

The Impact of COVID-19-Induced Crisis on Rural Zimbabwe: A Case Study of Selected University Students' Perceptions

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ABSTRACT

The outbreak of the novel Corona virus disease (COVID-19) in late 2019 in Wuhan, China, had a serious impact on people's lives, especially on students residing in rural Zimbabwe who were sitting examinations at the end of 2020. In order to curtail the spread of COVID-19, governments across the world instituted lockdowns. When positive cases rose exponentially in Zimbabwe, the government imposed a national lockdown for an indefinite period, from 30th April 2020, restricting movement within the country. Universities found themselves in a crisis as time went by without meaningful lecturer-student interaction. As a result, they resorted to using online platforms, particularly Google Classroom and WhatsApp, in order to reach out to their learners. This qualitative study was a case study in its design and twelve students were sampled using the convenience sampling technique for semi-structured interviews and twenty respondents to complete semi-structured questionnaires. The study revealed that students were so poor that they could hardly afford buying gadgets such as laptops and smart phones. Some students also bemoaned that, even if they could afford, they found it difficult to operate the gadgets. Furthermore, other students observed that they experienced Internet connectivity challenges which would require that they travelled to places far away from where they lived. The study recommends that the Government considers uplifting the lives of the rural students and the general rural populace by attending to connectivity issues and rural electrification as priorities that would culminate in bridging the digital divide between the rural and urban population.

Keywords: COVID-19, digital divide, online platforms, restrictions, rural electrification

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1. Introduction

COVID-19 (C19) has had a significant impact on many sectors across the world. It has resulted in the need for people to look at new ways of life. It is no longer business as usual as could have been the case if the pandemic had not ravaged the world as it did from late 2019 to date. Originally detected in Wuhan, China, as Corona Virus Disease in 2019 (hence the acronym COVID-19), the disease has killed several hundreds of thousands of people. It led to prolonged lockdowns in many countries across the world; the rich and the poor suffered the vagaries of this pandemic. This situation had serious ramifications on all sectors of the economy and education was no exception. Schools closed the world over. A survey carried out across Africa reveals that "There has been widespread school closure across Africa in response to the pandemic and 97% of respondents reported school closures in their countries, and 95% of these noted [that] all schools had been forced to close" (guninetwork.org/files/the_effect_of_covid-19_on_education_in_africa.pdf). The situation was exacerbated by the fact that most countries were ill-prepared for a pandemic of this magnitude. As a Third World country, Zimbabwe was also severely hit, especially university students with a rural background.

In response to the pandemic, the Government of Zimbabwe closed schools across the country for a prolonged period, from 30 March 2020 to May 2021. This implies that students had limited contact, if any, with either their teachers or their classmates. In general, this had serious repercussions, even when we consider that, in this study, the researcher refers to university students who are supposedly mature enough to be able to handle educational issues in a better way than those at primary and secondary levels. The irony of it is that they cannot because of reasons that this study sought to investigate.

Now that the pandemic is almost gone due to vaccines and other mitigating measures put in place to ameliorate the situation, schools in Zimbabwe and elsewhere have adopted what is termed ‘hybrid’ or blended teaching; a learning approach whereby there is interplay of face-to-face and online interaction. It is pertinent to pause and ask the question: “How is a student with a rural background coping with the new-normal way (learning through technology) of teaching and learning?”

2. Review of Related Literature

From the outset, it should be stated that available literature acknowledges that there are both gains and pitfalls in the use of technology in any situation. According to UNESCO (2021, p. 6), “Even though distance education has enabled the continuity of academic activities, this teaching modality could have severe implications for equity.” Many schools across the world closed as a result of the severe impact of COVID-19. Dang et al. (2021, p. 2) observe that “The COVID-19 pandemic has wreaked havoc upon global learning, with many countries facing severe disruptions and closures.” Technology implies the widespread use of an array of electronic communication modes, which include online platforms that have become part and parcel of teaching and learning in the contemporary world. As such, Tynan et al. (2013, p.320) posit that “Electronic communication brings an array of potential pitfalls as well as benefits, and business people need to understand how best to manage both the positives and negatives associated with new forms of communication.”

Schleicher (2020, p. 4) posits that “This crisis has exposed the many inadequacies and inequities in our education system – from access to the broadband and computers for online education and the supportive environments needed to focus on learning.” From a study carried out in six sub-Saharan African countries (Nigeria, Mali, Malawi, Burkina Faso, Uganda and Ethiopia), Dang et al. (2021, p.2) aver that “An emerging literature based on household data points to the pandemic as having exacerbated inequalities in education and learning in countries from Italy to Denmark, the United Kingdom and the United States.” If such countries were affected thus, it should be emphasised that Zimbabwe is a developing country and some sectors like education remain underfunded; the Government can hardly afford to assist students acquire the requisite infrastructure for them to be able to operate on virtual platforms. This situation appears to be worse in rural areas which tend to remain marginalised. Schleicher (2020, p. 4) further argues that “In particular, learners in the most marginalised groups, who don’t have access to digital learning resources or lack the resilience and engagement to learn on their own, are at risk of falling behind.” UNESCO (2021, p.6) also reports that “The crisis caused by the pandemic disproportionately affects the most vulnerable students [who] usually have fewer digital competencies, making it more difficult for them to adapt to the online modality.” In light of these observations, this study sought to investigate rural students’ perceptions on the impact of the COVID-19-induced crisis on their learning. This was at the backdrop of some studies cited herein which were carried out in countries whose economies are far better than the Zimbabwean and the researcher thought it was prudent to consider the marginalised in the matrix of university education.

It is indisputable that distance learning is gradually but surely becoming the norm. However, one of the most striking observations that had a significant influence on this study was that “A lack of access to technology is considered to be the biggest barrier for learning during the current pandemic together with school closures. Respondents felt that learners in rural communities are those most likely to be disadvantaged” (guninetwork.org/files/the_effect_of_covid-19_on_education_in_africa.pdf). Yet, Chikoko (2021, p.3) says “While it is almost impossible for most of us to keep up with the technological advancement in the modern world, it is equally impossible for us to totally ignore modern technology and still expect to cope with our daily lives, let alone live economically productive and sustainable livelihoods.” Tedesse & Muluye (2020, p.158) say “. . . the lack of infrastructures, computers and internet access is challenging distance learning in developing countries.” UNESCO (2021, p.6) echoes this by saying that, in class videoconferencing, students require access to “technological equipment and a higher capacity for data or bandwidth, which represents a barrier for both low-income students and those living in remote areas with no access to internet.” This is the paradox that shrouds teaching and learning in the contemporary world, with particular reference to marginalised communities.

This irony is associated with a deployment of any new technology, which inevitably throws people into turmoil, sometimes making it difficult for many to cope, especially the poor. This is particularly true when such change is drastic and compelling.

Chikoko (2021, p.6) further argues that “. . . if teachers integrate technology into the classroom, they are most likely to be able to connect with their students. Such connection is capable of providing rich learning experiences which the student can identify with.” Schleicher (2020, p. 10) weighs in saying “To remain relevant, universities will need to reinvent their learning environment so that digitalisation expands and complements student-teacher and other relationships.” It is clear that virtual learning platforms have become the new way of operating in schools and universities. Unfortunately, some students may fail to move with times, consequently falling behind, which could remain the plight of marginalised communities, the majority of whom could be residing in sub-Saharan Africa. From their study, Dang et al. (2021) recommend that policy-makers should focus more on supporting households that are poor, are less educated and reside in rural areas. They further observe that “These vulnerable groups have been hardest hit and are most in need of protection against deepening levels of inequalities caused by the COVID-19 pandemic” (p. 7).

The citations made in this study indicate that inequalities abound, pitting the poor against those with better education and socio-economic standing. However, it should be emphasised that the marginalised, particularly those who live in rural areas in developing countries, are hardest hit. As a result, this study sought to consider the perceptions of university students with a rural background on the impact of COVID-19 on their learning.

3. Main Research Question

How is a university student with a rural background coping with learning in a COVID-19-induced crisis in Zimbabwe?

4. Research Objectives

This study sought to:

1. establish perceptions held by university students with a rural background regarding learning in a COVID-19-induced crisis;

2. assess how university students with a rural background cope with learning in a COVID-19-induced crisis; and
3. determine possible ways that can be administered to ameliorate the situation.

5. Conceptual Framework

This study was based on the concept of the inevitable dominance of technology in the classroom as observed by UNESCO (1996, as cited in Chikoko, 2021, p.1), “. . . in a world increasingly dominated and driven by technology, emphasis must necessarily be placed on ways both to utilise technology in the service of education, and to prepare people to master it for life and work.” The outbreak of COVID-19 and the resultant closure of schools made it imperative for the education sector to embrace technology in order to forge ahead with schedules and programmes that ensured meaningful progress for students. Schleicher (2020, p. 10) attests to this saying “To ensure the continuity of education despite the lockdown, higher education institutions have sought to use technology and offer online classes and learning experiences as a substitute for in-class time.”

According to Dao (2017), in many countries across the world, education systems have undergone considerable reform and education policies have been framed to respond to the forces of globalisation. The COVID-19 pandemic is gradually but surely forcing the world to embrace technology in its many facets and no country can afford not to respond to the new order. In order to keep abreast of the latest trends, the education sector, in Zimbabwe and elsewhere, has already embraced blended learning in order to fulfill its mandate. It is further observed that “In times of crises, distance learning can mitigate the effects of education disruptions and school closures” (UNESCO, 2022). Schleicher (2020, p.4) also argues that “While the educational community have made concerted efforts to maintain learning continuity during this period, children and students have had to rely more on their own resources to continue learning remotely through the Internet, television and radio.” While this can be a reality in well-resourced communities, the same cannot be said about students in rural settings who are poor and lack of requisite infrastructure for effective implementation of digital learning.

6. Statement of the Problem

The researcher observed that towards the due date for submission of assignments, there were several calls by students for the lecturer to give them an extension. Some of these students were conspicuous by their absence on (learning) platforms such as WhatsApp and Google Scholar. This motivated the researcher/lecturer to make follow-ups, intending to find out why they had missed or delayed their schedules. Through both short message service (sms) and WhatsApp, the lecturer booked appointments with the affected students for interviews in an attempt to get to the bottom of the cause for the prevalence of such requests. Also, from personal experience, the researcher observed that in some parts of the country, especially those perceived to be remote, people actually experienced connectivity challenges hence this study sought insights into students’ perceptions into the impact of COVID-19 crisis on teaching and learning for university students living in rural Zimbabwe. There appears to be a paucity of research on the impact of COVID-19 on university students living in remote areas in Zimbabwe. So, this study sought to bridge such a gap.

7. Methodology

Drawing from the interpretivist paradigm, a case study design was adopted, which itself draws from a qualitative approach. Bless et al. (2013) note that qualitative researchers are very interested in the broad concept of context, which entails geographical location in which people live, their family structures, the economic and political worlds in which they live and so on. Without understanding the environment in which people live, it would be difficult to understand those people because the two variables are interrelated and they influence each other. Haradan (2018, p.24), also observes that qualitative research “. . . focuses on words rather than numbers, this type of research observes the world in its natural setting, interpreting situations to understand the meanings that the people make from day to day life.” Creswell, (2007, as cited in Pham, 2018, p. 3) weighs in by saying “Virtually, with interpretivism perspectives, researchers tend to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon and its complexity in its unique context instead of trying to generalize the base of understanding for the whole population.” This study sought to understand better students’ perceptions and experiences regarding the impact of COVID-19 in the context of their rural setting.

As a researcher, my selection of university students residing in rural settings was spurred by the observation that these students generally tended to experience challenges that resulted in non-participation on platforms like Google Classroom and WhatsApp as well as the tendency to miss deadlines for assignments. In worst case scenarios, others were unable to submit the assignments on any of the available online platforms. The research then drew its participants from this pool, that were conveniently sampled as crucial sources of this critical information that appears to suggest that this type of a student was lagging behind their counterparts in other settings. Kothari and Garg (2014) define convenience sampling as a form of non-probability sampling where organisers of the inquiry choose participants on the basis of intellectual interest. The researcher felt that these students were better placed to give their perceptions as they experienced digital learning while at home as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

For this study, the researcher chose those participants who could be reached, were willing to participate and were close at hand. This sampling procedure was also motivated by the belief in qualitative research that participants are writers of their own history as they experience the world around them (Tuli, 2010). Kothari & Garg (2014, p.3) concur that “Through such research [qualitative], we can analyse the various factors which motivate people to behave in a particular manner or which make people like or dislike a particular thing.” Whatever these people like or dislike becomes their history and shapes their way of life. In order to understand this culture, it is imperative to ‘hear’ their stories and try to construct their experiences through interpretation of their narratives, hence the use of semi-structured interviews and semi-structured questionnaires as data-gathering tools for this study.

Patton, (2001 as cited in Chinamasa, 2008, p.141), observes that “The two common and prevailing forms of data collection associated with qualitative inquiry are the interviews and observations.” Tuli (2010, p. 100) also says “Interview, focus group discussion and naturalist observation are the most widely used data gathering methods for researchers using research methodology.”

It is important to note that “The processes of data collection, data analysis, and report writing are not distinct steps in the process – they are interrelated and often go on simultaneously in a research project” (Creswell, 2013, p.182). Content analysis was used to interpret the data and discussions were done in thick narrative form.

7.1. Semi-Structured Questionnaires and Semi-structured Interviews as Data Gathering Instruments

These were the tools that were used to gather data for this study. According to Boyce and Neale (2006, p.3), “In-depth interviews are useful when you want detailed information about a person’s thoughts and behaviors or want to explore new issues in depth.” Boyce and Neale further argue that when choosing interviewees, the interviewer should choose a sample which best represents the diverse stakeholders and their interests. For this study, the researcher felt that students were geographically spaced enough to represent the interests of their various locations as the University prides on open policy that does not discriminate on the basis of any form of background, ethnic or otherwise.

Thirty-two students, who were conveniently sampled for interviews and filling in semi-structured questionnaires for the study, had indicated that they had difficulties in meeting deadlines for submission of assignments and participating on scheduled online lectures either on Google Scholar or on WhatsApp. Upon making inquiries into why they had such difficulties, the researcher discovered that most of them were residing in rural areas, which, in Zimbabwe are ‘naturally’ marginalised. These respondents were targeted because the researcher was teaching them a module that particular semester, so it was convenient to make them participants in the study.

8. Results and Discussion

Through open-ended questionnaires and semi-structured in-depth interviews, this study revealed interesting patterns in the students’ perceptions about the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on teaching and learning at university level. While the former tool provided space for respondents to answer narratively, the latter allowed the researcher to probe deeper so that the participants shed more light on any matters as they arose. The prevalent feeling in the findings, from both tools, was that students living in rural setups were seriously affected by the COVID-19-induced lockdowns due to a number of variables. In this section, the researcher presents and discusses such findings in thematic form.

One of the primary merits of this data collection tool is that “In-depth interviews are flexible in that they can be presented in a number of ways-there is no specific format to follow” (Boyce and Peale, 2006, p.8). Therefore, the research chose the presentation as given below.

8.1. Perceptions on Infrastructure

Respondents’ perceptions were that infrastructure tended to have an impact on teaching and learning during the pandemic. The researcher gave students pseudonyms so that they remained anonymous, as part of ethical considerations which require that data sources are kept secret.

Student A: It saved us on time and transport costs i.e. to and from school for lectures and submission of assignments.

Student B: This pandemic gave us the opportunity to experience new ways of learning which may not have happened as fast as it did when suddenly the world closed its doors on us.

Student C: Change is unavoidable. We had to move with times as we are living in a digital age and COVID-19 crisis provided us with the opportunity to experiment with technology and its ever-changing tools and devices.

The above excerpts suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic had its own share of benefits, even to a student residing in rural areas. Given that the university recruits students from across the country, those who came from outlying and remote areas found the university ever open and were able to interact with their lecturers and fellow students without necessarily having to meet face-to-face as conditions were not permissible. They were compelled to adopt new ways of

making teaching and learning a reality. They were able to experience transformation from face-to-face to digital learning, which they had never thought they would be forced to adopt. Schleicher (2020, p. 4) gives credence to this by saying “To ensure the continuity of education despite the lockdown, higher education institutions have sought to use technology and offer online classes and learning experiences as a substitute for in-class time.” The perceptions expressed above indicate that these students actually appreciated the new experiences associated with COVID-19 crisis despite their rural context.

In addition, students had to face head-on the realities of change where they were forced to embrace technology and the need to communicate through devices which would otherwise have remained alien to them. As marginalised communities, the pandemic provided a ray of hope on the inevitable need to embrace technology and move with times. This corroborates with Chikoko (2021, p.6) who argues that “. . . if teachers integrate technology into the classroom, they are most likely to be able to connect with their students. Such connection is capable of providing rich learning experiences which the student can identify with.” It might prove to be difficult under the circumstances but change is inevitable, hence should be embraced.

However, the findings also indicated that respondents viewed COVID-19 as negatively impacting on learning for a university student with a rural background. Below are some of their sentiments.

Student C: I cannot afford a Smartphone, not to mention a laptop that will facilitate access to the Internet. I use this [*showing it to the researcher*] *Chimbudzi* (a derogatory term used in Zimbabwe to refer to that small cell phone incompatible with the Internet). This means that I can hardly keep track of the lecture proceedings Online.

Student D: When I am at home (name of place withheld for ethical reasons), I have to walk six kilometres to a hill so that I might get network. There is no booster anywhere close by which makes it impossible to connect to the Internet.

Student E: I struggle with issues of connectivity because where I live, the booster uses solar energy. So, during the night, there is no network. The same applies when the sunshine is poor. *Hapana yekutamba* [There is absolutely nothing one can do].

Student F: Connectivity is horrendous in most rural parts of Zimbabwe. For example, in some parts of (names withheld for ethical reasons), one has to go up a hill or a mountain top to use a cellular phone.

Student G: High cost due to demands for compatible devices to use and high Internet connectivity costs for those fortunate to be connected.

Student H: Computer technology relies heavily on electricity. However, lack of reliable power provision in most rural areas renders online learning and self-learning a (*sic*) onerous task when compared to being in urban areas. Student collaboration is difficult, if not nearly impossible, because of poor network systems where I come from.

Student I: Even though in my area there is electricity, load shading (*sic*) is very high and most of the time, network will be down, making my learning very difficult. Feedback is delayed and managing time for online classes is difficult.

From the above highlights, it can be deduced that students had limited access to their learning platforms due to factors attributable to infrastructural constraints such aspects as boosters, laptops and smart phones. When motivation is at its lowest ebb, a student may not find it worthwhile to travel the long distances mentioned above. S/He will end up saying “*Hapana yekutamba*” (There is nothing I can do), showing that the student has given up on the practice.

These responses also suggest that, some students lose out on teaching and learning because the gadgets that are compatible with the Internet are beyond what they can afford, coupled with high costs of data bundles. Sometimes, there is load shedding that may last several hours in some parts, making it difficult for one to use any electrical gadget. This makes it difficult for students to stay connected. As a result, they are left out on the lecture proceedings online.

It also implies that some areas are still lagging behind in terms of infrastructure that will make connectivity to the Internet sustainable so that they remain abreast of the latest developments on their teaching and learning platforms such as Google Classroom and WhatsApp. These findings complement earlier findings such as Tedesse & Muluye (2020, p.158) who say “. . . the lack of infrastructures, computers and internet access is challenging distance learning in developing countries.” Furthermore, UNESCO (2021, p.6) reports that in class videoconferencing, students require access to “technological equipment and a higher capacity for data or bandwidth, which represents a barrier for both low-income students and those living in remote areas with no access to internet.” This study has unearthed that, apart from infrastructural challenges like boosters and computers, lack of electricity and prolonged hours of load shedding were other factors impeding access to the Internet by students in remote rural areas of Zimbabwe.

8.2. Perceptions on Lack of Expertise on Digital Platforms

Most participants also felt that lack of technical know-how about how these online platforms worked was one of the greatest challenges that students in rural setups faced. The following were some of their sentiments.

Student J: I just heard that we were supposed to meet on Google but I have no knowledge of how to meet the lecturer and other students. I am afraid I am going to lose out yet I have to sit for examinations at the end of the semester.

Student K: I am more comfortable working on WhatsApp but to submit an essay on that platform is a big problem since it keeps showing that I don't have enough memory. I hear there are other online platforms which I can't use because I know very little about them.

Student L: People are excited about online learning but where I come from, there is no electricity. At a local school, *vaMugabe* (former President of Zimbabwe), *vakatipamaComputers but akungopera basa akavharirwa muLab asingashandi nekuti hapana magetsi* (Mr. Mugabe donated computers but they are lying idle and becoming useless while locked up in the computer laboratory because there is no electricity).

Student M: My phone has a weak battery. Sometimes it switches off before the lecture has even commenced. I ended up giving up on that because it's pointless.

When probed further on why Student M was not trying to acquire a new battery for the phone, he said “I am struggling to pay fees. Do you think I can spare some money for that? No.”

From the above excerpts, it can be deduced that the new web-based environment has taken people by surprise and those in rural settings are hit hard as the platforms remain unfamiliar, not only to themselves but also to their lecturers. It appears the university has invested very little in orientations of both staff and students to the new applications to be used in the teaching and learning programmes. Whenever new technology is deployed, it is prudent for the responsible authorities to ensure that users are (re-)trained so that they are able to handle it and gain access to the packages that would make learning more meaningful. These findings reinforce Schleicher's (2020, p.4) observation that “While the educational community have made concerted efforts to maintain learning continuity during this period, children and students

have had to rely more on their own resources to continue learning remotely through the Internet, television and radio.” The results also confirm UNESCO’s (2021, p.6) report earlier on that “The crisis caused by the pandemic disproportionately affects the most vulnerable students [who] usually have fewer digital competencies, making it more difficult for them to adapt to the online modality.” Schleicher’s (2020, p.4) findings are also confirmed that students living in outlying areas lacked “. . . access to broadband and computers for online education and the supportive environments needed to focus on learning.” Di Pietro (2020, p.4) weigh in saying “More vulnerable students, such as for instance those from less advantaged backgrounds, are especially likely to fall behind during this emergency . . . [as] . . . they are less likely to access to digital resources.” Students J’s and K’s sentiments give credence to the issues of limited digital competences for students due to lack of training and the problems caused by lack of electricity. The students’ situation is worsened by general poverty that haunts students residing in remote areas of Zimbabwe. Student K admits “I hear there are other online platforms which I can’t use because I know very little about them.”

8.3. A Question of Mindset

Naturally, there are those who always view change as anathema and are quick to say nothing will work for the better. Such can be deduced from the observations made below.

Student N: There is nothing good that is going to come out of teaching online because the students are simply not interested in learning without the teacher. How would you guarantee that it’s the actual teacher whom you are conversing [with]? *Kutambisa nguva uko!* (Just wasting time!)

Student O: Yes, we are in the Twenty-first century where technology has taken over our lives. But, to think that we can be taught by someone who is miles away is just a dream which won’t come true. It will take time for us to be able to be online as a class, at the same time.

Student P: Even if we are able to get the assignments online, we have no access to the Internet due to a number of factors which include poverty.

Student Q: University education encourages collaboration and the Internet had come to our rescue where face-to-face is impossible. However, we can hardly connect as groups due to our different socio-economic backgrounds that would not promote such. Even if you have the gadgets, data bundles are beyond the reach of many.

Student R: The Internet has empowered us but things just aren’t working in our favour. We thought we would benefit from rural electrification but with intermittent power supply, our learning is constantly being interrupted. Sometimes, we go for many days without electricity. It will be difficult for me to complete my tasks on time, even if I were committed.

In general, the findings above serve to confirm Tynan et al.’s (2013, p.320) observation that “Electronic communication brings an array of potential pitfalls as well as benefits, and business people need to understand how best to manage both the positives and negatives associated with new forms of communication.” The results also substantiate UNESCO’s (2021, p.6) observation that virtual classrooms required that students have access to technological equipment and the ability to purchase data or bandwidth, but both low-income students and those living in remote areas had no access to internet due to poverty. This, then, impedes access to online platforms and the marginalised student remains disadvantaged.

Most of the observations above tend to weigh heavily on the downside of the COVID-19 crisis and confirm findings from other studies such as that “A lack of access to technology is considered to be the biggest barrier for learning during the current pandemic together with

school closures. Respondents felt that learners in rural communities are those most likely to be disadvantaged” (guninetwork.org/files/the_effect_of_covid-19_on_education_in_africa.pdf). Schleicher (2020, p. 4) reinforces this saying “This crisis has exposed the many inadequacies and inequities in our education system – from access to the broadband and computers for online education and the supportive environments needed to focus on learning.”

It is clear that students residing in rural areas were the most affected by the COVID-19 crisis that saw all schools closing, leaving administrators with no choice but to implement the blended learning practices, largely dominated by use of online platforms. Although collaboration is encouraged at university, students can hardly engage each other due to differences in socio-economic statuses.

The findings also indicate that rural electrification could have alleviated the situation regarding power supply but such is intermittent to the extent that communication is hindered. Students hardly connect as and when they need to do so.

9. Conclusion

This qualitative study sought to establish perceptions of university students with a rural background on how they were coping with learning during the COVID-19-induced crisis. Semi-structured interviews and semi-structured questionnaires were used to gather data from thirty-two student participants.

Findings were presented and discussed in thematic form under three main categories of perceptions on infrastructure, perceptions on lack of expertise on digital platforms and a question of mindset. There were positive and negative perceptions about the impact of COVID-19 crisis on learning for university students who resided in rural areas. The findings from this and other studies (Tynan, et al., 2013; Schleicher, 2020; Chikoko, 2021; UNESCO, 2021; among others) indicate that technology facilitated distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Paradoxically, the pandemic caused severe school disruptions and closures and marginalised students’ access to distance learning through virtual platforms was impeded by different variables as confirmed by results from this study and others such as Tedesse & Muluye (2020), UNESCO (2021) and Dang et al. (2021), among others.

There is ample ground to conclude that the COVID-19 pandemic has largely impacted negatively on the rural student as s/he is confronted with challenges of infrastructure, cost of buying suitable gadgets, digital competencies and general mindset, among other variables. The study recommends that governments in general prioritise the issue of networking marginalised areas and that they endeavour to adequately fund education, especially during times pandemics of this magnitude. This is also in line with recommendations from Dang et al. (2021) that policy-makers should focus more on supporting households that are poor, are less educated and reside in rural areas.

To cap it all, Chikoko’s (2021, p.3) observation becomes succinct, which says “While it is almost impossible for most of us to keep up with the technological advancement in the modern world, it is equally impossible for us to totally ignore modern technology and still expect to cope with our daily lives, let alone live economically productive and sustainable livelihoods.” This tells a long story about the paradox of innovation vis-à-vis the possibility of its accessibility to the marginalised, especially those living in outlying areas like the rural in most developing countries like Zimbabwe.

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