

Chapter 10

Ensuring Inclusive and Equitable Quality Blended Learning in Zimbabwe's Higher Education: Lessons Learned During COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

The chapter examines the lessons learnt from implementing blended learning in Zimbabwe's higher education system during the COVID-19 pandemic. It focuses on themes, including technology access, digital literacy, and support for underrepresented groups to promote inclusivity in blended learning. The research underlying this chapter was qualitative and utilised surveys and interviews to gather insights from lecturers and students. The findings highlight obstacles to successful blended learning related to infrastructure and connectivity, digital literacy, and skills of students. These challenges influenced students' ability to utilise online resources and participate effectively in blended learning activities. The study provides several recommendations that can lead to inclusive and equitable blended learning experiences and raise the overall quality of instruction, including enhancing technological infrastructure, facilitating digital literacy development, ensuring accessibility, establishing support programs, and continually assessing and improving blended learning practices.

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INTRODUCTION

The higher education landscape has undergone a profound transformation recently, catalyzed by the unprecedented challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Blended learning, an approach integrating traditional in-person instruction with digital resources and online platforms, has come to the forefront, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. This approach represents the future of education, grounded in the foundational principles of effective learning while serving as a key enabler of inclusivity. This chapter explores the dynamics characterizing blended learning within Zimbabwe's higher education system, specifically focusing on inclusivity and the provision of quality education. Through a comprehensive analysis of the dynamics, we unearth valuable insights that provide a blueprint for molding the future of education into a more accessible, inclusive, and responsive endeavor that can meet the needs of a diverse range of learners. In this case, diversity encompasses gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic, language, and geographical location, among others (Diallo & Maizonniaux, 2016). This is consistent with the shift in inclusive education towards an approach that caters for the needs of a diverse range of learners who may be susceptible to exclusion, regardless of their needs, abilities, gender, race, and socioeconomic background (Kozleski, Artiles, & Waittoller, 2013).

Like their global counterparts, Zimbabwe's higher education institutions faced an urgent need to adapt and innovate as the traditional classroom setting gave way to virtual learning environments. Blended learning emerged as a versatile approach that harnessed the potential of digital technologies and in-person interactions. This chapter seeks to explore how this approach was not merely a response to the crisis but a springboard for positive change; an opportunity to address longstanding disparities in access, bridge technological divides, and enhance the educational experience for all students, regardless of their backgrounds or circumstances.

Inclusivity lies at the heart of discourse in higher education in Zimbabwe. Historically, access to higher education in Zimbabwe has been influenced by a range of factors, from socio-economic status to geographical location. The sudden transition to remote and blended learning during the pandemic further underscored the significance of ensuring that no student is left behind. The introduction of blended learning in Zimbabwe's higher education system has highlighted a range of intricacies and inequalities that demand urgent action. It has exposed existing obstacles related to technology accessibility, digital proficiency, and assistance for underprivileged student groups, which have been amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic.

While research specific to blended learning in the context of Zimbabwe's higher education system is limited, studies conducted in analogous resource-constrained settings have shed light on various challenges. For example, Ndlovu (2018) examined the implementation of e-learning in Zimbabwean universities, identifying issues

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