



A narrative case study on the experiences, responses and challenges faced by private HEI's during COVID-19 pandemic lockdown - A case of MOSA University, Zambia.

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Abstract: *This narrative case report assessed the challenges imposed by COVID-19 related lockdown and restrictions on the operations of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Zambia. It also gives importance to understand the experiences and lessons learnt on a new normal situation. The documents for this narrative case study were collected from the published studies in English through Books, Internet and search engines, and a systematic search in the websites of organizations and international forums concerned with education sector. The compilation of the narrative case study report was done based on the department teaching learning plans, management reports and experience sharing of faculty & management team of MOSA University, Zambia from March to December 2020. The key result of the narrative case study report shows that, private universities completely collapsed in initial month's lockdowns but off late it was managed with limited resources and skilled manpower at minimum level. The important lesson most universities are learnt is that, COVID-19 has dramatically reshaped the way of teaching and learning activities should go along with using virtual and digital strategies.*

Key Words: *Private higher education, Impact of COVID 19 on HEIs, Zambia, Online Learning, digital strategies.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

Currently, the world we live faces unprecedented challenges due to poverty, natural disaster, climate crisis, global pandemic etc. The recent COVID-19 pandemic increased the existing issues in large scale and affected almost all the sector specifically in education. Outlines some of the major challenges education sector facing due to COVID-19, which include how to continue teaching and learning in a new normal environment with COVID lockdowns and restrictions (Katharina Neureiter and Rob Jordan, 2020). Within the new normal situation, many institutions switch over from traditional way of physical teaching learning into online learning. It also crippled with issues of technical knowledge, internet connectivity, lack of resources etc. It resulted that the weaknesses in higher education establishment across the world have been magnified and exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic issue. With the above knowledge, this narrative case study report discusses the issues and challenges faced by private higher education institutions (HEIs) in 2020 due to COVID-19 lockdown restrictions.

2. AIM AND STRUCTURE OF THE NARRATIVE STUDY:

The principal author¹ of this of the narrative case study is a former Vice Chancellor to MOSA University and Co-Author² is a key aide and former Dean of Health Sciences, both experimented most of narratives mentioned in this study by themselves with support from the management during their tenure with MOSA University.

This narrative study report focus on four key areas:

1. Higher education ecosystem in Zambia
2. Impact of COVID 19 lockdown on the teaching learning operation of MOSA University
3. Response and best practice to minimize COVID 19 lockdown impact on teaching learning activities
4. Conclusion and way forward

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concerned with education sector. Key words that were used in the search include: COVID 19, Impact on Education sector, HEIs in Zambia, Online learning in Zambia. In addition, the unpublished internal documents of MOSA University also reviewed and key people from management including departmental heads, deans and administrators also contacted for receiving and cross checking of first-hand information.

3. HIGHER EDUCATION ECO-SYSTEM IN ZAMBIA: THE BRIEF BACKGROUND:

In Zambia, General education system follows five-tier hierarchy that includes early childhood education, primary school, junior secondary, senior secondary and tertiary or higher education. Higher education refers to any structured and schematized learning that takes place in recognised learning institutions that award certificates, diplomas and degrees acquired after secondary or high school, to further one's education according to Act No. 23 of 2021, The Higher Education (Amendment) Act 2021. Higher education includes universities, colleges, institutes, trades, seminaries and specialized job training institutions (Mkandawire, 2017).

When Zambia got independence, the provision of higher education was in the hands of state driven initiatives. During that time, there are two different higher education areas existed in which one is specifically addressing teacher education and the other technical and further education. Later, the private sector was allowed to neither own nor run any higher education institution as part of liberalization of education policies (Daniel L. Mpolomoka, Z *et al*, 2018). The liberalization of the higher education by the Government was expanded to the scope of many Zambian youths to get access to higher education. Currently in Zambia, there are 9 public universities coupled with 54 private universities, operating in higher education sector which attains significant growth that has improved over the years and providing for access to the education. Still Zambia suffers from a significant undersupply of higher education. Current tertiary enrolment rates across Africa stand at roughly 8 per cent; in Zambia 3.6 percent – well below the global average of 32 per cent. This contributes to low wages and a shortage of skills and talents. In most African countries there are not enough student places to satisfy demand including Zambia (Katharina Neureiter and Rob Jordan, 2020). Hence Private sector institutions and investors have an important role to play.

It is in this background, MOSA University, a private higher learning institution offering health science, teacher's education and business courses from 2017 onwards and registered under Higher Education Authority (HEA) of Zambia as private higher learning institution to support national interest. MOSA was established in 2004 as a Teacher Education College by late Lewis James Banda, a Zambian Educationist and Entrepreneur and later converted as full-fledged university college from 2012. As of January 2020, there were 658 students enrolled in various programmes under full time and distance learning.

4. IMPACT OF COVID 19 LOCKDOWN ON MOSA DAILY OPERATIONS:

The Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) was first reported in November, 2019 in Wuhan, China and in less than six months, it had become a global crisis. Globally, the pandemic has claimed more than 500, 000 lives (Marirajan & Narayani, 2020). Zambia documented its first confirmed COVID-19 cases on 18th March, 2020 and the Government of the Republic of Zambia (GRZ) has started taking actions to control the virus from spreading extensively, including school closures.

Based on the directives from Government Republic of Zambia (GRZ) and Ministry of Higher Education, MOSA university was closed on 18th March, 2020 well in advance to the deadline which is on 20th March 2020 as a step to restraining large congregation of people at one time in one place. Later GRZ further restricted any meetings of people more than 50 with Golden rules of COVID guidelines. Due to total and partial lockdowns have been implemented in HEIs in Zambia, encouraged to go with either completely shut down or shifted to remote learning aided by Information Communication Technology (ICT). This has resulted in disruption of learning for more than 650 student's community for three months with complete shutdown since MOSA didn't have online facility though running distance education programme due to its location which is remote in nature with less internet connectivity. This national lockdown heavily affected poorer students and institutionally vulnerable tertiary institutions disproportionately according to the statement shared by Vice chancellor of MOSA to the academics who participated in the discussion, themed "Impact of a Pandemic: Global perspectives" which was held in November 2020 virtually from India, Ukrainian and Zambia. The extent and nature of the corona virus crisis is unparalleled and will have a long-lasting impact on the Zambian economy and society. COVID-19 represents an immense economic hit to higher education. In general, student dormitory rooms are unoccupied, play grounds persist empty, and students push back besides paying full tuition fees. MOSA as private HEIs, fully depend on tuition fees collecting from the students. The collection of student fees completely stopped at one stage up to June 2020 even though MOSA managed E-Learning with partially successful and struggled to adapt to the economic damage produced as a result of the pandemic. In



addition to this, admission numbers also dropped down and a large proportion of student fees went unpaid, academic staff were furloughed or deprived of their salaries. As instructed by the GRZ directives, three-month salary was unpaid from April to June and half salaries were paid in the remaining part of 2020. Almost half of the staff team left the job and search others means of life which created negative impact on the overall image of the institution among staff and student's community.

5. RESPONSE AND BEST PRACTICE TO COVID 19 SITUATIONS:

5.1. DISTANCE LEARNING:

Before the COVID-19 pandemic set in, MOSA University conducting distance learning studies were receiving assignments from their students via post and email. Following the closure of learning institutions in Zambia due to COVID-19, MOSA University started offering distance learning resident programme through recorded lessons. Lessons were taught through Zoom App and recorded in offline mode. The offline videos, PowerPoint presentations and detailed notes stored in MOSA G-cloud. The G-cloud links generated and shared via student WhatsApp groups. Further questions and answers encouraged and handled in the group by the individual lecturer who is the admin to the group. Finally, a conventional two-week residential programme transformed into Blended learning practices which generated 350 video lectures (Approximately 15,750 hours) and volume of class notes as feature reference.

5.2. ONLINE TEACHING:

Due to lessons learnt from distance learning and encouragement from University council, MOSA built a low cost studio with basic recording and online teaching facility in May, 2020. With new added facility, online classes initiated via Zoom App / Google Meet for health science courses after two months of closure from May, 2020. A training programme organized to the lecturers in order to equip them on E-Learning process. Part of the training programme, they learnt the skills of handling classes via Google class rooms, video recording, uploading etc. The class tutor created Google class room for their classes and enrolled the students for online classes. The regular class zoom links are posted in group and students joint on fixed time and question answer session also done. The objective type class tests administered with stipulated time frame using google forms and even marked online itself. Despite MOSA efforts to ensure equitable access to learning, poorer students in remote villages are struggled with network issues, less able to afford the android cell phone, laptop, data and airtime costs which disadvantaged them by missing real-time classes and question answer sessions. Off let, each real-time lesson recorded as offline video and posted in YouTube and links were shared in the google class rooms. On the whole, Internet connectivity proved to be a hindrance to conducting e-learning classrooms in real time. Recorded video and audio lectures were frequently used to deliver contents to the learners.

Since we are used education based social media tools and forced lecturers to deliver their 'normal' lectures through the online platforms without the supportive interactive features of e-learning, which may not be engaging for students. There is hence need to train the lecturers on converting their courses to e-learning mode, and to motivate them to invest the time and effort required to do the actual conversion. All these scattered efforts motivated university management to look for Learning Management System (LMS). MOSA tried with Open source LMS such as Camelio and Moodle and finally settled with Moodle which provide back end support through some IT expert from Zambia. Now Moodle platform linked with MOSA website (www.mosauniversity.org) and students are given user name and password for individual log in.

MOSA as a small private university located in less advantaged remote area to serve the needy population, completely collapsed due to COVID-19 which created new normal situation but off late managed the situation with limited resources at minimum level. Still students are disadvantaged when comparing with big players within the sector. In the Zambian context, in which universities enjoy significant institutional and financial autonomy amid increasing budgetary instability, government actions to level the playing field may be considered that much more important. At least, a national scheme to ensure that poorer students could access the laptops required for online learning was dogged by delays. It is evident that, many big players in education sector already experienced do have online platforms in use, but equipment and software are often out of date or inadequate. Internet connectivity is also problematic in remote teaching; although the internet connection might be excellent on university campuses, the quality of the connections varies in teachers' and students' homes and off-campus offices. Another issue that came up from our experience was the attitude towards online teaching among both teachers and students. Due to the pandemic, a large part of teaching has been enforced to take place online, and the situation has been hostile to many. Teachers and students struggle with keeping the lectures as interactive as in classroom teaching, and using digital platforms often causes additional work for teachers.



5.3. UPGRADATION OF E-LIBRARY:

Considerable experiment gained through online teaching created positive atmosphere within the university environment which motivated university management to increase its E-Library resources. Before COVID-19, it was used as computer lab. Now it was converted as digital library with 24 hours' internet connectivity. MOU's signed with Zambia library consortium & Research for Life which gave access to more than 1.5 million e-books which includes medical science books at free of cost. In addition to this, increase the capacity of academia research added with research management tools like Qiqqa and Mendeley - Research and reference manager opens software for write up and create bibliographies instantly, Calibra E-Library for shorting PDF files and for checking plagiarism these is a plagiarism Checker and SPSS 26.6 for data analysis was inserted and implemented.

6. CONCLUSION AND WAY FORWARD:

Finally, COVID-19 has dramatically reshaped the way of teaching and learning in education delivered in MOSA which resulted in sudden shift away from classrooms by using virtual and digital strategies. Now, MOSA believe that the adoption of online distance learning will persist after pandemic and new scenario needs to be harnessed in proper way for the growth of the institution as well as for national development. To way forward, GRZ should help and support the private higher education institutions to develop the capacity of digital strategy of teaching and learning.

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