Programme Delivery and Assessment in the Context of the COVID-19 Crisis at one Higher Education Institution in Zimbabwe

Fortune Sibanda
ORCID iD: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1086-0066

Tenson Muyambo
ORCID iD: https://orcid.org/000-0001-6765-5034

Abstract

Today, as the world is facing the global pandemic of COVID-19, declared as a health emergency by the World Health Organisation, teaching, learning and research in schools and institutions of higher learning have been disrupted due to the extended closures and national lockdowns. In Zimbabwe, the uncertainties of the COVID-19 crisis convinced the government to declare it a national disaster. This chapter seeks to examine the nature and impact of the programme delivery and assessment interventions in the context of the COVID-19 crisis at one Higher Education Institution in Zimbabwe (HEIZ)'s Religious Studies class in an undergraduate programme at its School of Education. The study posits that the pandemic caused bewilderment regarding the nature of programme delivery and assessment at this institution, but at the same time it is set to transform the approach to teaching and learning through embracing online models such as Google classroom and video conference platforms. Poignant questions that arise include: How far can online education change the education paradigm at this one HEIZ? How prepared is the institution to implement online educational transformation at this juncture? Is online teaching and learning qualitatively different from the traditional campus-based talk-and-chalk/face-to-face teaching in Zimbabwe? How has the institution responded to the challenge of closure and the desire to protect the integrity of what is being taught, learnt and assessed across programmes

DOI: https://doi.org/10.29086/978-0-9869936-1-9/2020/AASBS02
Chapter URL pp. 157 - 178: http://alternation.ukzn.ac.za/Files/books/series-02/08-Sibanda.pdf

in the institution? This qualitative research gathered data through Key Informant Interviews, observation and documentary analysis of print and electronic media such as circulars from the institution and the Ministry of Health on COVID-19. The findings revealed that the email platform was hugely utilised for student assessment and lecturer feedback, whereas WhatsApp was popular with sampled students because of convenience, accessibility, efficiency and affordability to them. In addition, it was found that while the Google Classroom application was the least utilised by students due to its novelty to most students, lecturers preferred it as the best/most potentially effective mode of programme delivery and assessment.

Keywords: COVID-19, e-learning, Higher Education Institutions, ICT, Zimbabwe

Introduction

Today, as the world is facing the global pandemic of COVID-19, declared a health emergency by the World Health Organisation, teaching, learning and research in schools and at institutions of higher learning have been disrupted due to the extended closures and national lockdowns. As the novel coronavirus, COVID-19, took its toll the world over, some nations, businesses, religious organisations, schools and institutions of higher learning were forced to close their operations for the first time in history. This sudden turn of events caused some of them to remain in limbo due to the enforced lockdowns. This was a befitting measure to address what Wray (2009) in the book: *Communities and Crisis*, calls a crisis in society under stress in the face of disease. In Zimbabwe, the uncertainties of the COVID-19 crisis convinced the government to declare it a national disaster, to which schools, colleges and universities adhered. On this basis, there was a massive shift to online learning. This posed a great challenge for administrators, teachers/instructors, students, and parents alike, since nearly every school or college closed its physical locations due to the COVID-19 pandemic (IGI Global, 23 April 2020). Despite the challenges, potential and new opportunities have been offered by the COVID-19 crisis, which makes it timely to provide a scholarly introspection into the responses and impact of this disease in society.

This chapter seeks to examine the nature and impact of the programme delivery and assessment interventions in the context of the COVID-19 crisis at

one Higher Education Institution in Zimbabwe (HEIZ)'s undergraduate programmes in the School of Education, with specific reference to a Religious Studies class. This HEIZ is a relatively new institution whose establishment coincided with the onset of the new millennium. In the Zimbabwean context, this situates the institution at a time when the country was confronted by an economic and political downturn, 'the Zimbabwe crisis' (Mhlahlo & Smith 2020). Given that the HEIZ under study was established during the Zimbabwean crisis, the researchers assumed that it was relatively under-resourced, particularly in the area of online teaching and learning, when COVID-19 struck. The study therefore sought to establish how prepared was this HEIZ and its lecturers and students to adopt online teaching and learning. The study posits that the pandemic caused bewilderment in the nature of programme delivery and assessment at this HEIZ, but at the same time transformed their approach to teaching and learning through embracing online models such as Google classroom and video conference platforms. Poignant questions that arise include: How far can online education change the education paradigm at this HEIZ? How prepared is the institution to implement online educational transformation at this juncture? Is online teaching and learning qualitatively different from the traditional campus-based face-to-face teaching in Zimbabwe? How has the institution responded to the challenge of closure and the desire to protect the integrity of what is taught, learnt and assessed across programmes in the institution? The findings show that this HEIZ will have to grapple with issues of general unreliable power supply, Internet speed and robustness of software alongside reviewing its curriculum in the immediate and longer term, within undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, in the post-COVID-19 pandemic era.

Theoretical Framework: The Crisis Approach Theory

Most researchers use insights freely borrowed from all angles of vision (Enarson, Fothergrill & Peek 2007). As a novel pandemic, COVID-19 is a crisis that threatens humanity, causes uncertainties and calls for urgent responses. In this manner, the theoretical lens used in the study is the crisis approach theory in order to understand how this HEIZ responded to the COVID-19 pandemic. This study borrows the crisis-approach theoretical lens from Arjen Boin and Paul 'T Hart (2007). According to these scholars, the major tenets of the crisis approach theory are threat, uncertainty and urgency.

This can be presented diagrammatically as follows:

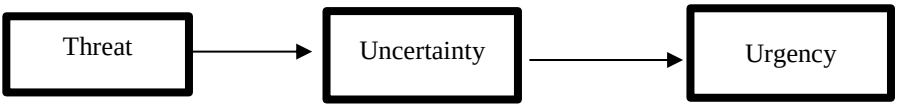

Fig. 1: The Crisis Approach Theory

In Fig. 1, threat is a foundational component of crisis. Crises occur when core or life-sustaining systems of a community come under threat. This is applicable to the education sector in Zimbabwe, which was threatened by the advent of COVID-19. There was a breakdown of normal educational operations. Another component as illustrated in Fig.1 is uncertainty. In a crisis, the perception of threat is accompanied by a high degree of uncertainty. This uncertainty pertains both to the nature and potential consequences of the threat. It focuses on these questions: What is happening and how did it happen? What is next? How bad will it be? More importantly, uncertainty clouds the search for solutions: What can we do? What happens if we select this option? What will others do? (Boin & 'T Hart 2007:44). This is critical in a traditional face-to-face mode of teaching and learning which, in the context of COVID-19, brought a 'new normal' characterised by 'shock, horror, and upheaval' (Wray 2009:3). The last component is urgency. A crisis induces a sense of urgency where time compression is a defining element. This acknowledges that the threat of COVID-19 is here; it is real, and it must be dealt with as soon as possible. Crisis situations are paradoxical inasmuch as they create opportunities to try out immediate and long-term solutions. Guy (1983, cited by Boin and 'T Hart 2007) asserts that what is a crisis for some may be an opportunity for others. In the same vein, Zhang (2020) considers the COVID-19 crisis as an opportunity to try out online higher education in China. On the basis of these arguments, the crisis approach theory is helpful to examine the responses to COVID-19 by one HEIZ to its programme delivery and assessment.

Research Methodology

The study adopted a Mixed Methods Research (MMR) design. Leavy (2017:164) states that MMR 'involves collecting and integrating quantitative and qualitative data in a single project and therefore may result in a more

comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation'. She further asserts that methodologically MMR approaches rely on,

> (a) combining deductive and inductive designs to generate both quantitative and qualitative data; and
> (b) integrating the datasets in some way.

In other words, MMR approaches are integrative approaches where the researcher relates the quantitative and qualitative datasets in a continuum of integration (Leavy 2017). It is suitable when the purpose of the study is to describe, explain, or evaluate complex problems or issues such as the implications of COVID-19 on higher education in Zimbabwe. In this study we used a nested design where quantitative data were nested into a qualitative research design using a qualitative method. From the four types of integration that Creswell (2015:83) identifies, namely merging the data, explaining the data, building and embedding the data, we opted for the fourth one where quantitative data were used to augment the qualitative set of data. Quantitatively, the study sought to establish the frequency in the use of online platforms such as WhatsApp, Google Classroom and Email. On this basis we collected data using questionnaires in order to establish the most used online programme delivery and assessment platforms by students.

Qualitatively, we used the phenomenological and historical approaches to describe and analyse the experiences, views and feelings of both students and lecturers at one HEIZ's School of Education's online education. The phenomenological approach was significant in tapping into the insider perspectives of research participants through the principles of *epoche* (bracketing), empathy, and descriptive accuracy (Cox 1996). The historical approach was equally useful in providing qualitative data to understand social life (Wray 2009:9). Because the study was carried out under lockdown conditions, data were qualitatively gathered through, *inter alia*, social media, Key Informant Interviews with 20 lecturers (10 males and 10 females). WhatsApp interviews were held with 30 (16 males and 14 females) purposively sampled final semester Religious Studies class in an undergraduate programme. In addition, participant observation of lockdown educational challenges such as 'home schooling' took place (Greenwalt 2016). Documentary analysis of print and electronic media such as institutional circulars and those from the Ministry of Health on COVID-19 was also utilised.

A case study of one HEIZ's School of Education was adopted. Though the meaning of case study is slippery and cannot be universalised, it is justifiably understood as a qualitative research method. A case study refers to research that investigates one case or a few cases, in considerable depth. Qualitative research, specifically the case study method, has been criticised in that its results cannot be replicated or generalized and universalised as in physical sciences. Indeed, it is impossible to produce 'Newton-like' generalisations from a complex social process of human action that is constructed and not caused as what is obtained in a case study method, which is also context dependent. Essentially, the aim of case studies 'is to explain patterns that exist, not to discover general laws of human behaviour' (Schofield 1995:70). In the current research, the case study approach is helpful in capturing unique dynamics of how the selected HEIZ operates under the shadow and challenges of COVID-19 in Zimbabwe. Through MMR, data were both qualitatively and quantitatively presented and analysed.

COVID-19 Crisis: A Historical Overview

First identified in Wuhan, China in December 2019, COVID-19 was declared a public health concern by the World Health Organization on 11 March 2020, because this viral disease had reached alarming levels in terms of its spread and severity, given that many people were infected, whilst others died. Due to an alarming spread of the pandemic, nations responded by putting prevention and control measures in place to reduce the spreading of the disease. These include physical distancing, quarantine, and personal hygiene, which also affected schools and HEIs' closures. Some nations, including Zimbabwe, came up with different positions during the lockdown period as intervention measures for teaching and learning. The interventions in HEIs call for a closer look into their implications for African countries whose levels of investment in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) are diametrically different.

COVID-19 Crisis and its Impact on Higher Education

Msila (2015:1973) cogently asserts that 'throughout the world, there have been efforts to transform the 21st century classrooms by introducing digital technology'. With the advent of the COVID-19 crisis, teaching, learning and

research in schools and at institutions of higher learning have been affected, but at the same time they are set to be transformed through online models such as Google Classroom, WhatsApp, Email, and video conference platforms, among other modes of e-learning. While each level of education faces its unique challenges, it is the higher education segment that may end up, by necessity, triggering a learning revolution (Kandri 2020). Writing from a Chinese context, Zhang (2020:n.p.) observes that the 'recent unique online education shock provides a great opportunity for every member of faculty and every student to experience online teaching and learning in their formal courses'. Along the same lines, Van Breda and Van Wyk (2018:45) concur by asserting that if the higher education sector is to be relevant and compatible in the context of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, universities must commit to the process of continuous change, or become redundant. This is relevant for the Zimbabwean higher education context. The questions that arise include: How far can online education change the education paradigm in Africa? How prepared are African governments and institutions to implement online educational transformation at this juncture? Is online teaching and learning qualitatively different from the traditional campus-based face-to-face teaching in Africa? Notably, although, at the turn of the new millennium, nations were plunged into the Age of Information Society and expected to go 'Beyond Y2K compliance' (Sibanda & Maposa 2010), there was a high degree of misplaced priorities by most postcolonial African states that failed to invest aggressively in healthcare facilities and in Information Communication Technology useful for developing a fully-fledged, new online educational paradigm. Notably, there is general agreement that the use of technology in education is here to stay (Sela 2018). Nevertheless, institutions of higher learning must grapple with issues of unreliable power supply, internet speed and robustness of software, and students with learning difficulties. This requires scholarly interrogation. Essentially, what is the role of Higher Education in mitigating the impact of COVID-19 in Africa? These are some of the puzzling questions this study grapples with.

Literature has it that technology use increases student motivation (Friedman & Friedman 2013) and assists in raising the institution's prestige as modern, innovative and promoting 21st-century skills (Pundak 2014). Nevertheless, for this to work out, lecturers must be available online as much as possible via Emails, phone calls, WhatsApp, Google Classroom, and video conferencing to provide students with a 'safety net' of advice and support,

making sure they do not feel lost in this 'brave new world' of online learning, which can be perceived as 'strange, isolating, alienating and frightening' (Sela 2018:74). Further complicating the issue is the observation which states that 'Today's new generation of tech-savvy students deserves teachers who can competently integrate technology into all content areas' (Lacina, Mathews & Nutt 2011:149; Sela 2018:77). This is a critical observation, considering that the techno-phobic old generation, to which most lecturers belong, has a condescending attitude towards online teaching and learning. Unlike in some of the African countries, the majority of academic leaders in the Global North feel that online learning is critical for their institutions' long-term strategies, and that learning outcomes in online education are the same or superior to those of face-to-face instruction (Sela 2018). While this is true, Russell (1999) and Sela (2018:73) posit that there is no significant difference in quality between face-to-face and online courses, popularly known as the 'no significant difference phenomenon'.

Programme Delivery and Assessment Interventions: The Case of One University in Zimbabwe

Since COVID-19 has hit the world, it is no longer business as usual. The pandemic is a gamechanger in all spheres of human life. HE in Zimbabwe was not spared either. On 24 March 2020, all institutions of learning in Zimbabwe were closed to observe the restrictions such as social distancing, a recommended intervention measure for the prevention and control of COVID-19. The closure of learning institutions was followed by a three-week national lockdown starting on 30 March 2020. This came barely few weeks after institutions of HE in Zimbabwe had opened for their first semester of the year. University administrations nationwide had to ensure that teaching and learning continued off-campus. What this entailed was that universities had to come up with measures that simultaneously ensured that teaching and learning are minimally disturbed and the social distancing, isolation and stay-at-home mantra are religiously and judiciously followed to the spirit and letter. The advent of the coronavirus (COVID-19) in the country constitutes an increasing institutional contextual pressure for change in programme delivery and assessment in HE. The real challenge lies in that higher education institutions in Zimbabwe had started their academic year and students were on campus. The over-reliance on the traditional face-to-face (Wiesenberg & Stacey 2005)

modes of programme delivery and assessment has been challenged and will soon disappear or operate side by side with online teaching through blended teaching and learning. This calls for universities to adapt by choosing the right technologies and approaches for educating and engaging the learners (Kandri 2020). It has to be asked: Are the HE institutions ready for the blended mode or the full throttle, online teaching and learning system in Zimbabwe? This is the herculean task that institutions of HE in Zimbabwe must contend with. It is against this backdrop that this section of the chapter discusses the findings of the study at one institution of higher education in Zimbabwe.

Results and Discussion

At this campus-based institution of HE under study, the following platforms were made available to both lecturers and students to continue the teaching and learning off-campus. In Table 1, we present the frequency use of each platform by students and lecturers, and in Table 2, the best/most effective platform, according to the lecturers, as the institution is shifting to online teaching and learning. Table 1 pertains to information gathered through documentary analysis provided by lecturers in the HEIZ's School of Education undergraduate programme. The findings were broadly analysed under the frequency of the selected teaching and learning platform and the lecturers' ratings of the platforms are indicated below.

Table 1: The frequency use of the platform by students as provided by lecturers

Selected teaching and learning platform	Number of students using it	Number of students not using it	Total
Google Classroom	56 (28%)	144 (72%)	200 (100%)
WhatsApp	150 (75%)	50 (25%)	200 (100%)
Email	170 (85%)	30 (15%)	200 (100%)

As shown on Table 1, the email platform (85%) was frequently used

by students, followed by WhatsApp (75%), with Google Classroom (28%) being the least. The implication is that the email platform was widely used not as a platform to have lectures but as a mode of submitting assignments to the respective lecturers. This illustrates that the email platform was used for both programme delivery and assessment. Through this the lecturers sent the respective module content in a variety of forms such as Word and portable document format (pdf). The lecturers received student assignments by email and gave feedback to the learners in terms of content and raw marks obtained by learners. Most students 20 (66.7%) indicated that the email platform was not only reliable, but efficient to deal with large volumes of material being transmitted between lecturers and students. The remaining students 10 (33.3%), especially rural students, cited a lack of Internet services as a major setback to this model. They stated that although they relied on urban friends to send assignments and receive reading material and feedback from lecturers through the student-student WhatsApp platforms, at times it involved delays in either sending the assignments or receiving the reading material and the lecturer feedback. Some lecturer interviewees confirmed this arrangement when they received a student's assignment through another student's email address. This explains why the email platform handled the largest volume of student assignments. There are challenges associated with this. It is difficult to ascertain whether a student's assignment submitted through a friend's email is the student's original work or if it is plagiarised and fabricated work. In other words, it is open to abuse, as someone can write the assignment and submit it as another student's assignment. This does not only raise eyebrows on the practice, but also compromises the quality of the graduate at the end of the process. Leary (2007) is instructive when he argues that new technologies often bring new problems and complications to an already challenging working environment. The COVID-19 pandemic has forced lecturers and students alike to adopt new ways of teaching and learning, but notwithstanding, that the new ways are problematic as well. There is a need, therefore, for lecturers to quickly find a solution to avoid a dip into the quality of education they provide (Kandri 2020).

Some of the lecturers involved in the teaching of the undergraduate programme at the HEIZ under study indicated the difficulties of using the email platform for lecture delivery and student work assessment. One major impediment was that not all students were reachable. They also indicated that the large classes they had made it extremely difficult to use the platform. Using

an email platform for a class of 300 students in the undergraduate programme was not only ambitious, but also difficult to implement. Nyamupangedengu's (2017) findings, from a South African context, were that large classes and heavy loads impacted negatively on the use of certain teaching methods. The lecturers also cited the difficulties encountered with Internet access due to lockdown. They could not access their workplaces for Internet services. Using their mobile phones was again expensive, with no adequate assistance from the University through a subsidy of data bundles. While in this study the email was possible for assignment submission for assessment, lecturers found it difficult to access by assignments, let alone use it for teaching purposes.

Second on the frequency radar was the WhatsApp platform that accounted for 75%. On the part of students, the platform was comparably accessible with 25 (83.3%) of the student participants indicating that the WhatsApp platform was not only efficient but convenient, accessible and comparably affordable for both rural and urban students. The platform was largely utilised for Word, portable document format (pdf) voice notes, voice explanations and short message services (SMS), just to mention a few by both learners and lecturers in the said undergraduate programme. The students were on the created WhatsApp groups, but had challenges with buying data bundles to utilise the platform. Some had mobile network connectivity challenges as they had to be on top of a mountain to get connectivity, especially those who reside in the remote areas of the countryside. While the lecturers indicated high WhatsApp students presence percentages, the platform could not be wholly depended upon, as students had challenges to connect, buy data bundles and keep their phones charged in the rural areas. These shortcomings indicate that although technology-enhanced teaching, and learning methodologies are becoming common in a university learning environment (Govender 2015), COVID-19 induced off-campus teaching and learning in this pilot one university case was a herculean undertaking. The interviewed lecturers indicated that some lecturers struggled to maintain the same depth of engagement with students they could have in a classroom setting.

Least on the frequency continuum was the Google Classroom (28%). Notably, the Google Classroom was selected administratively, as noted through the HEIZ's circulars distributed to members of staff and students during COVID-19-induced shutdowns. The HEIZ made hurried attempts to train the academic staff and learners to navigate through the Google Classroom, as it was shutting its on-campus teaching and learning doors.

Ordinarily the Google Classroom enables a lecturer to communicate with his or her class through creating, sending, receiving, marking, returning, recording assignments, conferencing with students, and creating videos, among other advantages (Machingura 2020). Few students 9 (30%) indicated that using the Google Classroom platform was not only motivating, but also enabled them to be technologically savvy enough to navigate new platforms. The lecturer participants also indicated that, despite the short time for training, the platform was an eye-opener and 'first-aid' solution for switching from in-person to remote instruction, a move that has been forced upon them by the sudden mandatory campus closure. Kandri (2020) concurs by stating that in a painful and stressful time like this a rebirth of the education systems is experienced.

The challenges cited under the WhatsApp and Email platform were equally overwhelmingly mentioned here as well. The students' challenges were summarised by one student who stated as follows:

> This was a nightmare for most of us. Apart from the common challenges experienced with other platforms, this one is a big challenge. Few students are unable not only to access it but to navigate through it. We are not even sure whether our lecturers are competent enough on this as well.

There are two aspects that are important to note from the student's utterance above. The first one is that the students were not adequately trained and did not know how to utilise the platform. This was confirmed by the lecturers who indicated that despite inviting students to join the class on Google Classroom, few, and in some instances none, did so. The second aspect that also transpires is that lecturers were not forthcoming in assisting students to access and utilise the platform. This could be either that the lecturers were also not conversant with the platform, or they simply did not want to use it. The lack of interest in the use of the platform by the lecturers could be explained by Govender's (2015) observation that lecturers who have been in the academic environment for a long time and have achieved great success in traditional classroom-based teaching are not keen to change. While the use of video-conferencing platforms like Zoom and Webex offer universities a lifeline worldwide, more so in the context of the COVID-19 crisis, this comes as a huge challenge to nations and institutions of higher learning in the Global South where the said apps are not only inaccessible but the lecturers, who are supposed to be in the forefront of

utilising them, are not 'technologically savvy' (Kandri 2020). The new ways of doing things could be threatening to them. This resonates with Msila's (2015:1973) study on teacher readiness about the use of ICT in South African classrooms where he observes that the 'younger teachers were more tolerant of the changes than their older counterparts who found the introduction of ICT daunting'.

Table 2: The best/ most effective platform according to the lecturers

Selected teaching and learning platform	**←Best/Most effective Worst/Least effective**					**Total**
	1 No. (%)	**2 No. (%)**	**3 No. (%)**	**4 No. (%)**	**5 No. (%)**	**No. (%)**
1.Google Classroom	15 (75)	3 (15)	2 (10)			20 (100)
2.WhatsApp	10 (50)	4 (20)	3 (15)	2 (10)	1 (5)	20 (100)
3. Email	8 (40)	7 (35)	3 (15)	2 (10)		20 (100)

From Table 2, the Google Classroom was believed to be the best/ most effective model for teaching and learning, followed by the WhatsApp and the Email platforms, respectively. This is illustrated by 15 (75%) of the lecturer participants rating Google Classroom the best/most effective, followed by 10 (50%) rating WhatsApp, and with 8 (40%) rating Email (1), respectively. These findings imply that the lecturers preferred the use of the Google Classroom over other e-learning platforms. Even if that was the case, the percentage (75%) is relatively low, given the fact that this platform was meant to make off-campus teaching and learning effective and efficient. While some lecturers indicated that they had received prior training before usage, others complained that the training was rushed and not adequate. One anonymous lecturer stated:

> Yes, the platform could ease the teaching and learning off-campus but

> is confronted by a number of challenges like any other online platform. While we appreciate the quick and timeous intervention offered by the University, we still feel more still needs to be done. There is still a need to train staff on its usage for programme delivery and assessment. As it stands those who can use the platform are only able to teach using it but when it comes to assessment more needs to be done. This is why you could see a few students on Google Classroom but more traffic on email when students submit assignments. This blended approach is fine but like observed earlier on we have more challenges than opportunities as it stands. There is need for further consultations and deliberations.

It is evident from the excerpt above that the university under study did what was possible, given the circumstances COVID-19 ushered in. While the lecturer was not pessimistic, she was very clear that more efforts had to be made. The success of the platform requires lecturers, students and the university authorities' holistic approach. For example, one lecturer indicated that although he was willing to use the platform, no provision was made for the necessary requirements such as access to the Internet on the part of the lecturers, as they worked away from their workplace. Lecturers did not have access to their offices for Internet connectivity. He proposed that the university could have planned to have few lecturers per day, one in an office, to interact with students. Since he was at home, he had no means to access the Internet, even when students were ready on their side. The literature is clear that institutional commitment and the ability to provide the necessary administrative resources to support online programmes are absolutely critical to programmes' quality and subsequent success (Brown 2002; Caffarella & Zinn 1999; Carliner 2002; Gallant 2000; Pajo & Wallace 2001; Stacey & Wiesenberg 2002; 2004). The lecturers preferred the platform, but wanted the necessary supporting mechanisms to be put in place such as provision of data bundles and the acquisition of laptop models with efficient processors.

The second-most preferred platform was WhatsApp. Lecturers indicated that since most students were not on Google Classroom, they could use the WhatsApp platform for providing students, in one group, with reading material and tasks to do. They argued that this was an easier platform to interact with students, where social presence, the ability to perceive the presence of others in an online milieu, was achieved alonside its impact on the motivation

and participation of the learners (Gorsky & Blau 2009). However, like the challenges encountered with other platforms, receiving large volumes of assignments was time consuming and needed more data bundles for lecturers who did not have Internet access at home. On email, the lecturers were willing, but students had no capacity to utilise the platform due to the factors already cited above. This leaves the Google Classroom the most/best preferred platform whose usage is friendly to lecturers, but inaccessible to most students.

At the Deep End of Online Education? Critical Reflections

Indications from the findings of the study were that several students and staff were thrown in at the deep end of online education due to the inaccessibility of e-learning platforms. Some of the students were reluctant to accept change readily. They were stuck with their old face-to-face instruction and old comfort zones, despite the fact that the world is geared towards embracing ICT-based learning platforms. This resonates with Ferrante's (2020) observation that 'whether students, teachers, or professors are ready or not, online education is here. Many students do not consider themselves 'online learners' and are being forced to deal with this new reality of remote classes'. Along the same lines, the study established that some lecturers at the specific HEIZ also had challenges with shifting to online teaching. This is further confirmed by Ferrante (2020) who states:

> Many universities were not prepared to be teaching thousands of professors how to completely shift their material to remote access. Universities were also not prepared for the lack of knowledge that many professors have about navigating remote learning resources such as Blackboard, Moodle, Zoom, and Google Meet. Some professors still have trouble sending a mass email to their students, so students are rightfully skeptical of their professors' ability to successfully navigate an online lecture. This is not all professors, but many professors are struggling with some aspect of this alternative way of teaching.

In this manner, universities, lecturers and students are not ready and fully capacitated for e-learning. The sudden inevitable demands for online teaching and learning has caused panic amongst both students and lecturers. The

sentiments of students were expressed through student bodies and captured in the study through Documentary Analysis. For instance, the Zimbabwe National Students Union (ZINASU) criticised the move by some universities to introduce e-learning during the lockdown as unaffordable, impractical and elitist, realising that Zimbabwe has some of the continent's most expensive mobile data tariffs. In addition, the president of the student command of the Economic Freedom Fighters-Zimbabwe, has 'berated Great Zimbabwe University for using 'Google class' and the Midlands State University for adopting WhatsApp to conduct lessons, describing the new methods as elitist' (Mukeredzi, Kokutse & Dell 2020). This shows that inasmuch as the COVID-19 crisis is an opportunity to try out online higher education in most countries (Zhang 2020), it was attacked as widening the gap between rich and poor, the rural and the urban, the technologically savvy and the techno-phobic, the able-bodied and those with disabilities.

The lecturer participants' views, where they bemoaned lack of support, indicated that administrators at the one HEIZ under study were equally in a quandary. The study has shown that although the specific HEIZ's administration had to respond quickly to the COVID-19 crisis in the best possible way, findings were that the university's administration had not adequately invested in e-learning platforms, as it had not been in tandem with global trends where, even before the pandemic, many universities saw a decline in enrolment for campus-based programmes and parallel increases in the uptake of their online courses (Kadri 2020). Traditionally, the administrators dismissed e-learning as expensive and time-consuming to implement, contrary to Friedman and Friedman's (2013) submission that online education enables academic institutions to economise. At this one HEIZ, most staff were not technologically savvy because they did not prioritise e-learning, e-commerce and e-business. In fact, some of the meetings that administrators travelled to attend could have been done online, with resulting savings for developing ICT facilities. They are now beginning to realise when the rains began to beat them at a time when resources are depleted. Just as what obtained at this one HEI, many Zimbabwean universities have consistently underfunded online education, which exposed the ugly side of this current crisis. In the past, administrators were lackadaisical about moving class content online, claiming that the transition would be too expensive, take too much time, and require too much extra training for educators (Ferrante 2020).

In terms of curriculum, the HEIs in Zimbabwe were tasked to review

the content, teaching and assessment methodologies in line with Education 5.0, which emphasises the need to inculcate skills that would produce relevant goods and services. This Education 5.0 is a reincarnation of the philosophy of Education with Production, introduced in schools soon after independence (Zvobgo 1997:63). Therefore, this new demand for online pedagogy comes at the right time, namely when the HEIs have been asked to transform their curriculums. This is an opportunity that HEIs should capitalise on in order to implement online education. To illustrate how this HEIZ under study, together with other institutions of higher learning in Zimbabwe has been thrown into the deeper end, even at this time of writing the chapter, the institution is still in a quandary about how to assess its third-year undergraduate students who are either on work-related learning, popularly known as attachment, or teaching practice (in the case of teacher-learners).

Conclusion

The chapter discussed how the specific HEIZ used online programme delivery and assessment for a Religious Studies class in the undergraduate programme, School of Education in the context of the COVID-19 crisis. It was revealed that the majority of students used the Email platform to submit assignments for assessment by lecturers while the WhatsApp model was the most popular among students, owing to its accessibility, affordability, convenience and efficiency. The study also determined that the Google Classroom was the best/most preferred platform by lecturers, but was utilised by the least number of students. It was also found that both students and lecturers had challenges with implementing online teaching and learning with little support from HEIZ's administration.

The study has demonstrated that online education is here to stay and it is high time that all and sundry embrace it, despite the daunting tasks that lay ahead in Zimbabwe and beyond. It is unfortunate that the poor and marginalised students who cannot access Internet facilities are thrown into the deep end by the emergency remote instruction mode of online learning under COVID-19. Both teaching, supportive and administrative staff should either shape up or ship out. Therefore, the findings at this HEIZ are indicative of the greater need for HEIs to put shoulder to the wheel and move with speed in embracing online education. More fundamentally, COVID-19 is challenging deep-rooted notions of when, where and how we deliver education, the role of

colleges and universities, and the importance of lifelong learning. The COVID-19 crisis has struck our education system like a lightning bolt and shaken it to its core. Nakayiwa (2020) posits in a Ugandan context that

> the adoption of ICT in learning, curriculum review and in the delivery of higher education programmes […] is still a long way off, or maybe this is the time to reflect on how it can be mainstreamed in the offering of degree programmes.

We can conclude with the observation that just as the First Industrial Revolution forged today's system of education we can expect a different kind of educational model to emerge from COVID-19.

In light of the foregoing conclusion, in the context of the COVID-19 crisis and other future disasters, the study makes the following recommendations:

- Given that e-learning, in the context of COVID-19, is fast becoming the 'new normal'; the administrators at HEIZ should urgently support online teaching and learning by providing adequate resources and infrastructure for both lecturers and students.
- Lecturers, students and administrators are encouraged to embrace online teaching-learning and assessment by experimenting with what Msila (2013) calls the 'Open Book Examinations' assessment model meant to nurture critical thinking in students.
- The e-Portfolio assessment approach should be adopted as an alternative form of student assessment, especially for students on work-related learning and teaching practice.

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Fortune Sibanda
Associate Professor
Department of Philosophy &Religious Studies
Great Zimbabwe University
Masvingo
Email: fsibanda@gzu.ac.zw

Tenson Muyambo
Lecturer
Department of Teacher Development
Great Zimbabwe University
Masvingo
tmuyambo@gzu.ac.zw