

## **Covid 19 Pandemic and Lockdown; Examining the Challenges and opportunities of Online Teaching of Religious Education in Institutions of Higher Education in Uganda**

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### **Abstract**

*The purpose of this study is to examine the challenges and opportunities of online teaching of Religious Education in institutions of Higher Education in Uganda in the context of the COVID 19 pandemic and lockdown. The study employed interpretive research paradigm because it focused on peoples' experiences regarding challenges and opportunities arising from online teaching of RE to generate the meaning of the phenomenon being investigated. The target population comprised of postgraduate students of education offering humanities because they had a rich experience of information about challenges and opportunities of using online learning platforms. Eight students specializing in RE were purposefully selected because they possessed the characteristics the research sought for namely; were teacher trainees in the field of RE; were familiar with challenges /opportunities associated with RE online learning platforms. Data collection instruments employed by the study were interview guides and observations guides. Data was analyzed qualitatively. Data analysis involved identifying key ideas, concepts, incidences and feelings from responses captured from study participants. These were then interpreted and categorized thematically as aligned by the study objectives. Study findings indicated that prolonged school closure created opportunities for RE teachers' trainees to engage in e-learning. It also enhanced close relationships between parents and teachers of their students, teacher-student interactions, and student-to-student interaction using online opportunities. The study concluded that COVID-19 and lockdown have not only intensified technology use as a critical tool to support remote learning but it also has its challenges. The study recommended that stakeholders should strengthen opportunities of e-learning that have been ushered in by COVID 19 while addressing challenges that undermine E-learning.*

**Keywords:** COVID 19 pandemic, lockdown challenges, lockdown opportunities, online teaching, Religious Education, Higher Education challenges, Higher Education opportunities, E-learning opportunities, E-learning challenges

### **1. Introduction**

Coronavirus 19 lockdowns have disrupted education across the globe leaving approximately 1.6 billion children around the world out of the classroom and 186 countries affected by school closures. The results of the disruption of education required is schools to make rapid adjustments in their mode of traditional learning approaches to online teaching and learning (Umesh, 2020). In many countries of the world, even children in nursery schools have been subjected to online teaching, while students in upper classes and institutions of higher learning interact with their teachers online. With the sudden shift away from the traditional classroom learning approaches, educationists are wondering whether the adoption of online learning will

continue to persist after the pandemic and how such a shift will impact the global education market (The World Economic Forum, 2020). COVID 19 has accelerated the use of digitalization in education but has also created gaps in terms of building technological skills, digital, and internet access for vulnerable communities (Lawless & Samantha, 2020).

COVID 19 pandemic is the ongoing global pandemic of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID 19) caused by Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS-Cov-2) which was first identified in December 2019 in Wuhan, China (Christensen & Senthilingam, 2020). A lockdown is an emergency protocol that prevents people from leaving a given area or people stay where they are without going anywhere. A challenge means is a situation being faced that needs a solution. On the other hand, an opportunity is an occasion, opening, or suitable time to grasp something (Cambridge Dictionary, 2015). Religious Education refers to teaching about religions and their varied aspects, beliefs, doctrines, rituals, rites, customs, and roles. Higher Education is post-secondary education leading to an award of an academic degree (The Free Dictionary, 2012).

In Sub-Saharan Africa, the COVID pandemic arrived at a moment when technology and innovation were being increasingly embraced in education and other sectors across the continent. African countries are dealing with the COVID 19 pandemic through online studies. Whereas the pandemic's full impact has yet to be felt, the prolonged lack of investment in critical education systems has exacerbated grievances and inequality and increased gaps for Africa's vulnerable communities (UNESCO, 2020). In East Africa, governments responded to COVID 19 pandemic by closing schools. With limited internet facilities and technology options for most schools, there is an uphill task for most schools in years to come. In Uganda, the nationwide closures are impacting 15 million students which led the government to implement localized home learning, while other institutions of learning adapted television, radio, and online learning. The government of Uganda has just introduced ICT in educational institutions and only a small section of Ugandan teachers has the knowledge of digital technology and can access computers and other online learning devices. Despite the booming growth in technological capabilities during COVID 19 lockdown, the rates of computer literacy and learner application of technologies are still far from perfect due to the lack of training skills and digital appliances for both the students and their teachers.

COVID 19 has provided opportunities for schools and teachers to invest additional efforts in building strong connections between students and their families. Parents are constantly in touch with teachers of their children, consulting them about digital learning and performance. E-learning has improved teachers' engagement with students and paying attention to those learners with additional learning needs during the pandemic and school closure (Umesh, 2020). E-learning has also enhanced students' freedom to juggle with their careers and school because they are not tied down to a fixed schedule. In a traditional classroom setting, class meeting schedules are set, and the student has no power over this, forcing them to work their schedules around these dates. Most people who choose online learning tend to have other commitments and prefer this mode of learning as it gives them power over how they will delegate their time towards their different projects. Since everything is available online, accessing class materials, and submitting work are very convenient for students on E-learning programs.

Furthermore, students in traditional classrooms may not get the personalized attention when they need to have concepts clarified, yet, most colleges have large classes of students. This is not a problem for e-learning because online guided discussions and personal talk time with their professors and lecturers are a hallmark of online classes (Tomayess & Pedro, 2020). Online studies increase the chances of a student performing well due to the time their instructors give them. It also enhances their problem-solving and communication skills, as well as knowing how to defend their arguments (Tanju, 2019; Samantha, 2020).

Online studies are an important tool that helps RE teacher trainers to review lectures instantly. It is easy for minds to wander during a lecture but in online programs, students can review words from professors instantly, either by rewinding the audio or video or by reading the transcript that accompanies the lecture. Whereas students in classroom environments are not comfortable speaking in public, in an online environment, it can be much easier to share thoughts with others (Kehinde and Adewakun, 2020). E-learning creates more time to think before sharing and it has a discussion element connected to it. On-campus students have to choose a stance or formulate a thought in class quickly, and sometimes speak before they've fully examined everything. In an online environment, students can spend as much time as they want thinking about and honoring their ideas (Bernad, 2011). Online studies lead to greater confidence and more elegant discussions. When students are given assignments or research after their online lessons, they can access different educative search engines. The teachers are also able to use different media platforms to search for the best teaching methods and what they are teaching about (Lawless, 2020).

Despite schools and online teachers having opportunities to invest in online teaching of religious education in institutions of higher education in Uganda due to COVID 19 pandemic, they experience a number of challenges in their services. In this particular case, for students with disabilities and additional learning needs, the move to remote learning has presented additional challenges, including engaging with technology, reduced access to supports and individualized learning interventions, and loss of social connections (UNESCO, 2020). The majority of school children, college, and university students from disadvantaged communities face challenges of unreliable internet; lack of digital tools such as laptops, data, smartphones, and computers to use for their school work. In Uganda, according to Social Media reports on 15th, October 2020, Guild Presidents from different Universities moved to petition parliament through the office of the speaker on challenges surrounding online studies. Among the challenges, the students noted that online studies are not favorable for science students; disabled learners; students living in rural areas, and the poor. The majority of university students live in rural areas with poor internet penetration, the majority lack smartphones, electricity, and money to buy data for zoom lectures. With these challenges put before the parliament, the guild requested the speaker to halt online studies because they were not inclusive (The Daily Monitor & Social Media Reports, 2020).

In traditional classrooms, teachers can give students immediate face-to-face feedback. Students who are experiencing problems in the curriculum can resolve them quickly and directly either

during the lecture or during the dedicated office hours. Personalized feedback has a positive impact on students, as it makes learning processes easier, richer, and more significant, all the while raising the motivation levels of the students (Quammen, 2013; The Lancet, 2014; Ameacin, 2019). On the other hand, in online learning, the teacher tends to struggle with student feedback. Students completing regular assessments become dissatisfied when they experience a lack of personalized feedback. The traditional methods of providing student feedback don't always work in an online learning environment, and because of this, online education providers are forced to look towards alternative methods for providing feedback (Olowokure, 2014; WHO, 2020). The online teaching and learning methods currently practiced in education tend to make participating students isolated and unable to communicate with friends which may lead to mental health issues. Face-to-face communication with professors, peer-to-peer activities, and strict schedules all work in unison to keep the students from falling off track during their studies (Oostdam & Hooge, 2013; Australian Government, Ministry of Health, 2020).

In the setting of an online learning environment, there are fewer external factors that push the students to perform well. In many cases, the students are left to fend for themselves during their learning activities, without anyone constantly urging them towards their learning goals. Students taking online learning courses find that they are often required to learn difficult materials in a comfortable home setting without any of the added pressure normally associated with traditional college support (Frieden, 2020). As a result, keeping up with regular deadlines during online studies can become difficult for those students who lack strong self-motivation and time management skills. Online teaching and learning methods are proven to be highly effective at improving the academic knowledge of the students but require self-driven learners. Due to a lack of face-to-face communication between peers, students, and teachers in an online setting, the students might find that they are unable to work effectively in a team and individualized setting (Clark & Mayer, 2011; Olowokune, 2015).

One of the biggest disadvantages of online studies continues to be cheating through various methods. Compared to on-campus students, online students can cheat on assessments more easily as they take assessments in their environment and while using their personal computers. The students cannot be directly observed during assessments without a video feed, making cheat detection during online assessments more complicated than traditional testing procedures. The problem is that a large portion of online learning training providers chooses to focus largely on developing theoretical knowledge, rather than practical skills (Archambault, 2010; Tanju, 2019; Frieden, 2020).

Online studies require the use of computers and other related devices. Lack of access to computers and smartphones, whether it be for economic or logistic reasons, will exclude otherwise eligible students from the course. This is a significant issue in rural and lower socioeconomic neighborhoods. As far as Internet accessibility is concerned, it is not universal, and in some areas of Uganda and other countries, Internet access poses a significant cost to the user. Some users pay a fixed monthly rate for their Internet connection, while others are charged for the time they spend online. If the participants' time online is limited by the amount of

internet access they can afford, then instruction and participation in the online program will not be equitable for all students in the course.

As a result of the sudden health challenges posed by the COVID 19 pandemic, many educational institutions were forced to switch from the traditional face-to-face mode of learning to online learning platforms. While this mode of learning provides a ray of hope to millions of students who would otherwise be trapped at home because of lockdowns and school closures, it equally poses several challenges that students and teachers in institutions of higher education have come to grapple with. For example, Daily Monitor and Social Media (2020) content that the majority of university students live in rural areas where internet penetration is poor, the majority lack smartphones, computers/laptops, and many rural areas lack electricity. Many students cannot afford to buy data for Zoom lectures. No studies have ever been undertaken to determine the impacts of using online teaching strategies in institutions of higher learning in Uganda. To generate meanings from this subject area that was being investigated, it is against this background that the study intended to examine challenges and opportunities of online teaching of Religious Education in institutions of higher learning in Uganda.

## 2. Methodology

The interpretive research paradigm was used because the study is grounded on how human beings construct and merge their own subjective and intersubjective meanings as they interact with the world around them (Packer,2011). The philosophical foundations of interpretive research are rooted in the belief that reality is personally constructed (Mayers,2008), and as such uses qualitative methods to explore in depth each individual's experience of a phenomenon, event, or social world. The rationale for adopting the interpretive research paradigm was based on the following criteria (Chinedy and Van Wyk, 2015); interpretive data is based on the participant's construction of meaning and therefore, highly relevant in problem-solving. It is effective and relevant for studying small numbers of participants or for in-depth cases, in response to how and why questions. It is also effective for describing the complex social world of the participants; it allows for deep exploration of individual cases as opposed to relying only on what can be observed from the majority of respondents. The research design selected for this study was a case study design.

The target population for this study was 49 Master of education students of humanities for the academic year 2020/2021. These groups of students were the most suitable categories that have considerable information on challenges and opportunities of using online learning during COVID 19 lockdown and prolonged school closure.

The sample size for this study was 8 Postgraduate students, where 7 male students offered Postgraduate Diploma in RE and 1 female student offered Masters in Education, specializing in RE for the academic year 2020/2021. The study employed purposeful sampling techniques whereby only students offering RE at the postgraduate program were selected to participate in the study.

Data collection instruments used in this study were;

- (i) Face-to-face interviews were supplemented by online interviews, emails, and digital WhatsApp conversations, which were used to collect the qualitative data from the postgraduate RE students. The qualitative data collected using an interview guide was categorized, classified, interpreted, and analyzed.
- (ii) Observations guides that involved the researcher's physical scrutiny of challenges and opportunities emanating from the COVID 19 pandemic. When the students returned to the institution to complete their studies after lifting the ban on universities, the researcher observed how COVID 19 had changed the students learning skills, with the majority having bought smartphones and laptops to engage in online study.

The qualitative data generated by this study availed quotations to support positions as well as to provide the necessary authenticity to research findings.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1 Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents

Five demographic characteristics of the respondents were considered in this study and these were age, gender, residence, level of education, and income status. Participants' ages ranged from 25-years of age and were all postgraduate students. 3 (37.5%) students were urban dwellers, while 5(62.5%) were from a rural setting and this had implications of internet access and electricity. The majority of the respondents were males (87.5%) offering PGDE and one female (12.5%) student offering Masters in Education (MED) which was a reflection of gender disparities in higher education where males are the majority.

#### 3.2 COVID 19 Opportunities in RE teaching in Higher Education

The study found that COVID 19 has provided opportunities for increased provision of online learning alternatives for students. E-learning practices have emerged as a response to the closure of institutions. Students showed the zeal to create themselves a conducive e-learning environment, despite the challenges they faced in their homes. This revelation was corroborated by a student who raised issues surrounding the home environment for conducting the online study;

I had a disagreement with parents over house organization when I wanted privacy where I could participate in online learning. My parents could not understand why I needed the house free of noise. Sometimes children would call me for something as online classes were going on which was so distractive, this caused me frustration but I had to control myself, while in an online class for the fact that my lecturer worked on time (KII 1, 2020)

The narratives generated from the majority of students concerning the above revelation suggest that they are unable to participate effectively in e-learning due to poor home environments that distract their participation. One student revealed an impediment to the online community as having no smartphones and internet connection for online studying;

I have a small phone, no computer, or laptop, therefore, I used to walk 10kms from my place of residence to a trading center in search of digital

platforms. Each time, I went there wherever an assignment or an online study was being conducted by my lecturer but I would find many students on these laptops, so I would wait for them to finish. Sometimes electricity would go off and the internet was unstable which frustrated my efforts due to limited transport and time (KII 3, 2020).

The above discourse from the respondent indicates that many students live in rural areas where they cannot access the internet or electricity. Respondents incur transport costs and have to plan for the time to move to areas where they can access digital. Additionally, the female student had this to say on the use of digital phones for online study;

I don't have a smartphone or laptop. Whenever there is an online study or WhatsApp discussion with my lecturer, I borrow my husband's phone. Sometimes when the lecturer has organized a zoom study, my husband is not there so I miss out (KII 5, 2020).

This response indicates that many students are supported by their spouses, parents, relatives, and guardians who cannot incur additional costs in terms of buying smartphones for e-learning or data. In line with this, a student could not hide his excitement when he said;

My lecturer called me on the phone before we could begin our online discussion and asked me whether any of my parents were around. When I said, yes, she said she wanted to talk to him. My father received the phone call and my lecturer asked him to support me financially to do the online study. What excited my father most was talking to my lecturer at Makerere University and since then, he increased his support towards my online study during the lockdown (KII 7, 2020).

These discourses reveal that COVID-19 has provided opportunities to strengthen partnerships between students and their colleagues, teachers, and parents of the students.

### **3.3 Respondents on Challenges of Online Studies in RE**

Responding to the question of digital devices and costs of the internet, a study participant had this to say;

The cost of 100 megabytes is Uganda shs.1000, yet, this cannot run a full hour of zoom class. This forces me to dig deeper into my pockets and spend lots of money on buying data. In addition to unstable networks, the high costs of the internet make it difficult for me to maintain online learning (KII 4, 2020).

In another incident a student of education expressed the challenges they experience as indicated in a letter which he addressed to stakeholders and the Council Makerere University for attention;

This is to inform you that the students' bodies are facing a hard and miserable time sustaining online lectures. On average as an education student, I spend 30,000/= daily to purchase data

bundles to have online lecturers. And this additional cost is not reflected to be compensated by the university in any way or the other yet the impact is deeply felt by we students on top of that other compulsory costs like welfare have to be faced. We, therefore, suggest that the university council, if possible, should either; Bring back physical classes for all academic years since all other universities are having physical lectures or Reduce the functional fees as a way to cover the additional cost of online classes (KII 8, 2020)

Additionally, a female lecturer from curriculum studies who was conducting online teaching with finalists, had this to say on School of Education staff WhatsApp;

I would like to hear your experiences of teaching online with finalists. I just had a lesson with a small class of 5 students but only one or two students were online, the others kept on dropping on and off until we agreed to end the class (KII 4, 2020).

In line with the above, when finalists returned to the university, in our first lesson as students shared their experiences of COVID 19 and online learning had this to say;

During COVID 19 I knocked a child when I was driving. I was put in prison and was forced by police to pay hospital bills even when I was behind the bars. Yet, I was financially broke. My classmates were not aware of what I was going through. No one could know why I was not participating in the online program. I thought of giving up in life because I thought this was too much for me, I had no one to share with and my colleagues did not know that I was in prison (KII 2, 2020).

In another related incident a disabled student whom I teach in RE but in an undergraduate class called me on a phone during COVID;

I am one of your Religious Education students at the Rhino refuge settlement camp. I am a disabled student and since school closure learning online has become a great challenge. I don't have a smartphone, and even though I had the phone, the connectivity of electricity to charge the phone is a huge problem. I cannot afford to raise money to buy data. The learning environment is extremely poor because of congestion in camps. My friend told me that you posted a question for an assignment on our WhatsApp platform but I am completely cut off from learning (KII 5, 2020).

The majority of the respondents indicated that lock-down had a negative effect not only on their education but also on their social, economic, mental, physical, social life, finances, and food security. With this observation, one student teacher shared his experiences;

I have not met any of my colleagues since lockdown. I just stay at home and even raising money for airtime is a big problem. Each coin I get, I think of buying food and paying house rent or buy food for my



children or water or charcoal for cooking food. I can't afford online study (KII 1, 2020).

In another related incident, a WhatsApp a very disturbing and touching text of online teaching posted on staff platform by a deaf student but a different subject revealed the following;

Hero Dr, I am a deaf student in a development studies class. I have tried to attend the zoom class yesterday but I didn't pick anything from you except the shots you kept sharing. Anyway, you can assist me to catch up with you. I shall be grateful sir, have a blessed week.

This text from a student raised many questions from teaching staff such as these were raised; How does a deaf student attend face to face and online teaching? Are there no interpreters for the disabled? Does the system care? Have all the teaching staff been given university laptops for online teaching? These questions raised by teaching staff pointed to the revelation that online teaching should be all-inclusive and teaching staff should be facilitated in terms of laptops and finances for buying data. The deaf students' experiences also revealed that heads of departments need to guide students with disabilities to ensure inclusiveness in the ongoing blended and online teaching and deliberate attempts should be made to send students with disabilities some reading materials as a special group.

#### **4. Discussion**

The study suggested that COVID 19 is changing the way Religious Education is taught. The use of E-learning is enabling the teacher to reach out to many students through RE WhatsApp, chat groups, zoom video meetings, and document sharing during the lockdown. RE student-teachers were of the view that when institutions of higher learning open, traditional classroom teaching and E-learning should go hand in hand. Tomayess and Pedro (2020) note that currently, worldwide the education sector is facing a huge impact as a result of COVID 19, with universities forced to shift their teaching to e-learning and blended learning modes. Institutions of higher learning are adopting the use of online studies to teach and assess learning. In turn, this has generated several challenges and opportunities for both academics and students. Universities have also urged RE teachers to load their courses online for student consumption. In the same vein, a study carried out by Kehinde and Adewakun (2020) in Nigeria, acknowledges that with the coronavirus pandemic and lockdown of schools and institutions of higher learning, there has been a shift towards virtual classrooms as a mode of education delivery. Students are taught through electronic platforms. The majority of states in Lagos began to use the broadcasting corporation to connect to students and teachers both in primary and school schools. In Nigeria, all core subjects are taught and transmitted via television and radio stations. Additionally, Whiting (2020) believes that the integration of information technology in education will be accelerated and online education will eventually become an integral component of education. Businge (2020) adds that the first lady of Uganda, Janet Museveni who also serves as the minister of education instructed all universities to start online teaching. She cautioned stakeholders to ensure that no continuing learner should be left behind or excluded from the e-learning approach as a coronavirus response intervention. Universities in Uganda such as ISBAT, Victoria University, International University of East Africa, Uganda Christian

University, and Makerere University are already using e-learning during COVID 19 pandemic and lockdown with continuing students.

The study further found that many RE teachers were facing challenges on how to reach out to their learners during COVID 19 due to lockdown measures to contain the spread of the pandemic. Many teaching staff did not know how to teach students using online digital platforms. Businge(2020) also notes that many Ugandan universities have been left out because they were caught off-guard and unprepared. Both teaching staff and students were not trained on how to use e-learning approaches. She also quoted the minister of state for Education, Muyingo, who said that there is a need to teach all students online using a blended approach to allow students to have more control over the time, space, and style of their learning. All universities should adopt online teaching because it is a potential source of income and academic continuity. Whereas the government is insisting on online studies for universities and colleges, UNESCO (2020) acknowledges that students and lecturers lack skills to handle online teaching, have limited gadgets to use; lack connectivity, no access to the internet at home, poor mobile networks, high cost of internet, lack of technological and pedagogical skills. Whiting (2020) urges that COVID 19 has caused a move by education institutions to use the unplanned and rapid intervention to conduct online teaching with no training of staff, insufficient bandwidth, and limited preparation. This results in a poor user experience that is un conducive to sustainable growth. Additionally, some students are without reliable internet access, lack digital tools and skills to participate in digital learning. This gap is seen across urban and rural dwellers and income brackets within countries. In Uganda, there is a significant gap between those RE students from privileged and disadvantaged backgrounds. Children from vulnerable communities lack computers and money to buy data.

The study established that the learning environment for online studies of the RE students happened differently compared to the traditional classroom system. In rural areas the majority of students are pre-occupied with household work, assisting parents in business and farming. Collaborative research by UNESCO (2020) found out that many learners in developing countries especially those from underprivileged communities are occupied with domestic work and are not fluent enough in the language of instruction. Even when they can access the content they can understand, they are faced with challenges of poor living conditions, economic stress, and low education levels of their parents, including digital skills. This means that even when home learning and e-learning are in place, the majority of children from underprivileged families do not benefit from the new learning support systems and receive adequate support needed to adapt to the new modes of instruction. Furthermore, children from lower socio-economic backgrounds lack reading opportunities, a table, and parental support during school closure and less help to complete their homework. Students, especially females are occupied with domestic chores or run other household errands, work on farms, and fetch water which can prevent them from participating in online teaching. Studies conducted by Archambault (2010) argue that creating the right online environment for students is the primary responsibility of the instructor and the parents. This is because online learning requires time-management skills, and self-directed mechanisms to be successful. In support of this, Bernard (2011) mentions that the

e-learning environment lacks the support and presence of the teacher, student interaction, and technological support to ensure its smooth learning.

## 5. Conclusion

The advent of COVID 19 has brought completely new ways of life among the population and a new dimension to our education system. It has facilitated the rapid development of long-distance education that has helped in the fight against the spread of the virus and saved many learners and parents from undue expenses. However, much as we appreciate this development, a lot is yet to be done to make it effective since it came in as the last resort to allow the continuity of the learning of our children. The Ministry of Education and Sports should streamline many issues related to electronic learning such as assessment, giving feedback, and learners with health-related problems. Besides, since it is an expensive venture, the government should increase the budget of education to allow all these innovations to be implemented. Teachers of Religious Education and learners must embrace the shift away from traditional classroom practices to an e-learning approach to education. Although today's learners are digital natives, the use of technology for e-learning can be overwhelming and provide RE teaching staff with opportunities and challenges. The rapid spread of COVID-19 has demonstrated the importance of building resilience to face various threats from the pandemic and to embrace the rapid technological changes of e-learning.

Based on the study findings, the study drew the following recommendations: Strengthen opportunities by training staff and students how to use e-learning as a mode of teaching; Address challenges of connectivity and mobile internet network; Equip staff with gadgets to use for online teaching; Increase students' access to e-learning in vulnerable communities.

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