# COVID-19: A precursor for ODeL in Higher Institutions of Learning in Uganda

Nabukeera Madinah[1] and Matovu Musa[2]
[1]Department of Public Administration, Faculty of Management Studies,
Islamic University in Uganda
[2]Department of Educational Psychology, Faculty of Education,
Islamic University in Uganda

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Nabukeera Madinah. Email: nabmadinah@gmail.com

## Abstract

*As the COVID-19 pandemic persisted, the government of Uganda together with Ministry of Education and Sports authorized education institutions especially universities to implement ODeL (*Open Distance e-Learning*) teaching and learning to enable education continuity and avoid students from lagging behind. The study used secondary sources to suggest preparation measures, identify ODeL challenges and suggested recommendations. The results indicated: a consistent, wholistic university approach; maintenance of learning outcomes; enduring student-centric, regular and clear communication; creation of many training platforms available in all sizes and shapes; avoidance of mistakes; and the situation though not being perfect, but was going on well.*

*Keywords*: COVID-19 preparations for staff and students, challenges and recommendations

By June 2020 it was unlikely for schools and universities to re-open and this was the rebirth of online ODeL (Open Distance e-Learning) in teaching and learning in Uganda as the new normal. Many education institutions adopted learning platforms that allow the use of video software to enable a proper learning environment and support real time feedback from the learners. In March, 2020 close to 15 million learners were locked at home to avert the spread of the global pandemic COVID-19. While the Government of Uganda endeavored to provide reading materials through hard copies, radio and television programs, this was for primary and secondary schools, not universities. However, the procedures were hard to control and unreceptive for government, learners and the parents. There was need to combine efforts to ensure that learners do not lag behind (Akandwanaho, 2020; Independent, 2020; Monitor, 2020; Observer, 2020; Reporter, 2020; Rwebiita, 2020).

Universities took on online classes quickly without proper communication. For instance, all classes beyond 50 students in Singapore Institute of Technology embarked on technology-enhanced learning in the middle of the semester. The teaching staff were ready to take on the new challenge if the situation worsened hence the online learning experience was positive. Online platforms for large classes, were reduced in number to ensure good contact with

the lecturers and top management encouraged lecturers to escalate measures needed for successful ODeL and share the challenges and way forward. Some teaching staff had knowledge in online/remote teaching in the following areas; facilitating discussions in digital platforms, streaming feedback, pre-recorded teaching and live streaming. There was need for preparation for both students and staff and installing the much-needed infrastructure (Lim, 2020).

In Uganda's situation, universities quickly and unpreparedly started ODeL following the blessing and announcement by His Excellence the President of Uganda, Minister for Education and Sports, National Council for Higher Education (accreditation body for higher education in Uganda) and Vice Chancellors' forum in Uganda. Both private and public universities aggressively took on ODeL amidst no training for lecturers and students. Emergency trainings were conducted for lecturers and students to ensure that they coped with the new normal. This extraordinary risk and pressure brought many stakeholders on board to appreciate that they needed to start the available resources as they made arrangements to improve in future since private and government higher institutions of learning never received any emergency response in terms of funding to enable the kick start the ODeL processes.

Many universities in Uganda didn't have learning platforms and with reduced funds since students were at home as a result of the lockdown, they lacked resources to put them in place. Nevertheless, learning continued somehow with a number of challenges such as students not being able to afford buying data for learning since some of their parents were not working especially on a daily basis and some of the students were staying in remote areas where there is no electricity and network.

## Methodology

Content analysis was used to analyze and quantify the meanings of words and to determine the themes generated (Carley, 1990) . This method was useful enough since it applies to textual material (Mayring, 2004) since the only data available was online sources from mass media and teaching institutions like Islamic University in Uganda Females' Campus (IUIU-FC) on their navigation to manage ODeL during the COVID-19 Lockdown of education institutions in Uganda. Given the fact that movements were limited online sources were suitable given the times (Cole, 1988). The research carried out informative analysis in assessment of available information for analysis and dissemination.

## Preparations for Staff and Students

Fingal (2020) proposed ten strategies that will help during e-learning i.e., prepare and practice by ensuring digital equity, practice, provide clear expectations to staff and parents, take time to plan including new timetables for e-learning, prepare individually, establish daily new schedules of new normal as a result of the deadly pandemic, provide robust learning, design an independent learning system, address the emotional toll and choose the right tools and stick with them.

In Ugandan higher education institutions, preparations for staff and students included holistic approach, maintenance of learning outcomes, active engagement of students, regular communication, variety of platforms; and blending the modes of teaching and learning.

A holistic approach was adopted and consistency was a key success factor in ensuring flexibility. Practical classes that needed face-to-face were broken into smaller groups and departments were not left to implement single-handedly the social distancing measures. ICT teams were available to academic staff and students to provide support services. This enabled teaching staff to choose what worked best for the students. The tools allowed training hence avoiding confusion in learning the various available tools (Azorín, 2020).

Since the COVID-19 pandemic was sudden, alternative methods were needed since assessments couldn't remain as prearranged in order to have a learning outcome. All learning outcomes had to be achieved despite the eventualities. Key documents were quickly submitted to the National Council for Higher Education, introducing flexibility in learning in the much-needed period and ensuring fair and reasonable modes of assessment. Online platforms are viewed as learning settings i.e., classrooms, auditoriums, lecture space that facilitated effective learning. While the rush was inevitable continuous learning was inevitable. While some teaching staff downloaded pre-recorded materials, many lecturers streamed live lectures to engage the learners although some of them were doing it for the first time but ready to take the risks yet majority received compliments because of positive learning results (Nabukeera, 2020).

Students had to continue being engaged and the need for online learning was key because international students returned to their home countries. Others were under quarantine orders put in place by various governments across the world including Uganda. Teaching staff ensured that the learning content reached the learners. Allowing students to participate in discussions and to answer designed questions were important. Majority of the students do not have laptops and either borrowed from friends or used their smart phones to ensure that no one was left behind in the conversion from face-to face to e-learning (WB, 2020).

There was need to comprehend anxieties at diverse arguments in time and one of the strategies used was regular and clear communication. Students' concerns were related to effective online teaching, change in assessment mode, and self-control when learning online. The student leadership was involved in the preparations for transition from face-to-face to e-learning and online meetings were conducted to harmonize and share experiences with academic managers and to correct the observed mistakes. Increase in the channels of communication was significant and in spite of self-social distancing, experiences were shared with the common feeling that 'we are in this together, am not alone if I make mistakes with e-learning it is a new experience, am ready to correct it and need support to perfect my experience since learning is a long journey'. Student support was a requirement to make ODeL successful hence teaching staff were requested to pair students to enable them empower one another and to ensure that those who needed

support and are academically weak were supported (Nabukeera, 2020; Tumwesige, 2020).

Generally, all over the world, there was panic and reaction to online teaching and learning. A number of platforms were generated and training provided to academic staff through workshops, consultations walk-in, and self-help guides on e-learning. The knowledge and skills developed included designing and creating of narrated slides, live streaming classes, and alternative modes of assessments including online assessments. Teaching staffs were provided with guides to use the tools and prepare for e-learning environment. Counsellors talked to students in line with time management, avoiding procrastination, and cautioned them on how e-learning is very destructive and needs self-control (UNESCO, 2020).

In Uganda online teaching and learning was very reactive and all higher education institutions were caught unaware including the regulator NCHE. Initially, NCHE was sceptical about online teaching and learning until a presidential directive that permitted all education institutions in Uganda to start teaching online. This was a blessing in disguise to the education sector and most of the higher education institutions made a decision to start vaguely and work on the challenges as teaching continued, bearing in mind that they had to put the necessary equipment in place in the near future (Daniel, 2020; Nabukeera, 2020).

E-learning needs a quiet environment, is expensive, and can be tricky if the environment doesn't support reading. For practical reasons, large classes had to be split into smaller ones. The key aspect in this was timetabling. Some departments were running hybrid classes hence the need to ensure standardization for online and physical environment bearing in mind the challenges that come with technology. Students only reported physically at the university for practical (e.g., laboratory) classes. During the face-to-face sessions, they had to observe social distancing and other standard operating procedures. There is need for further knowledge in using e-learning i.e., pre-setting certain features. Also, student control and class management was found to be challenging i.e., students could join an e-lesson while at the same time live streaming social media and private chats (Madinah, 2020).

### Challenges Faced with ODel Teaching and Learning

A number of challenges were and are still being encountered during online teaching and learning nonetheless, learning continues. Pain points are being improved; students' feedback is coming in and measures are being put in place to ensure that time is not lost. Remaining unified and learning collectively through times of a catastrophe has been Uganda's major lesson from this experience. The following are some of the challenges identified:

1) Students could not afford buying data to enable then continue with lessons online since some of their parents were not working especially on a daily basis. Some of the students found it difficult to connect to learning

platforms (like ERP [Enterprise Resource Planning]) to join the lectures because data was very expensive for them.

2) The attitude that online classes are not as effective as classroom lessons has not changed and ODeL classes were found not to be as effective as face-to-face classroom lessons. The lessons were boring since they lacked physical discussion with lecturers to elaborate the concepts well and many were not projecting their work to students on the various learning platforms.

3) Lack of electronic gadgets such as computers, laptops and smart phones. Some students have no smart phones and others were using their parents' phones during the time of the lockdown since they were staying at home with them. However, on partial lifting of the lockdown, parents resumed work which left their children without mobile phones to use during lecture times.

4) Poor network across the country and lack of electricity hampered the continuous online education among many universities in the country. Some students were staying in remote areas where there is no electricity and network. General poor network in the rural areas for all mobile networks in the country namely; Airtel, MTN, UTL, K2, Lyca Mobile and Orange.

5) Housework makes students busy in that they cannot concentrate on the learning well. Government quotas and liberalization of education in Uganda resulted into increased higher education institutions which also increased the number of girls attaining higher education. These girls have been at home for almost a year due to the lockdown as a result of COVID-19 pandemic outbreak hence working as house maids with limited time for concentration on classes.

6) Higher education institutions are not well prepared for ODeL. They lack equipment and their academic staff need retooling to enable them continue execute online teaching to ensure learning takes place.

7) It was not easy for those students offering practical course units like Bachelors of Information Technology, Higher Education Certificate (Biological Studies), Nursing and Midwifery practical lessons and Bachelors of Arts in Education with Computer studies and Accounting to learn practical course units online because they need hands-on activities in order to grasp the content very effectively.

8) Lack of compatibility of smart phones with learning platforms like ERP, Zoom, Jitsi, Google Meet, Webex services using their android phones.

9) Education exclusion due to inability to afford data and compatible devices which affects the achievement of sustainable development goal in line with education inclusion.

### Recommendations on How to Implement Online Teaching

a) Management and all stakeholders should be proactive by embracing uncertainty and being prepared to advance especially with academic work that has been converted to online or remote format full-blast yet there is no time to test, train and phase implementation.

b) Management and academic staff should prioritize care, compassion, and kindness as some students may not afford to attend online classes. Management should understand and find ways to support the students given the fact that online learning has a number of challenges.

c) Education stakeholders should remain calm, ensure calmness and talk positive during COVID-19 lockdown and its aftermath. Teachers as role models should be engage and supported during the tough times.

d) Academic staff should keep it simple and understand that there is no need to launch a full-blown online course since development of a curriculum takes time. They should adapt to using online platforms already available and be friendly to students. There is no need for doorbells and signals for effectiveness and efficiency. Care should be taken while choosing technology tools and involving stakeholders.

e) Academic staff should practice pedagogical flexibility. With the quick evolution to online teaching, flexibility is a key success factor. Pedagogical flexibility calls for creativity in projects, examinations, tasks, formats, assignments, designs, and choices for learners since at its core teaching is an inspired process.

f) Management and staff should support the student community, bearing in mind that universities have a good number of needy students and their involvement may be unequal compared to others who have enough resources and have care takers to take charge of their university needs. Being flexible and supportive can make a difference to students' completion.

g) Academic staff should seek support from colleagues by enhancing communication with fellow staff in the department, faculty and across the university. They should collect ideas on how to best implement online pedagogies with creativity and how to generate in free-associating novel ideas that will enable mapping a way forward.

h) Universities should mobilise adequate financial resources in order to facilitate and maintain the use of ICT in teaching and learning.

i) University management and teaching staff should give priority to students in their final years of study because they are eager to complete. They should interest them in embracing ODeL and prepare them to go an extra mile so that they join the job market.

j) Practical courses should be given additional time to enable academic staff and students meet for face-to-face sessions to compensate for what would have been missed during the semester and ensure learning for practical skills takes place.

k)  Parents should be officially informed about their children's online learning so that they can facilitate them with data and smart phones or computers.

l)  The programming of the online systems such as ERP, Zoon, Jitsi, Google Meet, Webex should be made compatible with the android phones in order for the students to have access with ease because some students claimed their phones could not access.

m)  Learning and teaching materials should be availed to the students on their WhatsApp platforms which takes less data as compared to ERP, Zoon, Jitsi, Google Meet, and Webex.

n)  Universities should provide necessary equipment to enable teaching staff to navigate the online teaching as a motivation to both lecturers and students. Access to the online software that are used during online lessons should be accessed free of charge.

## Conclusion

Academic institutions were not ready for online teaching and learning (Lugaaju, 2021) and progressive re-opening of education institutions is the right approach since there is general lack of resources and the attitude towards ODeL has not changed (Katusabe-Ssemwezi, 2021; Katusiimeh, 2012). Keeping the education system partially open is one step in the right direction to avoid children from lagging behind and crippling institutions and their staff. Academic institutions need resources to equip themselves with digital classrooms and get ready for holistic ODeL training (Karibwije, 2021; Massa, 2020; Mawji, 2021). It should be noted that the country has a good number of unprivileged children who will be left out if we promote online education rather than a blended mode of online and face-to-face (OECD, 2020). The continued stay at home resulted into escalated child abuse and domestic violence cases (Nabukeera, 2020; UN, 2020) which will result into many unrepairable damages and consequences.

## References

Akandwanaho, R. (2020). *Education ministry bans charging of fees for online teaching.* https://apearlnews.com/s2018/2020/07/10/education-ministry-bans-charging-of-fees-for-online-teaching/html, retrieved, November, 2020.

Azorín, C. (2020). Beyond COVID-19 supernova. Is another education coming? *Journal of Professional Capital and Community*.

Carley, K. (1990). *Content analysis. In: the encyclopedia of language and linguistics*. Edinburgh: Pergamon Press.

Cole, F. L. (1988). Content analysis: process and application. *Clinical Nurse Specialist, 2*(1), 53-57.

Daniel, J. (2020). Education and the COVID-19 pandemic. *Prospects, 49*(1), 91-96.

Downe-Wamboldt, B. (1992). Content analysis: method, applications, and issues. *Health Care for Women International, 13*(3), 313-321.

Fingal, J. S. a. D. (2020). *10 strategies for online learning during a coronavirus outbreak* https://www.iste.org/explore/learning-during-covid-19/10-strategies-online-learning-during-coronavirus-outbreak/html, retrieved, May, 2020.

Independent. (2020, January 10). Gov't to enhance digital, distance learning amidst COVID-19. *Indepenent*. https://www.independent.co.ug/govt-to-enhance-digital-distance-learning-amidst-covid-19/html

Karibwije, D. (2021, July). Education: Market for e-learning growing. *New Vision*. https://www.newvision.co.ug/articledetails/110590,html

Katusabe-Ssemwezi, M. G. (2021, August). Is online learning possible for Uganda's education system? *New Vision*. https://www.newvision.co.ug/articledetails/107588,html

Katusiimeh, M. (2012, September). Increasing educational inequality is a time bomb. *Monitor*. https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/oped/commentary/increasing-educational-inequality-is-a-time-bomb-3515848,html

Lim, M. (2020, April). Educating despite the Covid-19 outbreak: lessons from Singapore. *Times Higher Education*. https://www.timeshighereducation.com/blog/educating-despite-covid-19-outbreak-lessons-singapore, html

Lugaaju, G. (2021, August). Universities devise catch-up plans to make up for lost learning time. *Monitor*. https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/news/education/universities-devise-catch-up-plans-to-make-up-for-lost-learning-time-3513216, html

Madinah, N. (2020). The COVID-19 pandemic: Economic effects and government measures in Uganda. *SARJANA, 35*(1), 10-22.

Massa, A. (2020, September). E- learning: The best bet during lockdown worth gov't support. *New Vision*. https://www.newvision.co.ug/articledetails/297,html

Mawji, A. (2021, September). Lessons from the lockdown: Equality, equity in education. *Monitor*. https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/oped/commentary/lessons-from-the-lockdown-equality-equity-in-education-3308364,html

Mayring, P. (2004). Qualitative content analysis. *A Companion to Qualitative Research, 1*(2), 159-176.

Monitor. (2020, January). Online classes become the new normal. *Monitor*. https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/news/education/online-classes-become-the-new-normal-1896772/html

Nabukeera, M. (2020). Prevention and response to gender-based violence (GBV) during novel Covid-19 lock-down in Uganda. *The Journal of Adult Protection*.

Nabukeera, M. S. (2020). COVID-19 and online education during emergencies in higher education: A case study of Islamic University in Uganda Females Campus. *Archives of Business Review*, *8*(5), 183-190.

Observer. (2020, October). MPs want govt to declare 2020 'dead academic year. *Observer.* https://observer.ug/news/headlines/65722-mps-tell-govt-to-declare-2020-dead-academic-year/html

OECD. (2020). The impact of COVID-19 on student equity and inclusion: Supporting vulnerable students during school closures and school re-openings. https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/the-impact-of-covid-19-on-student-equity-and-inclusion-supporting-vulnerable-students-during-school-closures-and-school-re-openings-d593b5c8/html, retrieved, August, 2020.

Reporter, E. (2020, December). Universities get ready for online classes via Zoom. *Busiweek. https://www.busiweek.com/kampala-parents-school-gets-ready-for-online-classes-via-zoom/html,*

Rwebiita, M. K. (2020, September). Uganda: Open letter to President Museveni - Decision not to reopen schools may do more harm than good. *All Africa.* https://allafrica.com/stories/202006180262.html

Tumwesige, J. (2020). COVID-19 Educational disruption and response: Rethinking e-Learning in Uganda. *University of Cambridge.*

UN. (2020). The challenge of monitoring quality in distance education https://dakar.iiep.unesco.org/sites/default/files/fields/publication_files/note_1_-_1206_-_the_challenge_of_monitoring_quality_in_distance_education.pdf, retrieved, August, 2021.

UNESCO. (2020). UNESCO's support: Educational response to COVID-19. https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse/support/html, retrieved, May, 2020.

World Bank (2020). How countries are using edtech (including online learning, radio, television, texting) to support access to remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/edutech/brief/how-countries-are-using-edtech-to-support-remote-learning-during-the-covid-19-pandemic/html, retrieved, May, 2020.