

Academic Challenges faced by Students in Higher Education during COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: This research examines academic challenges faced by students in Higher Education during COVID-19 pandemic. The population of the study consisted of undergraduates, postgraduates and lecturers in selected universities in Uganda. The researchers adopted qualitative approach which involved the use of questionnaire and interview. 120 students and 10 lecturers participated in the study. Questionnaires using a 5 point Likert-scale were administered to all 120 respondents while interviews were conducted with 5 undergraduates, 5 postgraduates and 10 lecturers. Data analyses indicated seven main academic challenges faced by students in higher education during COVID-19 pandemic namely: lack of e-learning facilities, financial constrain, Conducive environment, teachers attitude, learning new skills, lack of interest and stress and anxiety. Based on the findings, there is need for adjustment requiring all tiers of education to respond to a new and evolving strategy in order to have a continuous flow in education process, making education accessible, affordable, anytime and anywhere, mitigating and restraining the effects of any gaps created by any form of disruption in education system.

Key Words: COVID-19, Coronavirus, Pandemic, Outbreak, lockdown, Higher Education, E-learning, Academic Challenges, Students.

I. INTRODUCTION

WHO declared the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) outbreak, caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), to be a pandemic on March 12, 2020 (Prof Russell M Viner, PhD. et al. 2020). In response to the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, many countries issued national lockdown and school closure. 107 countries had implemented national school closures by March 18, 2020 (Prof Russell M Viner, PhD. et al. 2020). National lockdown and closures of schools are one of the control measures to contain COVID-19 Infection. COVID-19 pandemic completely disrupts the lives of many children, their parents, and teachers. A lot can be done to at least reduce the impact through remote learning strategies. E-learning can help in the achievement of intended objectives in the teaching and learning environment and higher educations are ready to move teaching and learning online to preserve and continue its educational mission during the current pandemic (D. Christopher Brooks and Susan Grajek 2020).

Most institutions around the world have started exploring the e-learning approach in response to COVID-19. E-learning is one of the most outstanding educational innovations that offer learners an alternative and innovative learning environment

through different platforms (Eze, S.C., Chinedu-Eze, V.C. & Bello, A.O. 2018). “Higher education institutions (HEIs) have embarked on rigorous programs that promote the use of ICTs for effective contact and online teaching and learning and for developing cognate skills needed to make socio-economic contributions in the knowledge world” (Eze, S.C., Chinedu-Eze, V.C. & Bello, A.O. 2018). Further studies (Keramati et al., 2011; Bhuasiri et al., 2012; Chen and Tseng, 2012; Ahmed, 2010; Hu and Hui, 2012, cited in Eze S.C. et al, 2018) show that e-learning has been adoption by vast number of HEIs.

However, several studies (e.g. Munezero, M. et. al (2016), Moakofhi Moakofhi et al (2017) and Afolabi Olaitan O. & Uhomoibhi James (2020)) have shown a low rate of adoption and implementation of e-learning in HEIs in developing countries. Majority of HEIs in developing countries has not adopted and implemented e-learning (Munezero, M. et al(2016), Moakofhi Moakofhi et al(2017) and Afolabi Olaitan O. & Uhomoibhi James (2020)). In view of this, the researchers wanted to identify academic challenges that may be encountered by students in higher education during COVID-19 pandemic

II. RESEARCH METHOD

The study adopted a qualitative approach to collect data of academic challenges faced by students in higher education during COVID-19 pandemic. The very strength of qualitative discourse is its exploratory nature. In this study, the researcher used open ended questions in the questionnaire and interview questions to collect data. 120 students and 10 lecturers participated in the study. Questionnaires using a 5 point Likert-scale were administered to all 120 students while interviews were conducted with 5 undergraduates, 5 postgraduate and 10 lecturers.

III. FINDINGS

The data was collected using open-ended questions and interview. The answers provided by respondents (Table 1) indicated that there were seven main academic challenges faced by students in higher education during COVID-19 pandemic, namely: lack of e-learning facilities, financial constrain, Conducive environment, teachers attitude, learning new skills, lack of interest and stress and anxiety. However, a total of 9 students (6.92%) out of the 130 participants stated that they had no major academic challenges during COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 1: Main Academic Challenges faced by students in Higher Education during COVID-19 Pandemic

Main Academic Challenges	Frequency	Percentage
Lack of E-learning Facilities	42	32.31
Financial Constraint	24	18.46
Conducive Environment	19	14.62
Teachers Attitude	16	12.31
Learning New Skills	10	7.69
Lack of Interest	6	4.61
Stress and Anxiety	4	3.08
No Problem	9	6.92
Total	130	100.00

Lack of e-learning Facilities

Lack of e-learning Facilities is the most serious challenges faced by most of the students in higher education during COVID-19 pandemic. A total of 42 students (32.31%) pointed out that Lack of e-learning facilities is their problem. Based on the questionnaires response, most of the students stated their challenges as follows:

- No computer in my home
- I don't have smart phone
- We don't have (Constant) power supply (electricity) in my village
- The Internet network in my village is not stable

Three students interviewed stated that they are having difficulty accessing the internet. According to the students, Internet connectivity is unstable in their locality and sometimes unavailable. Most of the students complained that computers were expensive and beyond their reach. Some lecturers interviewed confirm that lack of e-learning facilities is a major academic challenges faced by students in higher education during COVID-19. The availability of e-learning facilities such as computers, Internet access, and constant power supply is essential for the effective utilization of e-learning since this mode of pedagogy is computer-based.

Financial Constrain

Most of the students complained that they cannot afford to buy data during this lockdown, therefore, ranked it the second most serious challenge. A total of 24 students (18.46%) assert that they lack money to buy data. One of the lecturers interviewed stated that we have to look into the issue of buying data at this situation of lockdown. One of the student interviewed stated that the issue of data is a big problem in this lockdown because all business are closed and there is no sources of income. Financial constraint restricted the students from learning during the lockdown. One of the lecturer interviewed agreed with this statement. According to this lecturer who taught mostly postgraduate students, said his students were struggling to buy data.

Conducive environment

A total of 19 students (14.62) claim that their homes were not providing the conditions for learning. One of the student interviewed stated that home was noisy during COVID-19 pandemic because the kids were also at home. A female student interviewed stated that she have to attend to the needs of the children at home especially related with the remote school activities plus cooking and cleaning the house. According to the students, it becomes challenging trying to get focus with her own academic works.

Teachers Attitude

Students ranked the problem of teacher's attitude the fourth most serious academic challenge affecting them during COVID-19 pandemic. A total of sixteen students (12.31%) pointed out teacher's attitude as the academic challenge faced during COVID-19 pandemic. One of the student interviewed stated that "it is the mass amount of tasks given by the lecturers that are challenging". He said that classes held inside the classroom are still better compared to the home arrangement where tasks and assignments are piled up at the same time. Some lecturers do not show sincere sensitivity to the students' differences and are not motivated to provide meaningful learning experiences for all students.

Learning New skills

Ten students (7.69%) pointed out this problem. One of the students stated: "I think to learn something new in a situation that's an emergency is very difficult. Imagine we were told a year ago 'in a year we'll have a pandemic and you must learn to study online', well then I guarantee that we will be comfortable with learning online. Now, we have to learn in a much more stressful situation." Two of the students interviewed suggested that they would rather have a better well informed ahead of time to learn the skills needed for e-learning platforms.

Lack of Interest

Six students (4.61%) stated that they don't have interest in academics during this lockdown. Few students viewed learning during COVID-19 pandemic negatively.

Stress and Anxiety

Even though only four students (3.08%) stated this challenge, academic concerns may result from mental health issues, such as stress and anxiety. Two students interviewed stated that lockdown makes them feel frustrated and worried.

IV. DISCUSSION

The findings have shown significant result obtained from the open-ended section in the questionnaires and interviews. The students of higher education expressed that they had to face several challenges in their academic due to COVID-19. Most students are undergoing adjustments in recent events. Some are dealing with stress and anxiety over the uncertainty of things. Some have families that have been heavily impacted

by the COVID pandemic where their livelihood and day-to-day subsistence are a problem. Some have moved to localities where there is no internet access. Some do not have computer in their homes. Some of the students are not used to e-learning and it becomes challenging learning new skills in intense situation. Some students who may experience violence or other issues in their home and rely on school as an escape from abuse are now confined to that space. Some students lack interest in academics during the lockdown. The participants felt that they were having academic challenges during COVID-19 in the following areas: lack of e-learning facilities, financial constrain, Conducive environment, teachers attitude, learning new skills, lack of interest and stress and anxiety. A total of 32.31% of the participants highlighted the issue of lack of e-learning facilities as the academic challenges faced during COVID-19. Several studies (e.g. Andersson 2008; Rana & Lal 2014; Tarus et al. 2015; Pani et al. 2015; Munezero et al. 2016 cited in Moakofhi Moakofhi 2017) have shown that implementing e-learning systems in higher education institutions in developing countries has not always been successful; this is due to many challenges, mainly lack of e-learning facilities such as computer, electricity and adequate internet access. On the other hand, 18.46% claimed that financial constrain is their major academic challenge during COVID-19 pandemic. According to Qureshi et al. (2012), financial capacity is one of the factors impeding the implementation of e-learning in developing countries. 14.62% indicated that their home did not provide conducive atmosphere for learning. 12.31% claim that lecturers put up uncooperative behaviour during the COVID-19 pandemic. Two students interviewed said lecturers were not ready for teaching during COVID-19 pandemic. 7.69% were in the point of view that learning new concept were their academic challenges during COVID-19 pandemic. According to Moakofhi Moakofhi et al. (2017), lack of appropriate computer skills is one of the challenges that impede effective implementation of e-learning. Moreover, a few students had described that there challenges were lack of interest (4.61%) and stress and anxiety (3.08%). Academic concerns may result from mental health issues, such as anxiety caused by continues fear of COVID-19 impact on the society.

V. CONCLUSION

Evidence from the study suggests that student's in higher education were having academic challenges during COVID-19 pandemic in the following area: lack of e-learning facilities, financial constrain, Conducive environment, teachers attitude, learning new skills, lack of interest and stress and anxiety. Students need assistance to overcome difficulties. Governments and HEIs should have plan in place for students who need extra support. It's important that people have access to digital literacy programs, e-books and online learning. There should be provision of enhanced digital and connectivity services by expanding Wi-Fi capabilities, offering community digital literacy training and enhancing online library programs. Based on the findings, there is need for adjustment requiring all tiers of education to respond to a new and evolving strategy in order to have a continuous flow in education process, making education accessible, affordable, anytime and anywhere, mitigating and restraining the effects of any gaps created by any form of disruption in education system.

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