A New Learning Experience of Training in the Social Sciences Using Online Platforms in Low-Resource Settings: A Pandemic Experience at Busitema University, Uganda

Introduction

The outbreak of the Novel COVID-19 virus in early January 2020 led to the Ugandan presidential directive on 20 March 2020 to avoid the possible rapid spread of new infections (Madinah 2020: 184), and as a result, Ugandan institutions of higher learning closed their physical campuses. Conventional face-to-face lectures for all Ugandan institutions were stopped. The pandemic saw more than 73,200 schools and institutions close, forcing more than 15 million learners to stay at home (Atwine 2021). Globally, Uganda was ranked one of the top twenty countries with the longest lockdown (Safieldin 2021).

In June 2021, millions of learners were sent back home following the partial lockdown that was announced at the start of a second wave of the pandemic. Educational institutions therefore introduced online learning (Muriisa, Bariyo and Mlahagwa 2023: 9). Only

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29 per cent of African HEIs were able to quickly transition to online teaching and learning compared to 85 per cent of HEIs in Europe, 72 per cent in North America and 60 per cent in Asia and Pacific regions (Sonn et al. 2021: 2). If institutions were to stay in business they needed to develop blended pedagogy (Nawangwe et al. 2021: 23). This paper analyses the use of the Busitema University Online Learning Environment (BUOLE) as a learning management system which was adopted during the pandemic to teach blended courses.

Busitema University has learned new lessons as a result of disasters. COVID-19 in particular, severely disrupted traditional learning arrangements, which depend on the physical presence (face-to-face learning) of students and educators. The university introduced reforms in developing online blended courses, online teaching using different online platforms and the online assessment of learners. The Online Distance and Electronic Learning (ODeL) mode of delivery was preferred as the alternative means of enabling the continuation of higher education in the circumstances, largely because it offered a blended approach to learning activities (online and in person) (Bisaso and Achanga 2023: 123). The university adopted blended learning using a Moodle-based LMS – Busitema University Online Learning Environment (BUOLE) – and online assessment through various assessment modes.

Challenges of Online Distance and Electronic Learning

Despite the fact that digitalising teaching and learning through the use of ODeL during the pandemic was celebrated as a breakthrough, some impediments were observed that require attention in order for ODeL to be fully adopted (Bisaso and Achanga 2023: 138). Among these, HEIs encountered various challenges in capacity-building for instructors and learners. For instance, they were confronted with a negative attitude from some learners and instructors towards ODeL. This could be attributed to the fact that ODeL was introduced suddenly during the lockdown, and therefore, the learners and the students did not have adequate time to train in the use of the online resources. This situation was aggravated by the limited financial resources to conduct training.

During the reopening of HEIs, there was limited teaching space due to social distancing. The nature of the social sciences and humanities makes classes quite large. This meant that the socially distanced class might accommodate up to only half of the students, thus requiring either expansion or the construction of new lecture rooms. This was a major challenge as there were no funds to respond to these requirements. The high number of students enrolled in the social sciences also poses difficulties when managing them online and ensuring that all students are staying up to speed.

Learners and instructors reported poor Internet connection in their homes, which limited their possibilities of attending or giving online lectures. The lack of digital devices for online learning, such as smartphones, tablets and laptops, among students from poor families, also affected online learning. And despite the provision of 'study from home' data bundles to students by the telecommunication companies, at relatively lower costs than the normal bundles, these had a time and data limit.

There was also a failure by some staff to attend training, especially those who were advanced in age. Some of the older staff claimed that technology was for young people and therefore there was no need to attend training because it would be very hard for them to understand the concepts.

However, in spite of all these challenges, institutions are trying to improve Internet connectivity, increase the number of computers procured and provide more Wi-Fi points around the campuses to allow students Internet access at any part of the campuses. A good number of staff have been able to develop and upload blended online courses on the platforms used by different institutions.

Success Stories

Despite the numerous challenges institutions faced throughout the peak of the pandemic, there are some success stories to tell. Different institutions had good news relating to ODeL – for instance, at Busitema University, more than half of the staff have been able to develop and upload blended online courses on the BUOLE platform. Learners, too, have been able to use BUOLE to access lecture materials, including but not limited to notes and tutorials. More graduate students are enrolling at the university because learning online has offered them the opportunity to create a better balance between studies and work.

Lessons from the Lockdown

The lockdowns caused by the COVID-19 pandemic provided lessons from which HEIs could learn. For example, moving from traditional face-to-face learning to ODeL requires time and investment, which the universities had not prepared for. But there is always a need to prepare for the unknown and invest in infrastructure requirements for technology. If HEIs had started online teaching before COVID-19, it would have been easier for the learners and instructors to adopt the new normal of online-only teaching and learning. It became obvious, too, that we always must be flexible and open to learning new technologies. For instance, staff at various universities in the country discovered that e-pedagogy is not limited to computers but includes mobile phones, using apps such as WhatsApp.

The lockdown further illustrated the need for more collaboration between universities within the country to solve challenges that are more micro in nature, such as limited or no academic research outputs (Nawangwe et al. 2021: 22). In addition, universities should diversify their incomes, especially the private universities, which will have to be creative in finding alternative sources of funding other than student tuition fees. For instance, academic staff should engage in writing grant proposals to raise money that could cater for some costs.

There is a feeling that future Ugandan universities might be more skewed to technology in education as opposed to mere educational technology. Furthermore, there is a belief that universities will have to seek digital solutions for their pedagogy

(Nawangwe et al. 2021: 23). The realisation that education can be achieved through various means, in addition to the conventional approach where learners attend a specified facility physically, has become a turning point in defining education for the next generation (Bisaso and Achanga 2023: 138).

New Needs Arising at HEIs as a Result of the Pandemic

Online teaching and learning has become the new normal, but the digital environment changes fast and therefore there needs to be continuous refresher training for learners and instructors. At Busitema University, for example, to ensure the sustainability of the BUOLE platform the university conducts training for new students and staff and refresher training for continuing students and staff.

Because of the requirements of social distancing, institutions have to invest in the construction of more lecture rooms or even lecture blocks to accommodate the size of classes admitted. But HEIs need to focus on investing in other infrastructure, such as adequate Internet bandwidth and more computers so that the learner: instructor ratio meets the ideal 1:40 set by the Uganda National Council for Higher Education for face-to-face learning (The Universities and Other Tertiary Institutions Institutional Standards Regulations, 2005: 913).

The investment also means staying abreast with digital technology. At Busitema, a new software called iSpring has been introduced to help in designing interactive courses. The BUOLE platform can be transferable to other contexts and can be used as an assessment tool for staff performance. The university is looking into designing fully online courses for learners. This will start with the orientation of new students to the various online methods of learning by sending guiding materials before the actual lectures start. All the students will be required to have a week of in-person orientation to ensure that they are equipped with all the necessary digital skills. The fact that students attended online lectures during the COVID-19 lockdown proves that there is a proportion of students who are willing to learn online.

Discussion

In the wake of COVID-19, higher education institutions (HEIs) worldwide were forced to continue teaching and learning through online means (Kansiime and Batiibwe 2023: 1). This radical shift to digital pedagogy followed by online assessments and examinations brought new experiences to educators and learners (Babbar and Gupta 2022). However, Bisaso and Achanga (2023: 138) observed that, ODeL being a new concept in Uganda, the instructors and learners lacked the required skills and knowledge in the use of the approach. In addition, some HEIs experienced numerous challenges that were beyond their management, and therefore there is a need for government intervention. Just as the government supported secondary and primary schools, HEIs need similar support during emergencies like the pandemic, either through physical infrastructure or financial resources. Muriisa et al. (2023: 8) and Iqbal et al. (2022: 1) found that institutional support was limited during the pandemic.

Government and other concerned stakeholders need to invest in the installation of internet hotspots where learners can connect for free. This is because the high cost of internet services negatively affect access to education to a great extent. There is also a need for routine updates of online platforms and the skills of instructors and learners. This should be done after any systems update or as new students and lecturers join the university.Government and other concerned stakeholders need to invest in the installation of internet hotspots where learners can connect for free. This is because the high cost of internet services negatively affect access to education to a great extent. There is also a need for routine updates of online platforms and the skills of instructors and learners. This should be done after any systems update or as new students and lecturers join the university.

Tweheyo and Mugarura (2021: 1268) propose that universities should develop virtual laboratories that would support the online teaching of practical lectures or practicums, review the online programmes and ensure that they are accredited by the National Council of Higher Education (NCHE) as required by law, and train students and staff on the use of digital delivery models before they use them. Telecommunication companies need to install more signal masts in remote locations to improve Internet connectivity for the learners. The time limits of the data bundles should be adjusted so that if learners do not deplete their daily usage the remaining data is made available over the following day or other periods.

Universities should also consider designing self-paced courses. And for those with international students, since the difference between East African Standard Time and other time zones could have affected the attendance of

online lectures during the pandemic, they should factor in time zone differences when designing online teaching timetables. Furthermore, given the large number of social sciences students enrolling for particular courses there should be an investigation into how the lectures and assessments were done online during the pandemic in order to learn how best to manage them.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic was undoubtedly a disaster. However, its impacts have transformed higher education systems at a faster rate than would have been thought possible, not only at Busitema University but in the nation of Uganda at large. Many institutions have embraced the use of technologies which otherwise might have been a mere future aspiration. However, the use of the technologies for teaching and learning requires a holistic approach.

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