

Special Issue Editorial Comments: Challenges, experiences and opportunities wrought by the Covid-19 pandemic on Zimbabwe's educational terrain, 2020-2021

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Covid-19 and pedagogical upheavals

This publication claims *Special Issue* pioneer status under the flagship of the *Journal of New Vision in Educational Research*(JoNVER), of the Robert Mugabe School of Education, Great Zimbabwe University. The first special issue comes a few months after the launch and publication of the School's journal, which has so far only published its very first 2019 volume, issues 1 and 2. This special issue is therefore not about the journal's exponential scholarly growth, considering that the journal is just in its infancy. Rather, the issue is in direct response to the global pandemic, Covid-19, which struck the world in the last quarter of 2019, and has triggered an unprecedented pedagogical enigma, especially for less technologically advanced nations such as Zimbabwe. The *Special Issue* call was in the hope that participants could contribute to the debate about the education-related challenges associated with the Covid-19 pandemic as well as the possible ways to mitigate the challenges. The call was in a context where Zimbabwe, as a nation, would not countenance being left behind in terms of education, meaning that the relevant education ministries were to immediately plan for normalcy in an abnormal context.

On 24 March 2020, our university, together with all other educational institutions, were forced to close in response to the rampaging Covid-19 pandemic. Events unfolded impersonally like in science fiction; university campuses, libraries, and lecture rooms were literally padlocked or electro locked, including the guest editors' very own. Everything seemed to stand still. Soon after, Government instructed that with face-to-face tuition unworkable in the wake of Covid-19 Zimbabwe's educational institutions from tertiary to lower levels had to adopt technologically-mediated learning strategies for the remainder of 2020 in order to ensure that learning continued with negligible disturbances.

Popular learning modes in Zimbabwean universities prior to Covid-19

In most Zimbabwean universities, and indeed globally, it had been commonplace to have rooms designated as Lecture rooms 1 up to 20, or more, with properly manageable timetables. On the support side, there were functional libraries with professionally stocked

and stacked discipline-related reading materials, resource books, periodicals, journals and all. In Zimbabwe in particular, most students and lecturers had become so used to the traditional face-to-face lecture contact mode that they had not fully envisaged nor explored the virtual use of online strategies. The norm had been, in addition to the specially delivered on-the-spot oral lecture, to engage in tutorials, as well as participate in facial class group presentations and open-air group discussions. This is not to say lecturers and students were entirely unaware of, and not utilising facets of online learning. There has always been some kind of blending of learning modes in Zimbabwean institutions, though the lecturer who emphasised that students should work more alone and online was looked at with suspicion and distrust by both students and administration, both of whom expected him/her to physically and ritualistically deliver in front of the students.

Though blended learning was not uncommon, most university academic communities had not really ever thought of substituting the traditional physical classrooms for virtually virtual ones. Indeed, as two of the articles have recognised (Beans, Maireva & Muza; Mawere, Chigada & Sambo), most university senates and administrations mistrusted online pedagogy to the extent of denying promotional opportunities to staff members who had obtained qualifications via the online route. A recently creeping, though similar worry, is for institutions to be too prescriptive as to which online platform to adopt as a learning platform. Some go to the extent of saying ‘only Edmodo, Google Classroom, Blackboard or Moodle’ can be used officially in the institution. Sadly, some such decisions are taken without due consideration of the merits of the excluded platforms. Researches such as those included in this issue could help challenge these conservative misconceptions without – however, advocating for an outright discarding of face-to-face tuition.

Necessity of paradigm shift in pedagogy

The world has surely become digital and most transactions are technically completed online. It would therefore be a misnomer to call some of our current pedagogies 21st century-compliant pedagogies, if the intellectual activities that are supposed to drive the contemporary technological leaps remain embalmed in traditional teaching modes alone. The Covid-19 problem has therefore inadvertently helped us to appreciate that the future is no more in the future than in the now. What has been clear though is that Covid-19 protocols

discourage face-to-face contact but do not rule out interaction. How then can we guarantee efficient and effective educational interaction without exposing the students and the educators to the ravages of the mutating coronavirus? The question thus becomes: are the developing nations such as Zimbabwe and their education institutions ready for the move to the blended and the envisaged online learning? According to some of the articles in this special issue, decisions should be made bearing in mind that facilities, equipment, gadgets and connectivity affordances have to be availed equitably to institutions and the stakeholders who might be scattered across differently infrastructured terrains.

All the authors represented here are practising lecturers/teachers in different disciplines, ranging from Curriculum Theory, Literature and languages, ICT, Early Childhood Development to Commercials and quality issues. This broad spectrum gives the special issue an interdisciplinary perspective. The variety of backgrounds has enriched the scholars' engagement with issues such as their institutions', lecturers' and students' encounter with the disruptive force of Covid-19 and their reactions to this pedagogically transforming and transformative phenomenon. Drawing naturally from their educational backgrounds, the researchers focus more on the disturbances related to teaching and learning. Indeed, the authors have engaged with the pedagogical crisis that was wrought by the Covid-19 disease, the preparedness of institutions to handle the new demands and address attitudes to the process, the modus operandi of some institutions during the crisis, the lecturers' and students' adoptive and adaptive strategies to cope with the situation, the envisaged future with ICT and the edutainment value of Covid-19 social media images.

Structure of the Special Issue

The first article in the special issue is by Mupa and is titled, "Higher education pedagogy in crisis: Challenges in teaching and learning in the Covid-19 era in Zimbabwe." In the paper Mupa uses a case study design to explore the pedagogical challenges that have been caused by the Covid-19 pandemic in the Zimbabwean higher education sector. The study established that lecturers faced challenges in teaching online, subjects which require demonstration and experiments. Recognising institutional and individual unpreparedness, the study recommends that a robust professional development programme on ICT-based teaching be developed for lecturers to improve the quality of teaching in the Covid-19 era.

In a paper entitled “Zimbabwe higher education institutions’ preparedness in responding to Covid-19 induced disruptions to education” Beans, Maireva and Muza employed the qualitative phenomenological design to investigate the higher and tertiary education Ministry and its institutions’ preparedness to migrate to online learning following the directive by central Government. Like Mupa, the study found out that, generally, administrators, lecturers and students in Zimbabwe were ill-prepared for the new normal of teaching and learning online during Covid-19. The reasons for this were that the pandemic struck too suddenly in a country whose institutions had not really budgeted for nor prepared for virtual learning, especially for polytechnics and teacher training colleges. The recommendation was therefore that government, through Ministry, capacitate universities, polytechnics and teachers’ colleges for them to handle online teaching and learning effectively.

Mufanechiya, Mufanechiya and Mudekunye continue on the debate of institutional preparedness and reactions to Covid-19 as seen in one studied institution. Their paper called “Exploring teaching-learning challenges faced by Zimbabwean university pre-service students during the Covid-19 pandemic” explores how, in order to respond to the Covid-19 pandemic, and the Government’s instruction, the institution under study reacted in panic in order to ensure that students finished their studies and wrote examinations. Their qualitative paper rightly draws from The Panic Approach to show that although desperate ills call for desperate remedies, there is still need to think and act soberly if we are all to own our decisions.

“Factors that influence attitudes of Zimbabwean rural high school teachers towards online remote teaching and learning in Chivi District” is a paper by Pisirai, Mugomba and Matsvange. In their paper the authors broaden the context of study from higher education institutions to Zimbabwean secondary school settings. Their research adopted the qualitative approach and the Technology Acceptance Model to explore the attitudes of selected rural high school teachers on the idea of teaching online during the Covid-19 pandemic. They found that the teachers’ attitudes were largely negative because the teachers felt that their institutions were not supportive enough on equipment, connectivity and data bundle costs. Most of the teachers who responded to the questionnaire also cited their penurious condition as militating against the successful utilisation of the online learning platform. The study thus recommends more institutional support and also the general improvement of the rural

teacher's welfare for him or her to positively implement government policies, some of which are ad hoc.

Using a related though different context, Mlambo, Masimeki and Machibaya explored the challenges encountered by visually impaired secondary school learners in e-learning during Covid-19 lockdown in Masvingo district. The study established that learning from home had serious learning challenges as most learners with visual impairment did not have the JAWS software that enhances screen reading in their ICT gadgets. Some assistant readers for learners with total blindness were found to be incompetent in assisting on screen reading at home. The challenges prevented most learners to complete their online learning assignments during the Covid-19 lockdown period. For online learning to be successful at home parents should purchase or download the JAWS and screen readers for Visually Impaired (VI) learners to use.

Mhindu in her paper with the title "Harnessing WhatsApp group communication for university teaching and learning in the wake of Covid-19: Successes, challenges and prospects" draws on her personal experience of how her own students already had class group chat platforms where they shared education-related concerns to discuss how the WhatsApp social platform could be engaged as a learning platform. At the selected state university, lecturers and students had received a one-day training on how to use Google Classroom for teaching and learning during the national lockdown. Arguably, the one-day 'training' was not sufficient to enable lecturers and students to meaningfully use it, hence, her study sought to establish how university students and lecturers harnessed the most commonly used social media platform, WhatsApp, as a learning and teaching platform for English modules. The paper recommends that this typically social yet readily available media platform could be educationally useful if group administrators and users stuck to ground rules that discourage abuse of the platform, especially during academic sessions.

Pursuing the same experience of using the WhatsApp platform to augment learning, Makaye and Gonye deploy a case study design to assess students' experience of learning for imminent examinations during Covid-19 lockdown conditions. In their study, "Masters in Education students' experiences and views towards use of WhatsApp platform in lecture deliveries during Covid-19 lockdown at a university in Zimbabwe" the authors explored and assessed how a class of Master of Curriculum Studies students at a university in Zimbabwe utilised the WhatsApp platform in their lectures. The students engaged in lectures via the WhatsApp

platform for three weeks during the lockdown period as a contingency measure, and thereafter, were asked on what they liked and disliked about their experiences during the three-week learning period. The findings revealed that most students benefited from and enjoyed using the WhatsApp platform in their learning. It was concluded that if appropriately used, the WhatsApp platform could be a competitive online 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.

In a futuristic contribution titled “Technology and its impact in post Covid-19 higher education”, Mawere, Chigada and Sambo draw on the Delphi theoretical framework to undertake a detailed review of the potential of technology to enhance teaching and learning in the envisaged post-Covid-19 period. Like all the papers, their qualitative study rises from an appreciation of the fact that Covid-19 has disrupted the education terrain and that things can never be the same again. Based on their vast literature review of carefully sampled current articles on ICT, their paper therefore recommends that higher education institutions begin thinking about Mass open online courses (MOOCs) E-learning, and Data driven decision making (DDDM) tools, among others.

In his study titled “Images of Covid-19 in selected socially mediated WhatsApp messages shared in Zimbabwe” Nyoni undertakes an important analysis of how the Covid-19 pandemic has been represented pictorially. The paper employed the Reader Response criticism to show how the writer interpreted the Covid-19 pandemic inspired artfied posts that were shared in WhatsApp groups. The study notes that although Covid-19 is represented differently it is essentially conceptualised the same – destructive and disruptive. However, as the various images presented in this paper show, Covid-19 has not only made the world anxious, it has also made the world creative. The paper has argued that the pictorial images are of both communicational and educational value, aspects which can be usefully harnessed in all classroom situations.

Finally, as the pioneering guest editors, we want to thank the Chief Editor and the JoNVER editorial board for offering us this opportunity to bring these ideas together. We would also want to acknowledge the important work the reviewers did and all those who made this special issue possible. We thank all our valued article contributors for articulating issues which affected education and higher education in particular amidst the Covid-19 crisis. We

thank you all for your support and it is the guest editors' hope that the messages in the articles will add value and usher in a new approach on how institutions, higher education in particular, can transform the education terrain and discourse.

Meantime; wash hands, sanitise, mask up, keep social distancing, and get vaccinated!

Once again JoNVER provides a variety of articles which speak to our day to day social and educational encounters. We hope the articles will tap your quest for more academic and scholarly discourse.

The Guest Editors

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& Jairos Gonye 

On behalf of the Chief Editor



Prof. R. Mugweni