Chapter 9

Democratizing Online Learning Platforms:
Ghanaian Universities' Experience in Promoting Equity Through Accessibility in Online Learning

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ABSTRACT

This chapter gives practitioners' accounts of how online learning is faring in Ghana particularly in the post-COVID-19 higher education environment, and how online learning platforms could be 'democratized' to engender equity among learners from different backgrounds. The objective of the chapter is to outline and highlight some of the strategies that could be adopted to promote equity through increased accessibility in online learning. Using Scott's six goals of educational equity, this chapter provides an account of knowledge-rich educational stakeholders about means of ensuring equity for all. The chapter synthesizes the lived experiences of educational administrators, online learning practitioners, and students to understand online learning and make relevant recommendations. Through a qualitative research design with a case study strategy, the chapter examines the online learning landscape in selected Ghanaian public universities with emphasis on the challenges, opportunities, and prospects.

INTRODUCTION

Online teaching and learning have been with us since the mid- 1990s when Professor Murray Goldberg developed one of the first learning management systems (LMS) called the WebCT at the University of British Columbia (Singh & Thurman, 2019). Learning management systems such as WebCT revolutionized learning in 'western countries as blended learning gained popularity. This learning platform enabled instructors to mount online courses, upload files, and monitor class attendance and learning progress among students (Rose, 2004). The benefits of online learning have been numerous, including accessibility, flexibility, self-pacing, and individualization (Rose, 2004).

In spite of this, and because advances in technology have addressed a lot of the geographical and economic disparities experienced in traditional face-to-face learning, there still exist a myriad of challenges that affect efforts at democratizing online education and making it more accessible. In view of some of these challenges, almost all public universities in Ghana have returned to face-to-face teaching and learning with few adopting the blended mode. There are, however, others who are exploring 100 per cent online teaching and learning to 'decongest' some of the campuses with increasing student numbers. The "online" part of teaching and learning is expected to be part of instruction in Ghanaian universities going forward either in a conservatively blended mode or a pragmatically full online mode.

The question is how do universities ensure that online learning works for everyone? This chapter contends that, for online learning to be successful, universities need to formulate strategies, and deploy the necessary infrastructure and resources to ensure that there is equity for all students. The chapter makes a modest contribution to the growing literature on online learning especially in the post COVID-19 educational environment. With Scott's Six Goals of Educational Equity and School Reform as the theoretical framework, the chapter is divided into five sections. The first section deals with a general introduction to the chapter, providing a background to the broader issues in online learning. Section 2 provides an overview of existing studies on online learning and strategies to ensure accessibility and equity. Section 3 hones in on the research methods adopted for the study. Section 4 deals with the analysis and discussions, and section 5 conclusion and recommendations.

ONLINE LEARNING IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Online learning, in its simplest meaning, connotes studying in any location outside the classroom via the Internet. It invokes the concept of e-learning, which means learning via electronic means rather than face-to-face in physical classrooms. Online

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