

**FACULTY OF EDUCATION**

**CHALLENGES OF ONLINE LEARNING TO UNIVERSITY STUDENTS**

**BY**

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## **1.0 Introduction**

Online learning has become a new trend in education system in many colleges and universities across the world. The factors that encouraged the demand for online learning include the wide spread of diseases that required serious mitigations, advancements in technological tools, increased demand for Information and Technology (IT) skills, etc. As far as many colleges and universities are concerned, online learning comes with a number of benefits and challenges to both the school and learners. In this paper, only the challenges of online learning to university students are discussed. In doing this therefore, the paper begins with conceptual framework, where frequently used concepts are explained. What follows conceptual framework is the excessive review of related literature, and the last part of this paper is the conclusion and recommendations.

## **1.1 Conceptual framework**

This section deals with the concepts that are frequently used during the discussions. For this particular paper, e-learning, online learning, university, university student, challenge, are the frequently used words that the researcher attempts to explain.

### **1.1.1 E-learning**

According to Joubert & Snyman (2017) E-learning can be defined as teaching that is delivered through computers using numerous forms, such as Compact Disk Read Only Memory (CD-ROMs) and the internet or intranet. The CD-ROMs and internet enable information to be delivered in various formats, such as graphics, videos, audios, animations, models, simulations and visualisations (Joubert & Snyman, 2017).

E-learning is further described as the means of using information and computer technology for the purpose of building learning experiences (Coman, Tiru, Schmitz, Stanciu, & Bularca, 2020). Based on the aforementioned explanations therefore, E-learning can be simply defined as the method of transferring knowledge in education by using various electronic devices or can be viewed as a approach in formal education where information is sent through electronic devices to a group of students.

### **1.1.2 Online learning**

Online learning is the concept that is similar to e-learning. It is evident that in most cases, e-learning and online learning are used interchangeably. Online learning is defined by Gilbert

(2015) as the type of learning that takes place partially or entirely over the internet. In addition, online learning environments can be categorised into three central groups, fully web based, blended or hybrid format, and traditional courses using web based supplements. Gilbert (2015) asserts that fully web based courses are conducted entirely on the internet with no face to face interaction; all aspects of the programme are conducted in an online learning environment (Gilbert, 2015).

### **1.1.3 University**

From the British perspective, University is defined as by Alemu (2018) as an institution with its power to award its own degree and is very distinguished in the field of research. In addition, Alemu (2018) argues that university is a higher learning institution that brings men and women to a high level of intellectual development in the arts and science, and in the traditional professional disciplines, and promotes high-level research.

Another view that is similar to Alemu (2018)'s argument, is brought in by Boulton (2011) who states that the university is an entity that signifies a community of persons engaged in study and research. It appears that the term university can be defined as an entity that serves a certain educational purpose; the educational purpose must directly deal with students that can engage in research projects.

### **1.1.4 University student**

The Readiness Online Dictionary defines University student as a person enrolled in a college or university. Furthermore, university student can be defined as someone who has been admitted into a university to study a certain programme. According to Alemu (2018), the university student is a someone who is admitted into the university to attain universal knowledge and highly skilled human power for a certain profession.

### **1.1.5 Challenge**

According to oxford online dictionary, a challenge is defined as a new or difficult task that tests somebody's ability and skill. It is something that competes with you or is a threat to one's daily activities.

## **2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW**

One of the major concerns regarding online learning is that students have to be trained on how to use their gadgets to access material on online platforms and to use office-word tools (Palvia,

Aeron, Gupta, Mahapatra, Parida, Rosner & Sindhi, 2018). In many cases this has not been the case; many universities only put out some guide lines on how to access material, forgetting that not every learner knows how to even get started on their personal computer or smart phone. The challenge is that students are not awarded time for online training (Joubert & Snyman, 2017). The negative impact is that the time passes and the student still has not completed the tasks; be it registration of courses or even academic registration.

Another challenge of online learning that has affected many university students around the world is that most students do not have gadgets to use during the course of the online programme (Joubert & Snyman, 2017). The issue of usage of technological tools in learning must be reviewed based on two social classes; the 'haves' versus the 'have-nots'. In reality, not every student has a personal gadget to use for online learning, not because they chose not have them but because of monetary problems within their families (Gilbert, 2015).

Technical difficulty is one of the challenges that millions of university students around the world are experiencing (Joubert & Snyman, 2017). Because of the high usage rate of online learning systems, video streaming software and other online activities, most students experience a difficulty when trying to access online learning platforms. Most of the time, these online platforms are overloaded, slowing down internet connection. The students are either unable to download the materials or access the discussion forum or chat rooms (Joubert & Snyman, 2017).

Still on the same issue of technical difficulties, another issue connected to this is a computer crash that occurs at most important minute of the hour (Joubert & Snyman, 2017). This unfortunate behaviour may be motivated by device's compatibility issues concerned with operating systems, browsers or other software applications. When this occurs, the student does not know how to continue, therefore she/he gets further frustrated to an extent that they would even abandon the course.

University students who reside in rural areas experience similar problems. Their main challenge is that even if they may have access to devices such as computers, they are still struggling with network to connect to the internet or online platforms (Adnan & Anwar, 2020). As Adnan & Anwar (2020) explains, this is because rural areas usually have inefficient ICT-related infrastructure such as electricity, and telecommunications. To overcome this problem, such students are forced to leave for urban areas where network connection is much better; this further increases the cost of their studying since they have to pay for rents.

According to Coman, Tiru, Schmitz, Stanciu, & Bularca (2020), lack of lecturers' technical skills to use online platforms affects many university students. This has been seen in occasions whereby the lecturers would claim they had put notes in certain platform and when learners search for such documents they do not find anything there (Coman, Tiru, Schmitz, Stanciu, & Bularca, 2020). This issue escalates and adds more frustration to learners when the lecturers say they did not receive some students' tests submitted via e-mail or the academic online platform. The truth may be that the lecturer was not aware that some documents may go straight to spam if the e-mail used was not trusted by the lecturer's e-mail security. The lecturers therefore give learners zero, claiming they did not bother writing a test.

Challenges of online learning to university students include the fact that some students cannot physically practice what they learn (Musingafi, Mapuranga, Chiwanza, & Zebron, 2015). Science has shown that the best way to learn something is by practicing it. Learners who study science courses that require laboratories experience difficulties to continue with this experimental learning because they are unable to practice the things they learn. Many online courses focus mainly on theoretical content and external lessons (Coman, Tiru, Schmitz, Stanciu, & Bularca, 2020). As a result of this kind of education, Coman, Tiru, Schmitz, Stanciu, & Bularca (2020) argues that university students cannot practice what they learn and the learning process does not reach its full potential.

Another problem many students have faced is the increased cost of college education (Palvia, et al., 2018). To gain access to online material in the online platforms, there has to be a data plan to access such material. The governments, especially in Africa, had been reluctant to negotiate data plans with the network providers. According to Casement (2013), this results in increased costs of college education as learners are forced to divert some of their pocket money and use it to buy large amounts of data to download expensive videos, voice-notes and e-books.

Online learning itself is the big challenge to the deaf and hard of hearing students (Gilbert, 2015). According to Gilbert (2015), on campus classes often have interpreters or hired assistants who help these learners with disabilities with academic work and other social dimensions. It appears these learners have to stay at their homes with poor accessibility to active learning. This means if online learning is already a challenge for many normal students, learners with disabilities are experiencing a double problem. Thus, such learners will pass with lower grades or even fail because of falling behind.

One of the challenges of online learning experienced by university students is that there is no social interaction between them (Sarvestani, Mohammadi, Afshin, & Raeisy, 2019). Learning becomes active and fun when students are able to have face-to-face conversations, sharing their experiences, and helping each other with academic hardships (Sarvestani, Mohammadi, Afshin, & Raeisy, 2019). Online students do not feel a sense of connectedness and belonging than on campus students who attend face-to-face classes.

According to Gillet-Swan (2017), absence of peer interaction can negatively affect some aspects of the learning process; online learning hinders this kind of personal development and in many cases learners feel isolated and do not feel that sense of belonging to a certain school. Studying alone becomes even painful when the learner fails assignments and tests; they fear that they had failed alone, therefore may lose interest in the course and give up on academic work (Gillett-Swan, 2017).

In addition, online learning becomes one of the sources of academic frustration and depression. Educational Sociologists have documented or emphasised that students need to talk to people; be it lectures or peers (Dworkin, Ballantine, Antikainen, Barbosa, Konstantinovskiy, Saha, Essack, Chang, Vryonides & Teodoro, 2013). Students sometimes get frustrated due to the lack of human interaction, the absence of a teacher and an inability to discuss academic problems with their classmates (Mashinini, 2020). Students need a physical space where they can resolve their queries and if they cannot consult their lectures face-to-face, they become frustrated, depressed and may even commit suicide.

Online learning means there is no physical presence of the lecturer. This means lectures are completely conducted online (Gokah, Gupta, & Ndiweni, 2015). Gokah, Gupta, & Ndiweni (2015) explain that the challenge is that students find it hard to stay engaged without lecturer's face-to-face contact. Learners who are registered for courses that require fieldwork find it quite impossible to put concepts in practice without proper face-to-face guidance from their lecturers.

Lack of participation is another challenge that affects university students (Gillett-Swan, 2017). Effective online learning is parallel to the learners' skills in technological practicality to engage in online platforms. The fact is not all learners have these necessary skills and the result is the poor student's participation in academic platforms (Mashinini, 2020). The same students' participation in online platforms is also affected by the quality of interaction between the lecturer and the students (Gillett-Swan, 2017). As Gillbert-Swan (2017) argues, in most cases the learners find it discouraging to engage in the online learning platforms, the reason being

these learners seem to spend a lot of time typing questions or responses, more than they do listening to what the lecturers are saying.

Institutional factors, such as lack of support for online learning by the university management, are one of the biggest challenges that university students face. Instead of being too strategic on how things should be run without misconceptions, the authorities fail to provide the online environment where learners can interact with their lectures effectively and peacefully (Musingafi, Mapuranga, Chiwanza, & Zebron, 2015). The learners have a lot on their plate as they sometimes write three to four tests consecutively. In some cases, they write test-three while they had already begun writing an examination in the other modules.

Another challenge of online learning to university students is that the students find it cumbersome to read the never ending Portable Document Format (pdf). This is because online coursework seems to be reading and writing intensive; the courses consist of never-ending texts that fail to engage students. This issue becomes worse when the learners are assessed on materials they read online without proper guidance (Dhawan, 2020).

Dhawan (2020)'s view that online learning comes with cumbersome work can be supported by the situation at the National University of Lesotho where the students are given document after document, expected to read them through the course of five days and write a test or assignment. When the time comes to write such a test, many learners had not even been able to read half of the material that was sent through Thuto platform and WhatsApp, which results in learners having to copy in order to pass the assessment (Mashinini, 2020).

The above challenge means online learning is of great concern to university students because students with low reading abilities may find the heavy text and writing curriculum to be psychologically painful and frustrating. Online learning therefore becomes boring to this class of students. More than e-learning, it feels like e-reading (Palvia, et al., 2018). Many students who have low reading abilities do not complete the course.

Maintaining self-motivation to continue with online courses is one of the challenges that many university students face (Musingafi, et al, 2015). The reality is that some learners lack academic independence and self-motivation and they do not know how to proceed on their own. Trying to cope with the problem, these learners usually do their best to study but still tend not to assign enough time to complete their assignments, therefore, submit unfinished work (Gilbert, 2015). According to Gilbert (2015) this is because their lack of self-motivation makes them to easily

lose sight of what they want to achieve, become left behind within the programme and possibly fail the course.

Another challenge is that there is lack of positive feedback from the things they had written (Musingafi, Mapuranga, Chiwanza, & Zebron, 2015). The feedback is supposed to be constructive; it must show or tell the learners where they went wrong when attempting questions. These detailed explanations must improve the learners understanding, as it has been said that people learn by reflecting from their mistakes.

Online learning involves too many assessments submitted via e-mail, academic platforms, and even through WhatsApp. According to Musingafi, Mapuranga, Chiwanza, & Zebron (2015), in many occasions the feedback comes as spreadsheet test scores; no document is sent back to learners to see how it was marked so that they can improve in their writing. All these result in learners repeating the same mistakes when writing the online examinations.

In as much as no time frame is considered an advantage of online learning, it is still a challenge to many university students. According to Mashini (2020), online learning has resulted to lecturers executing their lessons any time they wish to, ignoring that learners may be attending another lecture at that time. Due to lack of coordination between lecturers, learners are therefore forced to go through platforms to read what had been discussed while they were in another forum (Sarvestani, Mohammadi, Afshin, & Raeisy, 2019). In some cases, this issue becomes worse when the lecturers force students to attend the online forum/chartroom very late at night.

Many university students had experienced tremendous workloads due to this issue of no time frame to study. Some lecturers would assign topics to be taught in a week no matter how complex the discussions may seem to be (Dhawan, 2020). They believe that all university learners have sufficient background knowledge in the course, therefore move faster to finish their course outline that was supposed to be taught for five months; they finish it in two months. The learners then realise that they had finished the course outline yet they still do not know anything; they did not really learn anything, they just chased marks (Dhawan, 2020).

One of the biggest problems brought by e-learning is that it affects the learners' physical health system (Jessica, 2016). The challenge brought by this kind of learning is that the learners have to be seated in front of a computer the whole semester or academic year. Some learners are already having problems with their sight and this is worsened by online learning activities; for example, heavy e-reading, and video streaming. Due to students' too much sitting, some



learners experience back problems and may not work to their full potentials (Coman, et al, 2020).

## **2.1 Researcher's evaluation on literature review**

As seen from the reviewed literature on the challenges of online learning to university students, online learning can be disadvantageous to students if it is not well planned and executed by university managements. Literature suggests that the first determining factor to attain effective online learning is the issue of social classes in communities involved. As Gilbert (2015) had stated, the learners who are considered the 'have-nots' normally find online learning to be a big challenge because they cannot afford computers, smart phones, and data to begin their online programme.

The researcher believes that if the government or school authorities fail to buy these gadgets for the underprivileged learners, many of them are forced to share these gadgets with their fortunate peers. The concern is whether these privileged peers would always be ready to lend their gadgets to the 'have-nots'. In many cases they do not, so the 'have-nots' lose track and do not proceed with the online programme.

As functionalists have said, the role of education is to socialize learners, equip them with necessary skills to survive, and to prepare them to be future leaders or good citizens (Heaton & Lawson, 1996). If that is the case, then online learning as the only method in educating learners had failed this functionalists view concerning education functions. The challenges of online learning include the fact that the university students experience frustration and depression due to social isolation that hinders them to come into physical contact with their peers and instructors. The researcher agrees with the functionalists that learning is more effective when the learners physically interact with each other, help each other on academic and non-academic problems that would still affect their performance at school.

Even though in some cases online learning is seen as the most appropriate method to teach university students in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, there is no doubt that many universities will still continue to ignore the view that online learning comes with financial challenges that force many learners to abandon the course because they cannot afford data to access academic e-learning platforms on daily basis, let alone streaming online videos. Nonetheless, as the researcher argues, the conditions for a successful online programme are not yet prioritised by the university managements.

Sociology of education has put lot of emphasis on educational inequalities/differences within the school as an organisation. As far as education sociologists are concerned, there are learners who are brilliant enough to understand the complex phenomena and there are those who need proper guidance to understand even the basic components of the course ( Dworkin, Ballantine, Antikainen, Barbosa, Konstantinovskiy, Saha, Essack, Chang, Vryonides & Teodoro, 2013). The researcher agrees that the challenge that university students experience, especially those are not brilliant, is that online learning does not give them time to practice the pedagogy they learn so that they would understand it better.

If learners do not get trained on how to use their devices to continue with online learning, that means learners would not turn in any good test or assignment. The researcher also argues that the biggest challenge that prevails in online courses is that the learners, who lack training on how to use technological tools, find it hard to access material as well as submit their work in the online platforms provided.

Literature explains that online learning means there is no main campus usage because everything is done online, meaning the university students are learning from their homes. The researcher argues that learning from home will never be of good quality than learning in a traditional way where learners would go on campus and attend classes. The challenge of studying from home, as the researcher argues, is that the homes are often the unfavourable environments to promote effective learning.

There is a lot of house chores that the parents expect the learner to do and these chores would affect the effort the learner applies towards school work. Not only house chores affect the learner, family conflicts are also the common characteristic within families that affects children from such families. The student cannot in any situation learn when the mother and father are fighting. The researcher argues that the student's psychological development is affected and the learner is luckily to fail the assessments.

Supported by the literature reviewed, the researcher believes the challenges of online learning to university students are based on certain variables and these variables are summarized by the table below.

**Table 1.** *Summary of the challenges of online learning to university students*

Determiner of the challenge	Challenge
Skill of using technological tools	Not all students have skills for using technological tools because most of the time these learners have not been given time for

	training. Some lecturers do not have skills to use online platforms thus deliver poor education.
<b>Availability of gadgets to use</b>	Computers and smart phones are quite expensive to some learners, so they do not have such tools to continue with the course.
<b>Technical issues</b>	Internet connection is often unstable due to overload. The computers also crash during an online lesson.
<b>Learners' health</b>	Students spend most of their time in front of the computer, therefore have back-problems and lose of sight.
<b>Social interaction</b>	Students cannot interact with each other, physically help each other on academic problems, they therefore feel isolated and may get frustrated when they need physical help from peers or lecturer.
<b>Participation</b>	There is low participation in the online platforms because learners do not like to spend a lot of time typing questions and responses other than listening to the lecturer or e-tutor.
<b>Time frame</b>	Lecturers execute their lessons any time they wish to, ignoring that learners may be attending another lecture at that time.
<b>Work load</b>	The students are given a lot of documents to read and they often do not have enough time to read for deep understanding.
<b>Practicality</b>	Online learning means learners do not learn through practice. Science courses that require use of laboratories are not effective and learners get poor quality education.

### 3.0 Conclusion

Even though online learning can be useful to learners who do not like the traditional way of teaching and learning, it can become disadvantageous to most learners who would wish to get good quality education. Online learning cannot produce good quality education. As seen in the body of this paper, many university students are affected by the way the educational activities are run within the online setup in many universities.

The challenges that university students experience include lack of technological tools to continue with the programme, lack of access to the internet due to monetary problems, technical difficulties during the course etc. The universities managements' failure to mediate

these challenges worsens the situation and the quality of university education becomes questionable.

As per the constitutional policies of the university, university students are bound to avoid any form of exam malpractice and plagiarism, which means any work the student turns in, is the result of his/her own original research. Online learning encourages learners to edit other people's work and turn it in as theirs and manage to get away with it. Online learning is of great concern, education ministries should intervene to make it less challenging for the benefit of the schools and the nation as a whole.

#### **4.0 Recommendations**

Looking at the challenges of online learning to university students, it is possible that the universities will produce incompetent learners who cannot survive in the practical world. The challenges call for serious attention from the university managements and the governments concerned.

To solve these prevailing challenges of online learning, the researcher recommends that the university management should combine both online learning and traditional way of teaching and learning. This would help strike a balance between learners who wish to study online and those who would prefer to study in a traditional setting. This will minimize the negative impacts of online learning on the quality of education offered by universities.

Considering to continue only with online learning, the universities' managements should stop being reluctant to hire skilled personnel to help them out. The e-tutors must be appointed and trained on how to use the academic online platforms effectively and productively. The university students must also be given training sessions before starting the online programme. This training must be frequently enforced during the course of the semester.

The e-tutors/lecturer must ensure that they have variety of strategies to pass information to students. There must always be plan B so that when plan A fails, they proceed with plan B. They should also consider the load of work they give to learners because failure to do so, results in increased magnitude of the already prevailing challenges. The e-tutors must give enough time for submissions because due to network conditions, there may be difficulties when trying to submit the work.

There must be government support to learners who cannot afford the computers and smart phones for online learning. The learners with disabilities must be allowed to go to campus where they must be allocated trained personnel to assist them.

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