Article title: The Digital Divide in the Context of E-Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Zimbabwean Perspective
Authors: Paul Svongoro[1]
Affiliations: Faculty of Arts and Humanities, University of the Western Cape, South Africa[1]
Orcid ids: 0000-0002-3186-339X[1]
Contact e-mail: 4080786@myuwc.ac.za
License information: This work has been published open access under Creative Commons Attribution License http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. Conditions, terms of use and publishing policy can be found at https://www.scienceopen.com/.
Preprint statement: This article is a preprint and has not been peer-reviewed, under consideration and submitted to UnisaRxiv for open peer review.
DOI: 10.25159/UnisaRxiv/000041.v1
Preprint first posted online: 12 July 2022
Keywords: COVID-19, online learning, equity, access
The Digital Divide in the Context of E-Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Zimbabwean Perspective

Paul Svongoro  
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3186-339X  
University of the Western Cape, South Africa  
4080786@myuwc.ac.za

Abstract

In this study, I examine the ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic had an impact on students from different family backgrounds studying in higher education institutions (HEIs) in Zimbabwe. When Zimbabwe implemented lockdown measures in line with the health regulations by the World Health Organization, the government directed all institutions of learning to migrate from face-to-face teaching and learning to online delivery of lessons. However, for institutions, lecturers and students alike, the directive was not supported by providing the prerequisite funding for equipment and related needs. Consequently, the government’s directive caused serious concerns related to access, equity and inclusion in education. For instance, for students to access learning and materials in the new normal, they needed access to electronic devices, stable and affordable broadband and an environment that is conducive to the learning process.  

Unfortunately, in Zimbabwe, access to online teaching and learning resources is uneven. Only a few students from privileged families can afford resources for online learning. For the vast majority of students, the cost of tablets and broadband remains beyond the reach of their families. In addition, the living conditions at home for most families are not always suitable for engagement in online learning activities.

Data for this study were collected through online focus group discussions conducted with both students and lecturers from six universities in Zimbabwe. Apart from this, data were also collected through a semi-structured survey on Google Forms administered via email to both students and lecturers from the selected universities. To understand fully the ways in which HEIs migrated to online learning and the ways in which students from different family backgrounds and institutions alike adapted to the new online learning practices, there is a need for a thoroughly considered framework that can be used to analyse these ways. For the analysis of the data collected for this study, I adopted the framework proposed by Khan (2001) who suggests eight dimensions and sub-dimensions in his e-learning framework. This framework takes into consideration factors that affect the successful delivery of e-learning at three levels: student, academic staff and institutional levels.
The Khan framework requires HEIs to evaluate their learning environments by constantly interrogating the resources they require to offer the best, meaningful and flexible learning contexts for their students. The institutional aspect of the framework is concerned with issues of administrative affairs, academic affairs and student services. The pedagogical aspect of e-learning refers to teaching and learning. The technological dimension of the framework examines issues of technology infrastructure in e-learning environments. The aspect of interface design refers to the overall outlook of e-learning programmes. The management dimension of e-learning refers to the maintenance of the e-learning environment and distribution of related information. The resource support dimension of the framework examines the online support and resources provided in the learning environment. The evaluation dimension explores the assessment of students and the evaluation of the instruction and learning environment. Finally, the ethical considerations of e-learning relate to social and cultural diversity.

In the context of Khan’s eight-dimensional framework, I examine the level of preparedness among Zimbabwe’s HEIs for online learning and the extent to which they were ready to provide the best and most meaningful flexible learning environments for students regardless of perceived and real differences in the backgrounds of the students. The analysis of the data collected for the study suggests that, as regards Zimbabwe’s higher education sector, the pandemic confirmed the divide between rich and poor students because most students who were expected to participate in online teaching and learning activities were unable to do so consistently. In this paper, I therefore argue that despite commendable progress made over the past two decades to expand access to higher education the COVID-19 pandemic has shown that further efforts are needed at the institutional, student and academic staff level, particularly in the developing world, to minimise barriers to online learning. These efforts should ensure that all students in higher education and learners in schools and other learning settings experience a genuinely inclusive e-learning environment.

**Keywords:** COVID-19; online learning; equity; access

**References**