

**Master of Education students' experiences and views towards use of WhatsApp platform in lecture deliveries during Covid-19 lockdown at a university in Zimbabwe**

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**Abstract**

*The subsequent lockdown of schools and universities world over, in response to the Covid-19 pandemic has led these institutions to adapt more online modes of teaching so as to mitigate the effects of disruption to learning. Using a qualitative case study design, this research explored and assessed how a class of Master of Curriculum Studies students at a state university in Zimbabwe used the WhatsApp platform in their lectures. Two platforms were at their disposal, that is, Google Classroom and WhatsApp platform but students opted for the WhatsApp platform for its perceived affordability. The students engaged in lectures via the WhatsApp platform for three weeks during the lockdown period and were being guided by their lecturer in two Curriculum Studies modules. The students who had been purposively selected were asked to complete a questionnaire which had unstructured questions on what they liked and disliked about their experiences during the three-week learning conducted on the WhatsApp platform and the improvement thereof. The findings revealed that most students benefited and enjoyed using the WhatsApp platform in their learning. Participants also endorsed the platform indicating that it enabled learners to access the material which was recorded on the platform, something which does not normally happen with the face-to-face mode. It was concluded that if appropriately used, the WhatsApp platform could be a competitive platform for teaching and learning even in higher education. It is recommended that with smartphone affordances such as WhatsApp platform students and lecturers could engage in several interactive learning activities outside the four walls of the lecture room, especially where 'social distancing' and non-face-to-face contact were to be adhered to.*

**Keywords:** Virtual online platforms; Covid-19; Google class; WhatsApp; Lockdown;

**Introduction and background**

The outbreak in 2019 of Covid-19, one of the world's deadliest pandemics which is particularly caused by a coronavirus, has disrupted almost all sectors of the economy. Covid-19 proved to be among the deadliest ever experienced epidemics in the world, having passed the one million deaths mark by 30 September 2020. The World Health Organisation (WHO) encouraged all countries to find strategies to contain the spread of the incurable virus. Zimbabwe, like all countries of the world, instituted lockdown measures, which included

closure of all her learning institutions on 24 March, 2020. Other mitigatory measures the government put in place include practicing of social distance, regular washing of hands, using sanitizers and wearing face masks. Since the Zimbabwe education sector had been hit hard by the corona virus Government directed that all traditional contact lessons remain suspended (The Herald of 25May 2020).

At the institution under study, the subsequent closure of all higher education institutions in Zimbabwe, coincided with the onset of their block release sessions which are normally taken up by practicing teachers. In Zimbabwe, block release is synonymous with part-time studies and is conducted by universities mostly during school vacations for those students in the education sector. Primary and secondary schools in Zimbabwe hardly felt the impact of the Covid-19 onset since it coincided with the closure of the schools for the April holidays. This was in contrast to the universities' situation. Closure of schools normally marks the beginning of university block sessions. Hence, any decision by universities to postpone the teaching of enrolled students or to defer their running programmes would trigger ripple effects that would complicate the semesterisation system. Incidentally, Government had directed that all first year university students in Zimbabwe were to simultaneously begin the proposed 5.0 Curriculum in the August 2020 semester, hence failure to teach the students who were already in the system could further complicate the university teaching and learning calendar. It was in this context that universities and other higher education institutions, in Zimbabwe, similarly affected by the Covid-19 lockdown regulations, had to migrate to online learning to ensure that learning went on as planned for the registered students.

Electronic Platform for Adult Learning in Europe (EPALE2020) proposes that since Covid-19 has negatively affected the lives of many people, including learners, there was need to further explore online teaching for learning opportunities. Responding to the effects of Covid-19 on education, Ngalomba (2020) comments that "it is imperative for schools and universities to look at how technological platforms can be used to ensure that learning and teaching processes go ahead in the context of Covid-19 especially for populations in developing countries where internet and power supply are unreliable." However, online teaching requires careful thinking about how learners and teachers could be equipped for the enforced shift from face-to-face to online teaching and learning. There is also need to seriously consider whether the teaching style would still be effective when taken out of the classroom and transposed onto technological devices (EPALE, 2020). Zhang (2019) has

identified challenges associated with mobile learning, particularly using smartphone gadgets. These challenges include poor internet access or lack of uninterrupted connectivity, exorbitant data costs for downloading or uploading educational videos, and small screens among others.

In a related case, Benjamin (2011) observes that the use and uptake of mobile phones by the South African population, especially university students, has been impressive over the past years. Surprisingly, however, empirical evidence on meaningful appropriation of cell phones, especially mobile instant messaging (MIM), for academic purposes remains disappointingly low in South Africa (Benjamin, 2011). A similar situation currently obtains in Zimbabwe where most of the population apparently uses mobile phones largely for communication purposes only. It is therefore important to encourage universities in Zimbabwe to exploit the opportunities provided by the Covid-19 pandemic to adopt online and mobile learning. This is apparently urgent in a globalising world where it is increasingly becoming the norm for lecturers and students to use technologically-enhanced online learning tools in order to “learn, study, and qualify in your chosen subject online without having to attend an exam center, a college building, or university campus” (Sagedhi, 2019:80). UNESCO (2020) provides a list of some of the digital learning management systems institutions could use as follows:

Moodle, which is a free open source software designed to help educators create effective online courses;

Google Classroom, which helps students and teachers organise assignments, boost collaboration, and foster better communication;

Docebo, which is a service offering a learning management system focusing on professional development;

Blackboard, which offers solutions, resources and tools to help deliver quality online teaching;

Edmodo, which is a tool for educators to send messages, share class materials, and make learning accessible for students anywhere;

Skooler, which is a system exclusively and fully integrated with Microsoft Office 365;

Ekstep, which offers a collection of literacy and numeracy learning resources and the chance to create new ones;

Cell-Ed, which is designed to meet the needs of adult learners;

LabXchange, which is an online community for learning, sharing, and collaboration, and

Quizlet, which is a mobile and web-based study application that allows learning and teaching through tools and games.

Whilst the above platforms could be very effective in developed countries where information technology gadgets, power and internet/Wi-Fi facilities are affordable to the majority, in developing countries such as Zimbabwe, these are accessible to only a few. EPALE argues that:

...inequalities are exacerbated when it comes to access to technology and to digital devices. Many learners suffer a form of digital inequality whereby they lack the connections and devices to learn remotely. In fact, this outbreak [Covid-19] widens the gap between those able to access digital learning opportunities and those who are shut out. Access is not equal, and we see inequality growing(<https://epale.ec.europa.eu/>)

The institution under study was no exception. The institutionally preferred online platform was Google Classroom, a platform which requires someone to use a computer or smartphone connected to Wi-Fi/internet. Most of the students at the institution under study had no laptops and no or negligible access to Wi-Fi save for a few of those who live in urban areas. There had also not been any significant training on the application of Google classroom for both staff and students by the time Covid-19 struck. The other alternative was to use the WhatsApp platform facility on students' mobile phones which some had initially believed could be used for social communication purposes only. It would be for the first time that lecturers and students were to harness the WhatsApp platform as a tool for teaching and learning. Hence, the researchers endeavoured to establish the experiences and views of the Masters in Education (M.Ed.) Curriculum students on how lectures for their modules were conducted using the WhatsApp platform.

Views of earlier researchers confirm that the WhatsApp platform could be effectively used for educational processes. Rambe and Bere (2012) contend that WhatsApp platform could be a lever for bridging access to peer-generated resources, heightening on-task behaviour and

promoting meaningful context-free learning. Culer (2017), on the other hand, avers that the WhatsApp platform is a useful assessment tool for both anonymous and non-anonymous peer assessment in a classroom environment in higher education. Gon and Rawekar(2017) in their study of undergraduate medicine students in India compared WhatsApp platform and traditional face-to-face didactic lectures and established that there was no significant difference in the knowledge gained through the two delivery modes. In another study to explore university students' perceptions on the impact of WhatsApp on educational processes Cetinkaya (2017) recommended that researches be conducted on the impact of the WhatsApp platform in other courses other than languages. This current study thus sought to explore how WhatsApp was used to teach M. Ed Curriculum Studies students at a university in Zimbabwe during the Covid-19 lockdown period, focusing primarily on the students' experiences and views of the learning mode. The results of the study could add on to the knowledge existing on the teaching/learning platforms used in higher education, particularly in developing countries where resources such as electricity, Wi-Fi /internet, or computers are not easily accessible to the majority. The study would be amongst a few to explore the use of the WhatsApp platform in higher education teaching/learning particularly in a Covid-19 context where direct contact learning is restricted. Other sectors of education could also benefit from the results.

### **Statement of the problem**

The global outbreak of Covid-19 in 2020 and in Zimbabwe in particular, has led to lockdowns in all sectors of the economy and suspension of all face-to-face tuition in all educational institutions. Institutions of higher learning such as universities have had to grapple with the situation through adapting to different online teaching and learning platforms such as those listed by UNESCO above in this study. The limited time Zimbabwean universities were given to adopt online learning, coupled with lack of computers and laptops, lack of access to unlimited Wi-Fi and reliable power led most universities, including the one under study to prefer WhatsApp as the most affordable platform. Although globally, mobile learning has been operational for some time now, what may be at issue could be its slow uptake in Zimbabwean institutions, especially the smartphone provisions. Thus, this study sought to explore how students of the M. Ed Curriculum Studies modules felt about the WhatsApp platform as a mode of teaching and learning.

### **Research objectives**

The study sought to:

- Assess the M.Ed. Curriculum Studies students' experiences and views of the WhatsApp platform as a teaching and learning mode at university level.
- Suggest possible strategies to improve on the use of WhatsApp as a teaching and learning platform at higher education level.

### **Literature Review**

Ngalomba (2020) posits that WhatsApp is primarily a communication application but shares a number of features with social media applications. Gon and Rawekar (2017) assert that the WhatsApp platform is a free messenger application that works across multiple platforms and is being widely used among undergraduate students to send educational multimedia messages such as photos, videos, audios along with simple text messages. It is indisputable that the WhatsApp platform has been one of the mostly used social media platforms both in business and social life. WOZTEL (2020) observes that the WhatsApp platform has more than a billion users and it is impossible for such a clientele not to reach education. It is therefore beneficial for educators and institutions to use the platform in their educational processes. In their study, Church and de Oliveira (2013) emphasise this fact and state that the WhatsApp platform has grown in popularity due to its benefits such as being able to send real-time messages to an individual or groups of friends simultaneously, low-cost, and privacy. Users of WhatsApp can send educational texts, audios, pictures, photos, PDFs and also videos. WhatsApp messages can also sync via smart phones or laptops. If one has a good handset, preferably an android smartphone with a large memory, one can perform several functions. However, such handsets are not affordable to most students in developing countries such as Zimbabwe, meaning that there are latent challenges to the use of mobile technology for educational purposes. The WhatsApp platform, as shown above, can be used for social life communications such as chats as well as in business and education. Rambe and Chipunza (2013:335) also observe that the platform supports knowledge sharing between students, and between students and teachers. In their study students described WhatsApp as a 'communication, transnational platform' where students can express themselves freely in a non-restricted environment, thus removing the low participation constraints characteristic of traditional lectures.

In support of the view that the WhatsApp platform could be used for teaching and learning, Bansal and Joshi(2014)agree that learning through the platform has educational benefits such as immediate feedback to the problem; learning on the move; deeper clarity on issues; revision of previously learned topics; learning from others' problems; healthy discussions; and availability of learning material all the time.Ngaleka and Uys (2013) also argue that WhatsApp enables learning beyond the classroom borders and that the high accessibility of students' questions to teachers could potentially enhance the learning process. There is also increased student collaboration outside the classroom, without the influence of the instructor. Over and above, the level of interaction between students and teachers in online environments promotes a sense of social connectivity among them(Balaji&Chakrabarti, 2010). The current study explored the experiences and views of M. Ed Curriculum students in Zimbabwe about the potential benefits and challenges related to using the WhatsApp platform under Covid-19 lockdown regulations.

All the above cited affordances could be exploited by lecturers and teachers to effect online teaching and learning during and after the Covid-19 pandemic. Thus, the effectiveness and efficiency of teaching and learning using the WhatsApp platform lie strongly on the innovativeness and ingenuity of the lecturer/teacher and the group or individuals taught. Robles, Guerrero, Llinás and Montero (2019) bemoan that empirical evidence on meaningful academic appropriation of smartphones, especially mobile instant messaging (MIM) remain disappointingly low. Whether these claims could be true or not is what we intend to unravel through our study, particularly whether the M.Ed. students' experiences and views suggest that they have benefited or not benefited from learning through the WhatsApp platform. Ngalomba (2020) intimates that using social media for academic purposes is less common but argues that there is potential for universities to exploit it. Thus, the current study endeavoured to tear this line by contributing on how WhatsApp could enhance academic learning at university level.

However, Gon and Rawekar (2017) note that some disadvantages of using the WhatsApp platform, including message flooding and eyestrain, could be overruled by creating small groups and using mobile phones with bigger screens. Ngalomba (2020) suggests an enabling of Wi-Fi in the college campus and negotiating with network service providers to constantly

supply such. However, these facilities need to be spread out to the far-dispersed students who have been barred from accessing university campuses. It is therefore pertinent to gather the experiences and views of the M.Ed. students on the effectiveness or otherwise of the WhatsApp platform as educational platform during stringent Covid-19 conditions.

### **Methodology**

The study employed a qualitative case study to establish the experiences and views of the students under study about the WhatsApp platform lectures they had been exposed to during the Covid-19 lockdown period. A case study permits a deep and thorough study or understanding of a phenomenon or case. Results of a case study are only particular about that case and cannot be generalised although the results can be transferrable to other settings. In this study the case was the Master of Education in Curriculum Studies group which was being taught by one of the researchers. The class comprised fourteen students in their second year, first semester level. The students came from different parts of Zimbabwe and two were from Namibia, meaning that during Covid-19 lockdown the students were geographically dispersed. The group comprised mature, seasoned professionals, all of whom were in-service teachers studying for their last written modules before they could embark on the dissertation project, their last module before they graduate. They were taught two Curriculum Studies modules by the same lecturer and the views of their experiences were solely based on how they interacted with the lecturer in those two modules. The students never met with the lecturers for the whole block period. They were informed through WhatsApp chats at the beginning of the block session of the mode of learning they were going to use and reasons why they were to embark on online learning. Students had been offered two options of learning to choose from, that is, Google Classroom and WhatsApp and they had opted for the latter as the majority of them could not afford laptops or computers connected to unlimited Wi-Fi and regular supply of electricity.

### *Study setting*

Since this was the first time students were engaged formally on the WhatsApp learning platform by the lecturers, the engagement was unique and indeed warranted study. Module outlines and assignments were all distributed on the platform. Before the beginning of the lectures the lecturer emphasised and encouraged students to embrace the new normal that had been induced by the Covid-19 pandemic that resulted in lectures taking place online. Students



were reassured of the quality of lectures. They were reminded of how curriculum and pedagogy should respond to the needs of the society and that the adoption of the online mode of learning was some form of innovation to mitigate on curriculum challenges. The lecturer shared some ground rules with the group. Key amongst the rules were: respect for the timetable; respect for each other's ideas; no posting of any materials outside what the group is intended for; presentations should be uploaded prior to presentation and, lastly, that every student would have a chance to make a presentation of his/her allocated topic and to chair at least one presentation session. Responses from either lecturer or students were to be in audio or written text. The lecturer would sometimes use audio and/or print to deliver the lessons. Any changes on the regular timetable would be announced when the lecturer and students met for their lectures.

Communication would also follow the normal channel, that is, students would air their views through their group representative. However, the lecturer made it clear that students could inbox him whenever they felt there was need. It was the group representative who created the two chat groups for the two modules that they were taught by the lecturer. In most cases, lectures would last for at least two hours. The lectures took the mode of lecture presentations and individual seminar presentations. For seminar presentations students were given the chance to chair. The lecturer could not attend lectures on two occasions and students were asked to proceed on their own, which was possible on the WhatsApp platform. The lecturer would go through the presentation proceedings and comment. Students were given the opportunity to comment on the lecturer's comments. Students were asked to submit their individual assignments together with their write ups via the WhatsApp platform or lecturer's email. After the expiry of the three weeks students were asked to send their candid comments on how they felt about the WhatsApp platform they had used, its strengths, weaknesses and how best the mode of teaching/learning could be improved. An open-ended questionnaire was sent to all the fourteen students purposively selected for their being knowledgeable about the phenomenon under study. They all participated since all had learnt through the WhatsApp platform and hence were in a better position to comment or respond to any question regarding the matter under study. Yin (2003) observes that purposive sampling has the advantage of providing participants who are rich in information relevant to the study.

The open-ended questionnaire allowed participants to elaborate on their responses as these were not predetermined. Open ended questions provided the researchers with qualitative descriptive data typical of qualitative studies. The questionnaire was sent on the WhatsApp group to maintain social distance. To avoid infringing on their ethics, participants consented to participate in the study after they were informed of the research objectives and were assured that their views were to be treated with the highest confidentiality and were to assist the lecturer and fellow scholars. Pseudonyms were to be used in the study. Participants' responses were presented and analysed textually and thematically. To ensure credibility and confirmability of findings participants' WhatsApp texts were presented as they were for analysis and the texts were later deleted to ensure that confidentiality of participants was not compromised through traceable numbers. However, the authors could not rule out the possibility that honesty might have been compromised since one of the researchers was their lecturer although a strong plea for candid responses and clear articulation of the study objectives was made.

### **Findings**

Findings from the students revealed successes registered through using the platform, challenges and how best the platform could be used. Findings are presented under the themes: experiences, lessons learnt, challenges and suggestions. For reasons of anonymity and confidentiality pseudonyms were used.

### ***Experiences***

Almost all students, represented by the following several excerpts, expressed satisfaction with the WhatsApp delivery mode of lectures during the Covid-19 period in Zimbabwe. These excerpts testify their experiences:

*It was a learning experience as I never thought we could be meaningfully engaged in effective learning. I never missed anything right from the beginning of the semester or block session to the end.*

This was what Shamiso said.

Thandi also echoed her experiences by saying:

*I never knew that WhatsApp could be used just like a face-to-face lecture. I don't regret missing the lectures we had at Milton centre. I managed to follow every bit of the lectures online and the advantage was that if I got stuck I would replay my audio or revisit the WhatsApp texts.*

Mangi weighed in, saying:

*I enjoyed the WhatsApp platform more than anything else. To tell the truth it was far better than the face-to-face tutorials we did at Milton as we could replay every lecture session, a thing which you cannot do with face-to-face lectures. Once you have missed you have missed. With what we did you can replay the lesson session. The audio explanations or presentations which complemented the texts made the lectures more lively.*

Mary summed it thus:

*What we covered with you Prof, it was very good. We benefitted and we were following even if you replay our audios one can easily follow. I for one, think all went well kudarika zvataiita kuMilton[ it was better than how we previously did it at Milton]*

Whilst almost all participants were satisfied with the WhatsApp mode of learning that they were exposed to, we also wanted to find out what, in particular, the mode entailed. What opportunities did they have?

Francis indicated that:

*The kind of learning we went through was quite different from what I thought WhatsApp could offer. I thought it would just be limited to sending course outlines or some instructions by the lecturer but little did I know that Prof would engage us like in a real lecture room. We could engage in discussions with both the lecturer and other students just like a physical live lecture.*

Memory also had this to say:

*The live open discussions where all students could take part made the lectures interesting. For the first time I learnt also that you can also actually control the discussion on WhatsApp chat.*

Marvis indicated that one important thing she learnt and liked most about the mode of learning which was used was the opportunity to present and chair sessions. “I really enjoyed the opportunity we were given to chair sessions. This developed leadership and analytic skills amongst students. You need to address the group and Prof, give your own views about the responses and session presented”, said Marvis.

The above sentiment was also echoed by Chamunorwa, who said:

*“...we learnt how to listen to each other as group members would have divergent thinking about an issue presented. You moderate and get the group to order. I really liked the cooperation and spirit of oneness cultivated by the lecturer. We could feel as if we were one family. You could not imagine that we had some members as far away as Namibia...”*

Jetthro had this to say:

*The adoption of the new teaching method has been a breath of fresh air and a great challenge too. I feel the system has proved the fact that eLearning can be adopted as we managed to learn slightly more than we at times get from the 8am -6pm lectures. I feel the ‘classroom without borders’ was unique and ensured that we got all the lesson information even when busy with other things or not available for the lessons. We also managed to learn other responsibilities like teamwork and leadership when chairing the discussions and coordinating the learning experience and coming up with the data for assignments when not together. It has been a fruitful experience...*

The above WhatsApp chat indicates that learners were also afforded the chance to lead others through chairing sessions. Jetthro’s response shows and points to the uniqueness of the mode of learning they were exposed to in terms of its efficacy.

Memory, however, differed where she said:

*Though the lecturer was doing his best in lecture deliverance the new technological methodology treated me as an MPhil student. I feel this has taken me unawares. However, I have started to adjust and am beginning to see the advantage of being subjected to wide reading which, in a way, is developing my academic skills.*

The sentiments by Memory indicated that the mode of learning subjected students to wider reading. Further probing indicated that students had to be available for the presentations well prepared as they would be engaged in rigorous academic discourse. “The lecturer fully engaged us so much that you didn’t miss lectures. You would have to come to the lectures well-read and prepared.” Memory’s response indicated that students were so involved and engaged by the lecturer that they could not have time to sneak from the lectures.

We also sought to establish what the students liked about WhatsApp platform as a mode of learning.

#### *Likes*

*One thing I liked about the WhatsApp approach we were introduced to by the lecturer is that we managed to learn from the comfort of our homes. This time we really cut on costs-transport, accommodation and photocopying. I don’t regret buying WhatsApp bundles.*

The above statement was made by Jettthro.

Echoing the same sentiments was Chipu who had this to say; “Personally, I enjoyed this semester better than any other semesters. I didn’t experience the hurdles of moving up and down, chasing after the kombis (commuter buses) to and from school.”

The above excerpts testify that the WhatsApp mode of learning relieved students from the expenses they used to incur, particularly when they come to the institutions for their usual face-to-face block sessions.

Gabidai had a different view on what he liked about the mode of learning they were exposed to which he expressed thus:

*Unlike Google classroom which requires internet or Wi-Fi WhatsApp can work with data bundles which can be accessed even by those deep in the rural areas. Although we could not communicate face-to-face, one thing I liked about what we did was that the lecturer gave us chances to chair the discussions freely and members could also participate freely during the discussion.*

Francis indicated that he liked the organisation and time consciousness displayed by both the group members and the lecturer:

*Lectures were timetabled and the punctuality of the lecturer made us feel the seriousness of the lectures. This was completely different from what some of our colleagues in other groups experienced. The mode of learning actually enabled me to learn something about WhatsApp which I had never thought I would, and I am going to do likewise with my class. I only knew that WhatsApp was for sending social messages and not about teaching.*

Tarupiwa further emphasised that “The use of both text and audio was something which I liked about the mode of learning we were exposed to. We were permitted to use both written texts and audios, meaning that the mode implied two different senses, hearing and seeing.”

Runesu also added, “We could follow every bit of the lectures. It was just like we were in an actual classroom situation. The lecturer would present his lectures in whatever form and would even send additional literature as attachments. So insofar as learning was concerned, I don’t complain.”

Chipiwa intimated:

*I could send my assignment on WhatsApp again something which was different from the traditional face-to-face which called for hard copies. In a way this mode is more economical in terms of both time and other resources needed. I think our families also learnt something, particularly our children. They witnessed the learning experiences we went through so in fact, they were inspired somehow. The same mode of learning could be used even for our kids in schools, especially during this period of the Covid-19 lock down.*

The study also permitted respondents to indicate what they did not like about the mode of learning and an opportunity to suggest ways to improve on the method.

*What they disliked about WhatsApp platform used*

Very little was obtained in as far as the dislikes were concerned. Jethro buttresses this view where he said:

*To tell the truth in as far as learning was concerned the lecturer did all the best. There was no stone left unturned. What I can only point out as a negative was*

*perhaps the expensive nature of the bundles. However, to some of us who used to pay for accommodation during each block session, we found the costs of data bundles for WhatsApp being offset. I can't compare the costs of bundles to that of the accommodation and transport I used to pay. So, in another way it was cheaper.*

Modesto also echoed the same sentiments that the costs of data bundles were far less than the expenses they used to incur for transport and accommodation.

Monica intimated that what needed to be improved was not on the part of the lesson/lecture delivery but perhaps that the university should also pay a certain fraction towards data purchase since students would have paid full fees. She went on to add, “But otherwise as a mitigatory measure of learning we benefitted a lot more than what we used to. This mode of learning can permit even someone who was absent from the lecture to replay the lectures on the phone.”

Participants also suggested that it would be more useful if the university or Ministry were to make arrangements with network providers such as Netone, Econet or Telecel to cut down on tariffs, or to negotiate with shops which sell cellular phones so that students could buy smart phones at affordable prices “These lectures require cell phones with a larger memory capacity *kwete zvimbudzi zvedu izvi* (Not our small non-android smartphones)”, said Vusa.

## **Discussion**

The previous presentation of data points out to some positive experiences and challenges encountered by the Masters students as they were exposed to the WhatsApp learning platform during the Covid-19 lockdown period in Zimbabwe. As pointed out by EPALE (2020) Covid-19 has affected the lives of so many people and all these people and nations must explore new ways of teaching and learning. Undergirding the EPALE warning was the need for careful selection of the online teaching style as learning institutions shifted from the classroom to online platforms, hence the current study's examination of the effectiveness of the WhatsApp mode that was employed by the institution under study. Almost all participants indicated that they had experienced satisfaction with the manner the lessons were conducted by the lecturer online. To quote Matilda; “I have nothing to regret at all as we benefitted immensely from the lectures more than what we did during the face-to-face we used to have”. These sentiments were echoed by most of the participants, implying that what students were exposed to show no difference from the traditional face-to-face lectures. The WhatsApp

platform permitted students to rewind the exchanges and reactions to the presentations, something which they could not do with the traditional face-to-face lectures. The findings concur with Gon and Rawekar(2017) who established that there was no significant difference in terms of knowledge gained by students from WhatsApp and face-to-face lectures and that WhatsApp permits learners to learn beyond the classroom.

However, the fact that almost all students registered a predilection for the approach used could have stemmed from the way the lectures were presented on the WhatsApp platform. This could be a result of how their lecturer exposed the students to the WhatsApp platform as a learning mode. This finding could support Cetinkaya and Sütçü (2016) who indicated that most people and scholars think about WhatsApp being limited only to social communication purposes. Participants also expressed satisfaction on the way they were being taught. They revealed that the sessions and proceedings were officially timetabled just like for traditional face-to-face lectures. This was testimony of the success of the WhatsApp platform used by the case understudy.

It was also established that the lectures would use both audio and text messages. This implied that during the discussions both the lecturer and students would use either audio or text communication mode or both. One other experience participants liked about the mode of learning used was how presentations were organised and managed. Students were also given the opportunity to chair the presentations. This could have been a way to motivate them to attend the online lectures as well as to develop leadership skills. In support of this, Marvis intimated, "...I really enjoyed the opportunity to chair the discussion and that developed my leadership skills." Whether this could have been done in the usual face-to-face lectures but little was known about the digital dimensions proffered on the WhatsApp platform, the latter of which the majority had used mostly for social chatting. The above finding is in keeping with Rambe and Chipunza (2013) who observed that WhatsApp supports knowledge sharing between students, and between students and teachers.

It was interesting to note that some students disclosed their excitement on how one could control discussions on WhatsApp. Memory has this to say, "...for the first time I learnt also that you could actually control the discussion on WhatsApp chat. Little did I know that WhatsApp could provide such opportunities." Some Zimbabwean university students had assumed that these opportunities provided by WhatsApp were common only on platforms such as Zoom conferencing and Google conferencing. The study's findings imply that



WhatsApp can be added to the list of online platforms which are affordable to almost all (EPALE, 2020). This is because with some advanced mobile smartphones, students can conduct video chats. However, this real-time visual affordance was not experienced during the current study.

Students also cited some limitations of the platform used. The major challenges cited, although not related to the quality of lecture conduct, were on the expensive costs of mobile data and the intermittent power cuts that affected the charging of their mobile phone batteries. However, the other challenges which could have been envisaged were the shortage of android cellular phones with a large memory and capacity to store large data as well as applications to open documents in different formats. These challenges were also observed by Gon and Rawekar(2017) who indicated that a few disadvantages such as message flooding and eye strain could be overruled by using small groups and using mobile phones with bigger screen. Having efficient, reliable, and effective Wi-Fi in the college campus could make mobile learning or use cost effective.

### **Conclusion and recommendations**

From the findings discussed above we concluded that the WhatsApp platform that was studied provided Zimbabwean students with quite enriching opportunities and experiences to effective learning during the Covid-19 period that had been characterised by lockdowns and banning of face-to-face contact approaches to maintain social distancing. With the WhatsApp platform offering opportunities to present lectures, engage in discussions and post assignments, students found that alternative a very worthwhile encounter. The opportunity and advantages of replaying lecture and print-text discussions also provided a permanent reference which students could use during examination preparation and the period after. The platform could also accommodate learners who might have failed to avail themselves for the lessons as they could replay the WhatsApp sessions. Thus, the platform proved to be another competitive and vital teaching/learning tool which could be used at institutions of higher learning. Considering that there had been scepticism and suspicion on how students could gainfully learn outside the lecture room, the experiences registered some successes which some Zimbabwean universities and schools could exploit even in the post Covid-19 period. We recommend that other lecturers should not just limit the WhatsApp platform to purposes of communication alone but harness the mode for educational purposes as was proven in the

current study. Thus, with smartphones with good capacity, WhatsApp as a learning platform can compete favourably with other virtual online learning platforms such as Cell-Ed, Google Classroom, Zoom, Moodle, among others. Institutions of higher learning could engage service providers so that learners may access the services at affordable rates. However, studies on the lecturers' experiences are also of critical importance if a symbiotic balance is to be struck.

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