning, majority of Nigerian students never had access to formal learning due to the novel coronavirus disease—COVID-19 pandemic. It was an unprecedented situation. As a result, there was no swift response to create an alternative learning environment—VLEs for the continuation of learning in the higher education. Besides, the African continent was the last to be hit by the global COVID-19 pandemic (Lone & Ahmad, 2020). The government had time to prepare even before the pandemic hit Nigeria, but as we see, there was clear evidence that there were no alternatives for the continuation of learning process in higher education institutions.

In the USA, Basilaia and Kvavadze (2020) reported that students in Georgia were quick to adapt to the online education when schools were suspended following the COVID-19 pandemic. The authors further state that it was successful as all students participated in the online education. Patel et al. (2021) conducted a study on academicians to check how

COVID-19 became a blessing in higher education. The study reveals that, due to the outbreak of COVID-19 many academician attended and participated in various webinars, conferences, courses, workshops, research, orientation programs, faculty development programs. The pandemic did not stop tutors from engaging in online activities to acquire knowledge and impart in their students.

Higher education institutions in Africa were shut down with no alternatives provided for the continuation of learning (ibid). COVID-19 should not hinder knowledge acquisition for students in tertiary institution. It is important to transit to online learning. Since it is not certain when the pandemic will be over, there is need for the Ministry of education to device a means for all students to continue their learning processes. Toquero (2020) disclosed that online education is necessary for all students in the Philippines since it is uncertain when COVID-19 pandemic will end. So, it is important for all educational stakeholders to play a significant role in ensuring students are given the opportunity to continue their learning in this period. For a period like this, the public and private sector should ensure that every student can have access to the learning modalities that are provided (Obiakor & Adeniran, 2020).

Considering those in the rural areas with low or no internet services, all learning modalities should be put in place to enhance the learning process of all students. In the same vain, Ezeh, et al. (2020) advised that adequate internet should be provided in the country to enhance learning and bridge the gap between the rich and the poor. All students should be provided with equal opportunities of learning irrespective of their geographical location. At higher levels, students need the necessary support of parents and the government to enhance their learning process.

Lessons from Covid-19 Pandemic for Higher Education Institutions in Nigeria

There a lessons to be learned from the novel coronavirus disease pandemic. The Covid-19 pandemic was an experience that Nigerians, especially students will not forget in a hurry. Other sectors were affected by the pandemic, but the educational sector is mostly affected (Adeoye, Adanikin, & Adanikin, 2020;). The pandemic created a gap in the learning process of students in the public schools. While some private institutions continued learning—with Google classroom, WhatsApp, and Zoom (Abdullahi, et al.,2020) during the pandemic, those in the public institutions were denied of that opportunity (Obiakor & Adeniran, 2020) to continue learning during the pandemic. Undeniably, there was a huge gap between the poor and the rich. While those in private schools were able to continue learning online, on the other hand, those in public schools were left without any contact with formal learning.

More importantly, factors like, lack of information communication technology, electricity and insecurity in some parts of the country deprived majority of students from accessing formal learning. Those from rich homes run generators and their children had smart phones to continue with their formal learning process. They never allowed the COVID-19 pandemic to disrupt the learning of their children. Of course, so many parents desire to give their children opportunities that will enable them continue their learning during the pandemic; however, they did not have the finances to do so.

Importance of VLEs in Higher Education Institutions

Virtual learning environment (VLE) is defined as is "a web-based platform for the digital aspects of courses of study" (Bello, Otobo & Eru, 2018, p.1). It is an online communication platform used in higher education for learning (Cassidy, 2016). Students can continue their learning from any part of the country when there is availability of internet. With the current situation in Nigeria, the need for VLEs in all higher education is a necessity. However, as a developing nation, the reality of having VLEs in higher education lies with the help of the government. Akpan and Nwereka (2019) affirm that VLE is expensive; nevertheless, it is important for all in higher education institutions to provide VLEs to support teaching and learning. Having VLEs in all higher institution is possible; this will foster learning and help students to be responsible for their learning processes. There will be less dependence on the teacher as the only source. VLEs give students opportunities interact with their tutors and other students from any part of the world. Students using the VLEs will have a reading list which will enable them read and be proactive in their learning process. They can even research areas that appear to be difficult for them without relying completely on the tutor for information.

Most importantly, with COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, VLEs can be useful even when schools resume fully for the continuation of learning. There will be no need to start the learning process all over again. In China for example, even when classes were stopped, learning still continued in the lockdown (Zhang et al., 2020). Even with the global pandemic, all students in China continue to learn from home, thanks to VLEs and other online platforms. Some may argue that Nigeria is a developing country with little technology. Still there is need to explore possible ways that can accommodate all students to continue learning from any part of the country.

With VLEs, there is continuous communication between the student and the tutor. Students will not experience any disruption of learning. Students must continue to learn, especially those in the higher education. When students are equipped with the necessary learning materials online, even if school closure is prolonged, they will not be nervous. Rather, they will continue to have access to their learning materials and their tutors too. Although for developing countries, there are so many factors—poor power supply, poor internet service that can impede the implementation of VLEs in in the higher education. Nevertheless, this new technology is a necessity in the higher education institutions. Learning must not stop because of any pandemic at this level of education. It is important to move along with technological advancement in order not to be left behind. Daniel (2020) suggests that institutions should take advantage of asynchronous learning. Such learning environment will enable tutors and students to connect from any part of the world with or without pandemics.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Formal structure of learning was temporarily suspended in Nigeria due to the novel coronavirus—Covid-19 pandemic. The Federal Government ordered the closure of schools to curtail the pandemic. With the closure of schools nationwide, majority of students were deprived of formal learning. While those in the private schools continue learning online—Google classroom, WhatsApp, and Zoom, on the other hand, those in the public schools never had that luxury. Formal learning was suspended for those in public schools. In some parts of the world, learning did not stop because their government immediately switched to online learning. Schools were closed physically; however, learning was still in progress. It is important to have VLEs in all higher institutions to enable students continue their learning process. No student is to be denied learning because of a pandemic, parents' financial status or geographical location. With VLEs, all learners will have access to formal learning from any part of the world. VLEs will help students and tutors to connect without any physical interaction.

It is recommended that there should be a national strategic plan where all students in the country will still continue their formal learning process without any disruption in the event of any lockdown. There is need to have information communication technologies (ICTs) in all the higher education institutions. Again, there should be power supply in the entire country to enable the continuation of learning for all students in urban and rural areas.

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