

Experiences of University Students with E-Learning for Teacher Preparation during the COVID-19 Epidemic at a Higher Education Institution in Eswatini

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ABSTRACT

E-Learning was adopted by most universities and colleges worldwide to provide students with ongoing education during the COVID-19 pandemic and is here to last even after the pandemic is over. This study sought to explore the experiences of the students at a higher education institution in Eswatini during the COVID 19 pandemic. The study was based on the following objectives: Establish the experiences of higher education students in e-learning during the period of COVID- 19, determine the challenges faced by the students in e-learning during the period of COVID- 19 and recommend how e-learning may be sustained even after the pandemic. The study was underpinned by the diffusion of innovation theory and was located in the interpretivist research paradigm which followed a qualitative research approach where a phenomenological research design was applied. The study conveniently selected a sample of fifteen (15) fourth year students doing teacher education at a university in Eswatini. Data was analysed using thematic analysis. The findings of the study reveal that e-learning was the most appropriate teaching and learning process during the COVID- 19 pandemic and has benefits that make it sustainable after COVID-19. This study concludes that students are able to learn at the comfort of their homes due to the flexible nature of e-learning. However, despite the positive impact of e-learning there are some challenges students face which include limited physical contact and collaboration. The University should try by all means to provide the students with tools for effective teaching and learning. Based on the findings and conclusions, the study recommends that students should be provided with digital tools, trained adequately and get constant updates of software features. The study also recommends that for e-learning to be sustained even after the pandemic the university should provide modern technology tools and keep updating the software as well as widen the internet broadband for effective teaching and learning.

KEYWORDS: COVID-19, experiences, e-learning, higher education, post pandemic, technology

INTRODUCTION

As the existence of the COVID-19 pandemic period is coming to an end, e-learning remains prevalent post the COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic created mayhem in every aspect of the society (Kusomo, 2021). It has caused deep disturbance to the education systems as governments around the world had to limit face-to-face classes in higher education institutions, colleges and universities, and moved to e-learning in trying to allow learners to continue with

their education in spite of the virus. Van lancker & Parolin (2020), agree that due to the COVID 19 pandemic traditional or face to face learning in higher education institutions transformed into full-time e-learning to ensure that students continue with their education. E-learning has increased during the pandemic and is here to last even after the COVID-19 pandemic. E-learning is using information and computer technologies and systems in order to build

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and design learning experiences (Horton, 2006) or the acquisition of knowledge and information through the use of various electronic devices and media channels. E-Learning enhances and improves student learning outcomes.

Navarro (2014) reveals that in e-learning students were able to integrate knowledge better than students studying in the traditional way and that online learning proved to be effective especially in the case of students who are shy, easily intimidated, slow learning and those who usually do not have the courage to speak up and express themselves in the classroom. Allan (2020), also posits that e-learning has made it much easier for students to get and access information from their instructors at any time convenient to them than physically visiting the institution. E-learning is a suitable and flexible way of acquiring knowledge in higher education unlike the traditional approach to education where the students have to go to physical classes (Morris, 2019). Ayo et al (2020) states that in the modern day where wireless internet connections are found in most parts of the world, access to virtual learning is greater than in the past and is of great advantage to students than face to face learning.

In e-Learning systems, the social dimension of education is generally supplied for by enhancing basic delivery mechanisms of training material, through the assistance of synchronous or asynchronous discussions (Pauline Chitra & Antoney Raj, 2018). According to Sun et al (2020), Synchronous learning refers to concurrent, instructor-led e-learning, where students receive information, communicate simultaneously with their lectures and classmates. They can communicate through internet chat forums or teleconferencing like video, audio or both. While in asynchronous learning, the transmission and receiving of information do not happen simultaneously. Asynchronous learning allows students to access complete lectures, readings and learn at their own schedule and time. The students need not to be online at the same time with their lectures or classmates. The instructor and students can communicate using email, online bulletin newsgroups, weblogs or feedback technologies, but not in real time. In e-learning, learning takes place wherever and whenever the student may.

E-learning at higher education institutions

The review of literature reveals that, generally, e-learning provides good results in favour of its positive influence, effectiveness and usefulness on students' learning. According to a study by Burac et al (2019), on the impact of e-learning on students and teachers,

the study shows that they believe in the potential of e-learning to enhance the educational process and that it improves collaboration and communication with students, and it offers flexibility and benefits students to better understand their lectures. Lochner et al (2016), pointed out that, when used as an additional method to traditional classes, E-learning enhanced students' learning experience and increased their engagement with the lectures. Similarly, Muthuprasad et al. (2020) investigated students' perception and preference for online education in India during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their investigation showed that the flexibility and suitability of online lessons are prospects that make online learning an attractive option since it allows students to work at their own pace. However, Garly et al (2011) on experiences of students on E-learning posits that online courses do not have the same worth as courses taught in the classroom and that students would rather accept blended learning, which is a combination of online and face to face classes, rather than only online learning.

Different studies have revealed that E-learning is of great help and use during period of the pandemic. A study done by Bakia et al (2012) revealed that E-learning is mostly used by most institutions of higher learning because of its flexibility in delivering education and accessing content and resources. Due to its flexibility, E-learning removes obstacles of space and time, the students can have access to a wide range of information, it enables collaboration, tolerates students to learn in their own pace, it motivates them to interact with their peers, discuss and exchange points of view and idea (Arkorful, & Abaidoo, 2014). Moreover, Sun et al (2020), in their study on students' experience during online courses showed that the students believe that instructors should know how to adapt their lectures to the online environment, not just simply transfer information that was usually taught in the traditional way, and that they should give an adequate number of work and assignments. However, a study by Simpson (2014), on experiences of students on E-learning showed that students perceive online learning as a lonely experience.

Challenges of online learning to students

It is without doubt that E-Learning has numerous benefits towards students learning in higher education institutions. However, there are some downsides, drawbacks and challenges that can be identified and associated with E-learning. In a study done by Sadeghi (2019), on advantages and limitations of E-learning, the study revealed that students under E-learning depends much on technology, internet and

computers and smartphones, which some students may not have access to, and interruptions and other systems may appear during and after lessons. Students can miss deadlines due to such factors. Another study done by Dhull & Sakshi (2017), revealed that E-learning can sometimes result in decreased motivation, lack of physical interaction among colleagues and instructors and thus students feeling isolated and that can increase the rate of failure.

In developing countries, the possible challenges to be encountered in introducing E-learning in universities and colleges are poor technical infrastructure, financial restrictions, lack of computer literacy especially on students, internet connectivity or poor network, and limited expertise (Abaidoo & Arkorful, 2014). Moreover, a study by Nambiar (2020) which examined the Impact of online learning during COVID 19 indicated that learning while at home makes online classes troublesome as students find it difficult to manage both housework and school work simultaneously. This may negatively impact the students' performances when they do not have a favourable environment for their online classes. Combining online classes with other social realities definitely puts pressure on students.

Theoretical framework

The study was framed under the diffusion of innovation theory. This is a theory developed by Everett Rogers in 1963. It examines the social processes that occur when inventions or new ideas are dispersed throughout a community, organisation or institution. Innovations are not adopted by all individuals in a social system at the same time and it does not occur simultaneously in a social system. Instead, an invention or idea is absorbed in a different rate, time sequence, and classified into adopter categories based upon how long it takes for them to begin using the new idea. Adoption of a new idea is caused by human interaction through interpersonal networks.

According to Rogers (2003), there are five processes that each member in a community undergoes in order to accept a new idea under diffusion of innovation theory. The first step is knowledge in which Rogers (2003) asserts that a person becomes aware of an innovation and has some idea of how it functions. Even before the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic higher education students were aware of e-learning and had some idea about it since some of their counterparts studying part time were using it. The second step refers to it as the persuasion step which is where the person forms a favourable or unfavourable attitude towards the innovation. The need to social

distance individuals during the COVID-19 pandemic persuaded the students in higher education institutions to develop a favourable attitude towards e-learning as they were left with no option but to avoid physical contact but continue learning away from the institution.

The third step is decision whereby Rodgers (2003) postulates that a person engages in activities that lead to a choice to accept or reject the innovation. The need to stay away from the higher education institution during the COVID-19 pandemic saw students acquiring laptops and smartphones to use during e-learning as a way of accepting the new norm in learning. The fourth step is called implementation in which the individual puts an innovation into use. E-learning occurred during the pandemic. The last step is confirmation where the person evaluates the results of an innovation-decision already made. In studying the experiences of the higher education institute students' experiences, this study attempts to evaluate the results of the innovation-decision made by the higher education institute and suggest the sustainability of e-learning as a pedagogy to be sustained post COVID-19 pandemic era. For an individual to understand an idea, one has to undergo all these five processes. The researchers have adopted this theoretical framework also to help in the interpretation of the data and development of themes.

Problem statement

When e-learning was made the only delivery method in Eswatini universities, the higher education institution under study, had not trained the students in e-learning. Students had to start learning by manipulating the system from a trial and error basis. At that point of time no student was provided with smart gadgets to use, only talks of data were there with the local service providers (Masuku, 2022). E-Learning was adopted in almost the entire world as a way of study during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic in most universities including the university understudy in Eswatini (Sifundza, 2020). Many governments tried by all means to avoid the spreading of the Corona virus through closing schools and higher education institutions in order to continue with the educational process they adopted e-learning. However, most institutions of higher learning were not prepared to adopt e-learning. Some students still have no easy access to online learning and this has negatively affected the teaching and learning processes in higher education institutions (Allan, 2020). Therefore, the study sought to examine the e-learning experiences of the university students in the university understudy in Eswatini during the COVID

19 pandemic so as to determine how e-learning may be sustained even post COVID-19 era.

Objectives of the study

The objectives of the study are to:

1. Establish the experiences of students in E-learning during the period of COVID- 19.
2. Determine the challenges faced by students in E-learning during the period of COVID- 19.
3. Suggest how e-learning may be sustained post COVID-19 era.

Research methodology

Research methodology is a broad term used to refer to the research paradigm, research design, research approach, methods and procedures used in an investigation that is well planned to find out something (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). Research methodology explains how data is produced and analysed. On the same note Kumar (2019) defined research methodology as the specific procedures and techniques used to identify, select, process, and analyse information in a research study. The study employed a qualitative research approach. Research approach is a plan and procedure that consists of the steps of broad assumptions to detailed methods of data collection, analysis and interpretation (Chetty, 2016). Qualitative approach provides an understanding of a situation or phenomenon that tells the story rather than determining cause and effect (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2017). Maree (2007) also posits that the purpose of this approach is to understand the current situations from the participants' perspective and that the researcher does not attempt to manipulate the phenomenon of interest.

Research paradigm

According to Kivunja & Kuyini (2017), the research paradigm is a conceptual lens through which the researcher examines the methodological aspects of the research to determine the methods appropriate for the research problem and how data will be analysed. Research paradigms are significant because they provide beliefs and dictates to researchers on how a phenomenon should be studied, as well as, how the data of the study should be understood and interpreted. The study was located in the interpretivist research paradigm. This paradigm is relevant to the study because the researchers were concerned about understanding the world as it is based on the student's subjective experiences on E- learning.

Research design

The researchers adopted a phenomenological research design in the research. According to Donalek (2004), phenomenological design examines human experiences through the descriptions provided by the people involved. Cilesiz (2009), further asserts that

phenomenological studies seek reality from individuals' narratives of their experiences and feelings, to reach the essence of the individuals lived experiences of the phenomenon while ascertaining and defining the phenomena and to produce in- depth descriptions of a phenomenon. The experiences used in phenomenological studies are called lived experiences. This design seeks to comprehend and describe the world essence of a phenomenon. Maxwell (2005) also indicated the real interest of phenomenological study lies in how participants make sense of their experiences and how it informs their actions.

Data collection

Data was collected from a conveniently selected sample of 15 students who are in their level 4 doing teacher education at the university under study in Eswatini as the researchers are also in teacher education. Convenient sampling is a strategy whereby researchers use subjects or participants who are easy to contact and obtain their participation (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). Benard (2014) also adds that in the convenient sampling method, the researchers draw the sample from participants who are convenient for the researcher to access. In this study, the researchers conveniently chose the students who are doing year 4 because these participants have lived experiences in the university through traditional methods such as face-to-face learning as well as e-learning which was an option to minimise the spread of COVID-19 and that they were easy to contact and obtain their participation. Face to face Interviews were used as the main data collection technique in this research.

Data analysis

The researchers adopted a thematic analysis in the study. Thematic analysis is a process of identifying patterns or themes within a data set (Clarke & Braun, 2013). The researchers used the thematic analysis approach as alluded to by Clarke and Braun (2013) that it provides a highly flexible approach that could be modified for needs of many studies providing a rich and detailed yet complex account of data. The goal of thematic analysis is to identify themes such as patterns in data that are important or interesting and use these themes to address the research or say something about an issue.

Results

Experiences of students with E learning during the period of COVID 19

Several themes emerged from the research synthesis. The three major recurring themes about student experiences on E- learning in the higher education institution include: flexibility, high quality dialogue and cost effectiveness.

Flexibility

The flexibility of online learning compared to traditional learning is one experience the participants in this study revealed. The students discovered that in online learning they have to learn at their own pace which can help them alleviate a lot of pressure. Students emphasised that online learning is convenient to them since they are not required to go to campus but they learn at the comfort of their homes. Student B revealed that:

“Online learning offers me full control and accountability for my learning. Rather than having to show up to class as a requirement, I am able to decide and allocate time for learning. This control not only allows me to coordinate my education around my commitments but also ensures that I am learning at the best time because for me I work better in the evening.”

On the same note student E stated that *“Online learning is good for me because it does not require my physical presence and since I am a parent I don’t need to leave my kids for classes but instead I study at home at my own time and pace. I also don’t have to worry about making time to go to campus. There is no hassle in trying to rush to get to class.”*

Student F also pointed out that, *“Online learning allows me time to grasp and comprehend the concept slowly but surely a number of times and I am able to get better grades.”*

The flexibility of online learning allows students to slowly grasp concepts and ensure full understanding before moving forward. Step two of the diffusion of innovation theory is where the person forms a favourable or unfavourable attitude towards the innovation. The teachers who participated in this study showed that they have developed a favourable attitude towards the e-learning pedagogies as they point out the benefits of using e-learning in the teaching and learning process.

High quality dialogue

High quality dialogue was another experience of online learning that participants pointed out when asked about their experiences on online learning in this study. Student G revealed that, *“I am able to respond to what my colleagues have said in a discussion even a week later because the discussion remain open until the end of the semester.”* Student J reflected in unison that *“within an online asynchronous discussion, I am able to reflect on comments from others before responding or moving on the next item. I’m being favoured by this online learning because I am a person who is able to express myself through writing rather than verbal*

communication. Writing for me is better than speaking. So I make sure that I don’t miss any online discussion.

On a similar note, student C pointed out that *“online discussions are good for me because I am a shy person, I don’t respond to questions asked in a traditional classroom because I think I may pronounce some words wrong and people will laugh at me. With online education I am able to engage in discussions without any fear.”*

Students revealed that this structure allows students time to articulate responses with much more depth and forethought than in traditional face-to face discussions where the participant must analyse the comment of another on the spot and formulate a response or otherwise lose the chance to contribute. Step four of the diffusion of innovation theory is where the person implements or puts the innovation into practice or use. It was revealed from the study that participants have implemented the new system of learning.

Cost effectiveness

Another experience that students mentioned was cost effectiveness. Student I stated that, *“Although I have to pay for data but I save extra expenses like bus fare, money for printing and meal cost thus I prefer to take online classes to save these extra expenses. On a similar note, student B stated that, “I think online courses save me money. I have less automobile cost because I do not drive back and forth to campus”.*

Student F also revealed that *“I spend less on class material because online learning requires no hard copies for assignments but everything is submitted online.”* Similarly student K mentioned that, *“I feel that I make more efficient use of my money while learning online. My cost has also reduced since there is no need for me to rent a house near the institution but instead I stay at home”.*

On a similar note, student C stated that online learning saves her money because she is able to do the home chores instead of employing someone to help her at home because she has to attend classes at the campus. *“Online learning reduces cost for me because I don’t have to employ a helper at home, but I do the work myself.”*

Students revealed that online learning helps to cut costs for students as they do not travel back and forth to campus, they do not rent houses near the institution and they don’t pay money for printing out their assignment, but they save that money for other needs. Step one of the diffusion of innovation theory states that a person becomes aware of an innovation and has some idea of how it functions. The study had revealed

that teachers were aware of e-learning and had adopted it.

Challenges students faces with online learning

In this theme, the students stated a number of challenges they have encountered towards E-learning. The responses of the students revealed challenges such as limited socialization, technology issues and opening the gap between the privileged and the less privileged.

Limited physical socialization

Limited physical collaborative learning is the first challenge the students experienced through online learning. Student H stated that, *“I cannot share ideas, listen to peers, lectures and collaborate face-to-face on projects.”* Similarly student D mentioned that, *“I feel socially isolated due to the lack of physical communication.”* On the same note, Student F stated that *“I struggled to do my school work alone without the help of my peers.”*

Similarly student E stated that *“online learning is giving me a hard time because I have to work on my own and there are no group discussions to prepare for tests. I have to study alone and no one to ask questions if I don’t understand a concept.”*

Limited opportunities to learn from their peers was seen as a major negative experience of online learning revealed by students. Students revealed that online learning makes students undergo remoteness and lack of interaction.

Technology issues

During the interviews it came out that internet connectivity is a challenge in online learning. Student I stated that *“I stay in the rural areas and sometimes I fail to log into e-learning platforms because of network problems.”* Similarly, student H mentions that, *“I missed some of the zoom classes because of network problems. The network problems are a big challenge with this online learning and I’ve failed a number of my tests not because I don’t know but because of the network problems in my area.”*

Student F also stated that online learning does not work for her because she stays in rural areas where there is network problem. *“For me, network problems are a major hindrance to my learning because I stay in a rural area.”* Similarly student A pointed out that *“network is a challenge in my place because it is congested. I have to wait until late in the evenings so that I can be able to use the internet when most of the people are asleep”.*

Students revealed that technology issues are a big challenge in online learning. There is a lack of consistent internet connection in most of the places in

Eswatini and without a consistent internet connection for students, there can be a lack of continuity in learning thus affecting the process of teaching and learning.

Lack of resources

The opening gap between the privileged and the less privileged is another negative experience students revealed. Student A mentioned that *“online learning does not favour us all, my phone broke and it took me a month to buy a new one only to find that they have written tests in almost all the courses.”*

Similarly, Student D stated that, *“smartphones are expensive so some of them cannot afford to buy them and it’s a disadvantage for us. I missed tests and assignment deadlines because I did not have the smartphone required. Traditional classes were far better than this E- learning”.*

On a similar note, Student B stated that, *“This e-learning is not good for us all because if we have internet connectivity we cannot be in the lesson in time with others.”*

Student C revealed that only the privileged are able to study online without any hindrances because they are able to have WIFI connections. He stated that *“I think e-learning is for those who have money because they are able to have all what is needed for online learning to be effective such as WIFI. For us it is difficult because we depend on the network which is a challenge which sometimes becomes a challenge”.*

Students revealed that online learning propelled students to buy smartphones, computers and data and even WIFI for learning to be effective. Those who could not afford to buy those things are disadvantaged as they miss out classes. Step three of the diffusion of innovation theory postulates that a person engages in activities that lead to a choice to accept or reject the innovation. The study showed that the teachers were acquiring smartphones and laptops to use during the teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Limited knowledge to use e-learning platforms

During the interviews it came out that most of the students lacked knowledge in the demands of E-learning. The students revealed that they are not familiar with some of the platforms. Student L revealed that *“I am still having a challenge with using zoom, most of the time I log in I forget to press the button that will allow me to hear what the lecture and my colleagues are saying.”*

On the same note, student G stated that *“before COVID-19 we rarely used e-learning but when COVID-19 came we were forced to use e-learning”.*

without being taught properly on how it works. This has become a disadvantage to us because we miss deadlines after not seeing work that lectures have posted online”

The participants showed that they lacked the proper knowledge in using e-learning. Some of the students had an encounter with e-learning platforms in the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic and this encounter came when they were not prepared for it.

Discussion of the findings

The results of the study revealed that E-learning benefits the students in their academic performance as compared to the traditional or of face to face learning. Students emphasised that E-learning is convenient to them since they are not required to go to campus with physical appearance but they learn at the comfort of their homes. This allows the learners to learn and study at their own time and pace. This is similar to a study done by Arkorful, & Abaidoo (2014) which posit that E-learning removes hurdles of space and time and that it tolerates students to learn in their own pace, it motivates them to interact with their peers, discuss and exchange points of view and ideas especially in asynchronous learning. Muthuprasad et al (2020), also agrees with this assertion as his study indicated that the flexibility and suitability of online lessons are prospects that make E-learning an attractive option since it allows students to work at their own pace.

In addition, the study also revealed that E-Learning allows students time to articulate responses and engagement with much more depth and forethought than in traditional face-to face discussions where the participant will have fear of expressing themselves. This is because some discussions are open for a longer time before they close while in face-to-face classes after the discussions close after the time stipulated. This concur with a study done by Sun et al. (2020), which showed that students can keep on referring to the content since it's always on the sites until the end of the semester. Also it was revealed from the study that E-learning helps to cut costs for students as they do not have to travel back and forth to campus, they do not rent houses near the institution and they don't pay money for printing out their assignment, but they save that money for other needs. Step one of the diffusion of innovation theory states that a person becomes aware of an innovation and has some idea of how it functions. The study had revealed that teachers were aware of e-learning and had adopted it.

Among the challenges of E-learning, the study had revealed that E-learning makes students undergo aloofness and lack of interaction with their peers and

instructors. There are limited opportunities for them to interact with their peers as well as their instructors since everything it's done online. The students feel isolated because they have to work alone. This is in line with a study done by Simpson (2014), on experiences of students on E-learning which emphasised that students perceive E-learning as a lonely experience. Tham & Werner (2005), also agrees that students feel isolated in E-Learning because of the absence of their colleagues, and teachers should know how to establish connections and relationships with them, and technology. This can decrease their academic performances since the students have to study on their own while others work well and assimilate information properly when they are interacting with their peers.

Technology issues were another challenge that was revealed by the study. There is a lack of consistent internet connection in most of the places especially the rural areas in Eswatini and without a consistent internet connection for students, there can be a lack of continuity in learning thus affecting the process of teaching and learning. The consistency of the internet enables students to avoid interruptions especially during classes. Also, it was revealed that E-learning pushed students to buy smartphones, computers and data and even WIFI for learning to be effective while some of them do not have the resources to buy the gadgets. Step three of the diffusion of innovation theory states that the person engages in activities that leads to accepting or rejecting an innovation. The findings of the study showed that the participants accepted the new innovation and they acquired laptops and smartphones to be used in the process of teaching and learning.

Conclusions

The study concludes that e-learning was the most appropriate teaching and learning process during the COVID-19 pandemic and has benefits that make it sustainable after COVID-19. Students are able to learn at the comfort of their homes due to its flexibility. However, despite the positive impacts of e-learning there are some challenges students face in e-learning which include limited physical contact and collaboration. The University in Eswatini should try by all means to provide the students with tools for effective teaching and learning.

Recommendations

Based on the findings from this study the following recommendations were made:

- The University should provide the students with the right adequate digital tools for e-learning and data, not only for Moodle but also to access the internet, for it to be effective because some of the

students do not have the necessary tools for learning. These can be in the form of smartphones or tablets.

- The study also recommends that students should be equipped with technical skills and trained to utilise e-learning, since it is a new norm in the education system.
- The study further recommends that the university should keep on updating the software as well as widen the internet broadband for effective learning.

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