
**FEASIBILITY OF TOTAL MIGRATION TO ONLINE LEARNING IN
ZIMBABWE OPEN UNIVERSITY: THE CASE OF GOKWE NORTH
DISTRICT CENTRE**

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed at finding the feasibility of total migration to on-line learning for Zimbabwe Open University students in remote areas such as Gokwe North District. This study was conducted during the lockdown period that was instituted by the government as a measure to curb the spread of Covid-19 disease. The study was limited to the students in Gokwe North District and it utilized a pragmatic research approach which was a triangulation of quantitative and qualitative methods. Questionnaires, interviews and observations were utilized to gather information. The study established that students in Gokwe North District lacked appropriate and adequate technology to conduct on-line learning. The gargets were expensive and beyond their means. Both students and lecturers did not have the skills to conduct on-line learning effectively. There was a need for the government to provide a conducive environment for the adoption of on-line learning. The gadgets must be affordable whilst connectivity should be improved in Gokwe North District. Users of digital technology must be trained in the use of gadgets.

Keywords: covid-19, digital technology, Gokwe North District, on-line learning, lockdown, Zimbabwe Open University,

1.0 BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

The novel coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), which is a severe acute respiratory disease, was first identified in Wuhan City, Hubei Province, China, in December 2019 (Kandola, 2020; WHO, 2020a; Zhu, Wei, and Niu, 2019). It then spread across the globe and by February 2020, every continent had detected cases of COVID-19 (Vlachopoulos, 2020). The World Health Organisation declared the disease a global emergency on 31 January 2020, and a pandemic on 11 March 2020 (Rana, 2020; WHO, 2020b). The outbreak and spiking of the

disease shook the whole world. In order to combat the spread of the disease, several governments worldwide instituted lockdown measures. These were characterized by travel bans, closure of schools, colleges and universities, businesses, offices, places of worship, shopping malls as well as public places where people usually gathered (Wasdani and Prasad, 2020). Other measures put in place included social and physical distancing, wearing face masks when in public places, as well as washing of hands regularly with soap under running water. The adoption of social distancing as propounded by the world Health Organisation (WHO) as a measure to reduce the spread of Covid-19 resulted in the closure of schools, colleges and universities, and this disturbed the traditional teaching and learning method (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020).

The emergence of COVID-19 meant education across the globe had to take a new trajectory. It was important to keep students engaged at home and complete their academic calendars. It was therefore incumbent upon universities to embrace new methods such as online teaching and learning methodologies (Dhawan, 2020; University World News, 2020). Mhlanga and Mloi (2020) observe that several universities in South Africa moved to online learning although some did not make an official announcement about the move. This switch was a stopgap measure to deal with the challenges brought about by Covid-19. On-line learning has a number of advantages as it helps to maintain social and physical distancing principles. It also reduces movement and as well as minimizes movement and contact between learners and educators. The adoption of on-line learning during lockdown is an apt response to the clarion demands of Agenda 2030 (UNESCO, 2017) whose aspiration is not to leave anyone behind.

On-line learning can be defined in a number of ways. For example, Means et al. (2009), define on-line learning as the educational usage of technological devices, tools and the internet. Fry (2001) describes online learning as the use of the internet and some other important technologies to develop materials for educational purposes, instructional delivery and management of programmes. Dhawan (2020) goes a bit further by saying online learning is learning experiences in synchronous or asynchronous environments using different devices such as mobile phones, laptops, among others with internet access. Dhawan (2020) further explains a synchronous learning environment as a situation which is structured so that students are engaged in live lectures, with real-time interactions between educators and learners. This could be in the form of video conferencing with groups of more than 40 students. This situation has a possibility of instant feedback between educators and learners. The situation is however different with asynchronous learning environments. These do not have properly structured, and learning content that is presented as live lectures or classes. Instead learning content is available in different learning systems and forums (Dhawan, 2020). These could be WhatsApp audios and videos, and learners could access them during their spare time.

The adoption of on-line learning across the globe, can be viewed as an opportunity to migrate to use of digital technology in learning and teaching. It can also be regarded as a unique opportunity that institutions could utilize to fill the gap that was left by conventional (face-to-face) education (Vlachopoulos, 2020). On-line was considered as an opportunity for educators and students to continue teaching and learning from any location without interruption (Vlachopoulos, 2020). However, the utilization of on-line education has a

myriad of challenges. Both the developed and developing world have teething problems that tend to frustrate on-line teaching. A number of challenges have been experienced both in the developed and developing world. Firstly, the Covid-19 outbreak caught the world unawares. Even European countries such Germany, France and Italy which are believed to be the frontrunners in the areas of information and communication technologies (ICT) transformation, were not ready to initiate on-line learning progress (Fraillon, Ainley, Schulz, Friedman, and Duckworth 2019). In a study conducted by Dube (2020) the unavailability of a network in rural areas of South Africa was a major stumbling block in adopting on-line learning during the COVID-19 period. It also emerged that learners lacked the devices for on-line learning in the same rural areas of South Africa. It was evident that both educators and learners lacked the necessary training to make utilization of online learning a success (Vlachopoulos, 2020).

In Zimbabwe all schools and tertiary education institutions were closed on 23 March 2020 in a bid to contain the spread of Covid-19. The government then instructed all tertiary education institutions to stop face-to-face lectures on campuses and to adopt e-learning as a safety measure to protect students, lecturers and workers from a sudden surge in the number of Covid-19 cases (Mukeredzi and Mashininga, 2020). This also had implications on Zimbabwe Open University, a university mandated to provide distance education in Zimbabwe. The university as shall be seen shortly had been running on-line programmes before the onset of Covid-19 in conjunction with face to face tutorials. During the Covid-19 inspired lockdown, it meant the university was to migrate to total online learning. It is against this background that this study was conceptualized to establish the feasibility of that move.

1.1 Zimbabwe Open University

Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) is a state university that was established on 1st March 1999, through the Zimbabwe Open University Act (Chapter 25:50). ZOU was mandated through this Act to provide higher education through open and distance learning (Garwe, 2014). Open and distance learning is a mode of learning that allows for physical separation between learners and lecturers. With ODL, learners can conduct their studies away from the campus. However, observations show that other universities in Zimbabwe have adopted ODL, even before the onset of COVID-19, as they fight for enrolling more students. They do this in the guise of block release programmes. Prior to its establishment ZOU operated as a department under the University of Zimbabwe from 1993. The ZOU Act then made the university a fully-fledged university standing on its own. It was established to provide an opportunity for several disadvantaged individuals who had failed to access university education previously because of one reason or another. It was also a way of increasing access to tertiary education and training in Zimbabwe. ZOU is located in each of the country's provincial capitals.

Since its inception, ZOU adopted a delivery mode that combined the use of teaching and learning materials (modules) and six-hour tutorials conducted the course of the semester. Modules are written by skilled and knowledgeable experts. Modules act as the lecturer as through studying them students are guided in their learning. Students converge at specified venues for tutorials with their tutors. Tutorials are sessions used to classify the challenges encountered.

When ZOU was established, it had the intention to establish a virtual classroom by the year 2000. However, this could not be attained as a number of challenges cropped up. A virtual classroom enables students to access knowledge and information on the internet. The university was able to embark on online learning in 2014 when it established an e-learning management system called MyVista (Njaya and Murangwa, 2017). This meant providing all the Regional Campuses with an electronic system and this enabled accessing online library resources such as ebrary, registration, fees payment and checking results. In 2017 the university then introduced the online platform called my vista (Chirume and Thondhlana, 2019). It was a learning management system designed to foster anytime, anywhere teaching and learning in a flexible and interactive environment that is centred on the student. With this platform, students are able to conduct their studies online. The platform presents many functions, which include admissions, payment of fees, registration, access to assignments and learning materials such as online tutorials. They can also submit assignments as well. Lecturers are to access students' assignments for marking as well as provide feedback to students. The platform provides students with 24/7 unlimited access to their lecturers, fellow students as well as numerous learning materials.

ZOU which is the premier Open and Distance e-Learning (ODEL) university in Zimbabwe, has crafted a 5-year Strategic Plan (2019-2023) that mainstreams e-learning. As a result, it has changed its vision to be the university of Choice in open and distance e-learning; and its mission to empower the world through high quality open and distance learning enabled by technology. This shows that ZOU placed e-learning at the centre of its learning and teaching processes even before the incidence of Covid-19. This explains why the university was able to run examinations in August 2020 as students were able to prepare for examinations using on-line technologies.

2.0 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The switch to total on-line learning by Zimbabwe Open University after suspension of face-to-face lectures and tutorials by the government as a measure to curb the spread of Covid-19 could have unprecedented challenges for students in remote locations such as Gokwe North District in Zimbabwe. The government had to respond to save learners, whilst at the same time trying to have teaching and learning going on.

2.1 Research questions

- i. Is it feasible for Zimbabwe Open University to adopt total on-line learning as its delivery model?
- ii. How were the students in Gokwe North District affected by the move to temporarily migrate to online learning?
- iii. What should be done to assist students in remote parts such as Gokwe North District to benefit from online learning services?

3.0 METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a pragmatic approach which triangulated quantitative and qualitative paradigms. The pragmatic approach entails that research always occurs in a social context

and its main concern is to provide solutions to problems, using a pluralist research design to understand the problem. This explains why this study adopted a mixed research paradigm. The study used the exploratory approach whereby qualitative methods were used first and quantitative methods were used later in gathering data. Neuman (2006) posits that quantitative and qualitative paradigms have complementary strengths. According to Bless, Higson-Smith and Kagee (2006), qualitative methods make use of language to record and articulate human experiences. This gave the research team access to the perspectives of students being studied. The use of qualitative techniques enabled the research team to observe the behaviour and attitudes of students with regards to the use of digital technologies as they interacted with them. However, this was not adequate, hence it was necessary to complement the study by using quantitative techniques. Kelly (2000) contends that the use of figures validates the findings. Convenience sampling was adopted to select participants in the study. They were interviewed as they visited the district learning centre at Mtora Service Centre in Gokwe North District. Saturation point was attained after interviewing ten participants. It became necessary to use questionnaires to obtain basic statistics on issues like gender and age of participants. The study also sought figures on accessibility to the internet and ownership of digital gadgets. The study had wished to administer questionnaires to all 150 registered students in Gokwe North District. The questionnaires were posted to their WhatsApp and only 30 responded. Follow-ups on those who had not responded revealed that some did not have the appropriate gadgets such as printers and scanners that were to be used in responding to the questionnaires. Others had a phobia of using digital technology to participate in the study. Others were not computer literate hence they chose not to participate in the study. Observations were also utilized to check on the computer literacy of both students and lecturers. Secondary sources such as journal and newspaper articles were used to complement information from primary sources.

4.0 STUDY AREA

This study was conducted in the Gokwe North District of Zimbabwe. Gokwe North Rural District is in the Midlands Province and was established in July 1993 following the amalgamation of Rural and District Councils (GNRC, 2020). The District is located in the extreme north-west of the province. It shares common borders with Binga District (Matebeleland North Province) to the West, Gokwe South to the Southern side. Kadoma District to the East and Hurungwe District to the North (both of Mashonaland West Province). In terms of size, the District covers approximately 703 354 hectares (7 033.54km²) and is divided into 36 administration wards (GNRC, 2020). The District has four political constituencies namely Nembudziya Constituency, Gumunyu Constituency, Chireya Constituency and Kabuyuni Constituency. Gokwe North District has a population of 243 000 people (CSO, 2012). The administrative functions of the district are conducted at Mtora Service Centre. This centre has some urban functions and services.

The district is characterized by poor service delivery. The road network is very poor, making communication very difficult. During the rainy season, the roads are impassable as they become muddy and slippery. During the dry season, the sandy soils make it very difficult to drive on the roads. Although rural electrification has been ongoing, a number of service centres are yet to be electrified, let alone the households. Telecommunication services are not yet fully developed as well.

In its quest not to leave anyone behind, ZOU opened a district centre at Mtora on the 1st of December 2016. The centre is 312 kilometres from the Midlands Campus in Gweru, which is responsible for its operations, and 317 kilometres from the capital city Harare. Through this centre, ZOU is the only university that has registered its presence in this massive and expansive district. Since its establishment, the centre has seen the number of students registering with the university increasing each year. The centre has the potential and capacity to improve people's lives through access to education and information. Students in the district get serviced at the centre instead of travelling all the way to Gweru or Harare.

5.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The study established that fifty percent of the respondents were male while another fifty percent consisted of women. Twenty percent of the respondents were in the 26-35-year age group, while seventy percent of the respondents were between the ages of 36 and 45 years of age. Ten percent of the respondents were between 46 and 55 years. The above statistics are in conformity with the expected mandate of the Zimbabwe Open University. It was established to cater for disenfranchised students. In a conventional university, undergraduate students would usually be in their late teens or early twenties. The respondents were drawn mainly from the returning students as these were considered to have been exposed to the issues under discussion. Forty percent of the respondents were in their second year, while thirty percent were in their third year, and another thirty percent were in their fourth year. This means the sampled students had enough experience to provide information on online issues.

The study established that seventy percent of the respondents owned a smartphone, while twenty percent owned a laptop and ten percent owned a tablet. The respondents revealed that they only had total access to the gadgets they owned; hence those were the gadgets they used in their on-line learning. However, sixty percent of the respondents gave a choice, they preferred using laptops for their on-line learning. Twenty percent revealed that they preferred a smartphone, while ten percent preferred a desktop computer and another ten percent preferred a tablet. During interviews, the group that preferred laptops mentioned that laptops were versatile and suited their learning style which did not confine them to the four walls of a classroom.

Participant 1 revealed some of the challenges faced in using smartphones:

Reading a book from a phone or typing an assignment on the phone is a mammoth challenge.

However, all the respondents indicated that they were incapacitated financially to own laptops which were priced beyond their reach. Respondent also revealed that unlike students in conventional universities, they had several commitments which required financial undertakings. For example, they were breadwinners and guardians of students at various levels of education including those in conventional universities. Ninety percent of the respondents were civil servants, mostly in the education sector. They were therefore using smartphones which had become multipurpose gadgets, although they were not necessarily efficient and effective.

Seventy percent of the respondents revealed that they were usually available on-line activities during the evenings, whilst twenty percent were available during the afternoon, and ten percent were available any time. Seventy percent dedicated Saturdays to their on-line learning, while twenty percent preferred Mondays, and ten percent felt they could do their on-line learning on Sundays. Information obtained from interviews showed that as ODeL students, participants were either full-time employees in government or in the private sector or were self-employed. Their time was therefore shared between other commitments and education. It was conceivable therefore to devote more time to their studies on Saturdays. Sundays were found to be days of worship.

The study realized that forty percent of the respondents had internet connectivity, while sixty percent did not have connectivity. Those with connectivity were either in their homes or in their workplaces. Of the connected, only twenty-five percent mentioned that their systems were efficient. Seventy-five percent revealed that their systems were somewhat efficient as they were often interrupted by factors such as power blackouts among other challenges as shall be discussed in the ensuing sections. The respondents without connectivity depended on bundles they purchased as well as Wi-Fi facilities at the ZOU district office. The situation was worsened by the absence of internet cafes in the service centre. Bundles were generally expensive and it was difficult for respondents to rely on them constantly.

Participant 2 who was a young student studying with Zou shared these views with the research team:

My parents are failing to understand when I tell them that I need money for the internet; they think that I am making up a story. Right now I have not started writing assignments and I don't have modules that are on-line as I don't have access to the internet.

These were some of the challenges being faced by students who were young and unemployed, who depended on their parents or guardians for academic support.

Forty percent of the respondents revealed that they had participated in one form of on-line tutorials in the past, whilst sixty percent indicated they had not taken part in any on-line tutorials. The latter group mentioned that their desire to partake in tutorials was thwarted by a number of factors. These included lack of finances to buy bundles, lack of internet connectivity, lack of access to internet facilities due to Covid-19 lockdown, lack of resources that could connect to the internet, and lack of skills to operate gadgets. In the same vein, thirty percent of the respondents had communicated with their lecturers in one way or another through the my vista platform. Seventy percent had not, and similar challenges as those already mentioned above. Forty percent of the respondents revealed that they were conversant with Myvista platform which was being used by the university as stated earlier on. Thirty percent of the respondents used google class while another thirty percent utilized zoom. Otherwise, the respondents were not familiar with other platforms such as Instagram, Twitter and YouTube.

All the respondents mentioned that the adoption of new media technologies in learning was the way to go during pandemics like the Covid-19. During the interview, they argued that if

the system was well resourced and properly equipped it could serve students in several ways. They felt this was a critical strategy in the containment of the disease. They would continue with their studies in the comfort of their homes.

Participant 3 had this to say:

On-line learning is the way to go in a situation where we have a pandemic like this Covid-19. If it is well equipped it will provide us with on-line learning resources such as reference books, journals and conference presentations. There is reduced travelling as you can operate from your home.

Participant 4 added the following information:

On-line learning is beneficial because you can learn from anywhere provided there is internet connectivity. Furthermore, it provides current and up to date information. You simply download the learning materials and you are good to go.

Those who had an opportunity to participate in on-line tutorials revealed that there was not much difference with the face-to-face tutorials except that these were being done virtually.

Participant 5 provided the following views:

We had an opportunity of meeting our tutors virtually and this was in conformity with the World Health Organization protocols which require people to stay at home and observe social and physical distancing. The zoom tutorials were vivid and allowed us to participate in an engaging manner. The only limitation was that we were few as most students could not afford to purchase the required data.

The study however established that on-line learning for students in Gokwe North District had some challenges. Eighty percent of the respondents felt that the migration to total on-line learning in the current environment would disturb their learning. They revealed that at an individual level, they did not have adequate gadgets that could be utilized for on-line learning. As already observed, the majority of the respondents depended on smartphones for their online learning.

Participant 6 provided the following views:

Most of the students use their smartphones which are in various states. Some are old, scratched and very small. My phone as you can see is quite small and it is not easy for me to read for an extended period. The proper gadgets such as laptops are well beyond my reach. So I just have to make do with this phone since I want to complete my degree.

The study also established that very few people had Wi-Fi facilities in their homes at the Mtora Service Centre. As already observed earlier on, only forty percent of the respondents were connected to the internet. This number however includes those that access the internet

at their workplaces. The lack of internet connectivity was therefore observed as a major hindrance to the total migration to total on-line learning for students in Gokwe North District.

Participant 7 made the following observations:

The Wi-Fi phenomenon is a very recent thing in Gokwe North District. Imagine the Mtora Service Centre does not have a single internet café. Very few individual households have such a utility. Otherwise, the majority of people in the service centre rely on data bundles which unfortunately are very expensive. We have to depend on the facilities at the ZOU district centre.

The study further established that the network challenges were exacerbated by unreliable power. There were interruptions in the electricity supply caused by power cuts and load shedding. Electrical faults took a long to be attended to. Power interruptions even affected those using smartphones as they could not charge their phones.

Participant 8 revealed the following:

Gokwe North District has serious challenges with electricity supply. Although rural electrification has been ongoing, a number of homes at Mtora are not yet connected. The situation is even worse in the communal area where most of the students stay. The real cause is the cost involved which is astronomical. Blackouts are worse during the rainy season when faults become too many. We may go for up to two weeks with no power.

The above quotation shows that on-line learning cannot be conducted effectively in such a situation. Electricity is central to the provision of on-line learning.

It emerged that limited knowledge on how to operate the digital technologies on the part of both the educators and the learners was a major hindrance to smooth on-line learning. This probably emanated from “technophobia” which is fear of technology. It was observed that not all students could participate in this study as they could not respond to the on-line questionnaire. During interviews, a number of students revealed that they were not comfortable operating digital technology to obtain learning materials such as online journals or books. One lecturer had this to say

Some students complain that there are no assignments or learning materials posted on their my vista learning platform yet they lack the skills to access the said materials. In some cases, it could be the sheer fear of opening the platform.

Some students mentioned that they had challenges submitting their assignments on-line. Some students even revealed that they could not register or even pay their fees using the on-line system. They could not even access their results on their student portals. They had to be assisted by colleagues with the skills or even other people who were not ZOU students. In the absence of such people, this could result in late registration or late submission of assignments. The research team observed that some students could not log in or out of their e-learning platforms. This was because they were not computer literate. In worse off cases,

some students actually failed to register for their studies or submit their assignments. This explains why some students had to travel from far off places to the district centre to seek the assistance of the District Administrative Assistant. Observations made by the research team showed that there were some students who still visited the Midlands Regional Campus to make fees payments, yet this was something they could do on their phones in the comfort of their homes.

This had its own problems as they could not hold these people accountable if their assignments could not be submitted because of one reason or another. This study observed that this was a common problem affecting students who asked other people to submit assignments on their behalf.

The participants revealed that they required regular exposure to digital technologies as well as training to help them perfect their skills. They mentioned that technology was continuously changing hence it was imperative not to be left behind. They felt they needed training on surfing the internet so as to get the correct online resources. They also mentioned that it was critical to be trained on how to upload assignments for marking and download marked assignments. They also felt they needed to get training on how to participate in on-line tutorials such as Google class or Zoom. They felt the training would perfect their on-line learning.

This challenge was not only limited to students alone, as lecturers and tutors had operational challenges as well. Information obtained from some lecturers showed that they were not very competent in using digital technologies. This stemmed from a phobia as well as a lack of training and exposure to the technology. One lecturer said:

The migration to online learning is a very good thing but it is fraught with many challenges. We did not have time to acclimatize with the technology as we found ourselves in the thick of things. We have so much that we are supposed to do on-line ranging from tutorials, marking and processing marks. We need refresher courses in digital technologies.

Other lecturers revealed that although they were competent, they could not conduct effective on-line learning particularly with students in Gokwe North District. A number of factors such as lack of appropriate technology and poor connectivity were a hindrance. One lecturer had this to say:

I have found out that Zoom classes can be effective as well as interactive. You can actually exchange views and entertain contributions from students. However, most students could not participate in these because they did not have internet connectivity. They lacked the requisite gadgets as they could not afford them. They could not all be available at the same time.

Another lecturer had the following contributions:

After realizing that I was not making any headway with Zoom I resorted to WhatsApp audios. These were generally effective as students could play the audios at their own time.

5.1 Discussions

The move by the government to have universities adopt e-learning was a positive move as the Covid-19 era has seen an upsurge in the use of technology on an unprecedented scale globally. This was meant to keep people safe, as well as making sure that life, education and business, in general, continue with few disruptions (Chindaro, 2020). However, Vlachopoulos (2020) is of the view that the adoption of online education initiatives was some form of emergency, hence the new measures were on the whole, untested, and in some cases were not being applied in a consistent manner across educational institutions.

The use of smartphones for online learning could be viewed as a stopgap measure. This has enabled students to proceed with their learning after the government ordered all tertiary education institutions to stop face-to-face lectures on campuses immediately and proceed with e-learning. This move was a safety measure to protect students and workers from a sudden spike in the number of cases of COVID-19 (Mukeredzi and Mashininga, 2020). The use of smartphones is a taxing exercise for learners as the cost of laptops and tablets is beyond their means. Dube (2020) in a study conducted in South Africa observed a similar scenario; that learner lacked access to devices such as cell phones, computers, laptops and smartphones to connect for online learning. This tended the impact negatively on the success of on-line learning in the study area. Azorini (2020) observed a similar trend in that a significant number of teachers lacked adequate digital competencies which affected the smooth progression of remote learning. It is therefore important to realise that the initiative to adopt on-line learning can only be utilised effectively if both learners and educators have reliable access to the appropriate equipment and resources required for on-line learning (Chinadaro, 2020; Vlachopoulos, 2020).

Poor or lack of internet connectivity is a major setback in the adoption of online learning. As already mentioned earlier, the utilisation of on-line learning by ZOU students in Gokwe North District was hampered by poor non-existent internet connectivity. Some students had to travel several kilometres to access the internet. In this case, on-line learning becomes a good option if every student has access to it. Gora (2020) contends that many students living in rural and other remote areas have problems in accessing e-learning platforms. This, therefore, places them at a disadvantage compared to students residing in urban environments. It would appear that on-line learning instead of making education accessible to all, is exposing the social differences between students.

Online gadgets were beyond the reach of the majority of the populace. They are considered as luxury goods yet their main function is to facilitate learning especially during difficult periods such as these when Covid-19 stopped face-to-face lectures and tutorials. Gora (2020) feels that most students are being hindered from exercising their right to education because they were financially unstable.

It was mentioned earlier that the inability to use on-line learning technology was a challenge and could be a major hindrance to learning for students in the study area. This was due to low computer literacy. ZOU students in Gokwe North District are not alone in this situation. A similar observation was made by Dube (2020) that most rural teachers in South Africa are unable to use online learning apps. It, therefore, became difficult for the teachers to help learners. Anwar et al, (2020) observe that students in Pakistan had low computer literacy levels. This was due to a lack of training in digital technologies and this affected their online learning during the Covid-19 lockdown. To buttress the preceding observation, the World Bank (2020) argues that very few classroom teachers have been trained in online instructional approaches and tools. Such teachers are therefore not able to assist learners in any meaningful manner.

6.0 CONCLUSIONS

The migration to total on-line learning is actually excluding some students in Gokwe North District who may not have access to the digital technologies, yet the clarion call by Agenda 2030 (UNESCO, 2017) is not to leave anyone behind. This is also against the philosophy that ZOU does not want to leave anyone behind. Students in Gokwe North District are disadvantaged in a number of ways, and complete migration may not be the way to go.

The study also concluded that the Covid-19 outbreak was a wake-up call to the education sector in Zimbabwe. Even if the pandemic comes to an end, the education sector may never revert to the old way of doing things. Education is gradually moving to the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) where teaching and learning will be digital, with reduced face-to-face interactions.

ZOU students in Gokwe North District are disadvantaged as they do not have ready access to online facilities. They have to travel long distances to access the facilities. Connectivity is hampered by limited electrification in the district. Telecom services are also poor while roads remain a major challenge as they are impossible especially during the rainy season.

Students cannot have access to appropriate gadgets such as laptops, computers and smartphones as these are pricey and beyond their means. They end up using basic android phones that may not be suitable for online learning. The situation is worsened by the fact that students, as well as lecturers, have not been trained adequately in on-line learning; hence this becomes a mammoth task to have effective online learning.

7.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

This study recommends that ZOU should adopt blended learning as its model instead of total migration to on-line learning. This will not leave out students in remote environments such as Gokwe North District who cannot afford the expensive digital technologies.

It is imperative to ensure that there is internet connectivity in Gokwe North District as this is critical not only for academic purposes but for holistic development of the district. Groups such as farmers and other entrepreneurs need the services as this is the trajectory the world is taking.

Stakeholders in the provision of university education such as the government, non-governmental organization and universities should create an enabling environment which enables students to have access to internet resources such as laptops and tablets at affordable prices. Connectivity in places such as Gokwe North should be improved. Data bundles should be affordable.

Gadgets such as laptops could be part of the registration packages to make it easier for students to access them without problems.

Training for both students and lecturers will enhance the uptake and use of new digital technologies in learning in ZOU.

The Gokwe North District learning centre together with other learning centres need to be capacitated in order for them to provide on-line learning without glitches. The internet infrastructure must be upgraded, and backup power in the form of solar power should be installed.

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