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Coping with Education during Lockdowns amidst COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The outbreak of Corona Virus disease (COVID-19) in China in December 2019 has rapidly morphed into an unprecedented health, economic and educational crisis globally. This study focuses on tertiary students' perspectives on Emergency Remote Learning (ERT) amidst COVID-19 Pandemic. The schools in Fiji closed its doors to face-to-face classes on 20th March, 2020 and tertiary institutes followed suit. This study was conducted to establish how tertiary students were coping with online learning at a university in Fiji. Subsequently, telephone interviews were held as it was most appropriate method at this time of lock down and social distancing amidst COVID 19 Pandemic. A meta-synthesis methodology was also adopted for this study and pertinent literature was visited to capture the essence of continued learning during these unprecedented times. Findings reveal that students were slowly adapting to online learning or E-Learning. Findings also reveal that lack of gadgets like laptops and desktops were major issues faced by the students. This is followed by lack of access to high quality internet and connectivity problems followed by lack of confidence in using online learning platforms. This exploratory paper proposes that students need to be well versed with technology and technological gadgets to enhance learning especially during these exceptional times.

Keywords

technology, digital generation, learning platforms, internet, gadgets, COVID-19, online teaching, lockdown

1. Introduction

With over 2 million confirmed COVID-19 cases globally and over 150,000 deaths worldwide, the global pandemic is causing devastation in the global economy leaving millions jobless around the world. Although the Pacific Island Countries (PICs) have recorded a smaller number of cases of COVID-19, they have implemented travel restrictions and border closures to prevent imported cases of

the COVID-19. Likewise, many countries have imposed public health emergencies, lockdowns, curfews and social distancing to prevent the transmission of COVID-19. In light of the rising concerns about the spread of COVID-19 and calls to contain the Corona Virus, a growing number of tertiary institutions have shut down in regards to face-to-face classes globally. The Corona virus has revealed emerging vulnerabilities in education systems around the world. It is now clear that society needs flexible and resilient education systems as we face unpredictable futures (Zhang, Wang, Yang, & Wang, 2020). Large-scale, national efforts to utilize technology in support of remote learning, distance education and online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic are emerging and evolving quickly.

Likewise, literature highlights certain deficiencies such as the weakness of online teaching infrastructure, the inexperience of teachers, the information gap, the complex environment at home, and so forth (Murgatrotd, 2020). However, despite certain limitations, current situation demands action so that the education of the students is not affected in any way. For example, China initiated a Suspending Classes Without Stopping Learning policy to see that learning was not compromised at any time during COVID 19 pandemic lockdown (Zhang et al., 2020). On similar note, to tackle online learning problems, Huang, Liu, Tlili, Yang, & Wang (2020) suggest education providers need to further promote the construction of the educational information and equip students with standardized home-based teaching and learning materials. According to a UNESCO Report by the end of 2019, COVID-19 had started spreading rapidly worldwide, causing the death of over 3000 people. Subsequently, several countries started initiating relevant strategies to contain this virus, including school closures.

Subsequently, as of 12th March, 2020 forty six countries in five different continents announced school and university closures to contain the spread of COVID-19 (R. H. Huang et al., 2020). International organizations started paying particular attention to the document Education Response in Crises and Emergencies. UNESCO stated in the Education 2030 Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action that countries should:

> Provide alternative modes of learning and education for children and adolescents who are not in education institutions, and put in place equivalency and bridging programmes, recognized and accredited by the state, to ensure flexible learning in both formal and non-formal settings, including in emergency situations (R. H. Huang et al., 2020, p. 1).

Subsequently, to contain the COVID-19, the Chinese government has banned most-face-to-face activities, including teaching. The Chinese Ministry of Education has launched an initiative entitled Disrupted Classes, Undisrupted Learning to provide flexible online learning to hundreds of millions students from their homes (R. H. Huang et al., 2020). The rapid evolution of Information Communication and Technology (ICT) and the increasing complexity that comes with its exploding potential explains why integration of technology in education continues to receive special attention particularly, in wake of COVID 19 pandemic. These conspicuous perceptions and the massive lockdown in the midst of current COVID 19 Pandemic has provided the intrinsic motivation for this

study.

2. Context of Study

In response to the global spread of the virus and advice from the WHO, the Fijian Government has heightened its level of preparedness in anticipation of an outbreak. On 19th March, 2020 the Prime Minister of Fiji Honourable Voreqe Bainimarama officially announced that Fiji had the first confirmed case of COVID 19 through a press conference. Lockdown was declared for greater Lautoka area and the schools were closed from 20th March, 2020. Tertiary institutions followed suit and staff were tasked to work from home and make transition to online learning. A week later a ban was placed on inter-island travel dampening the spirits of many students wishing to travel to and from outer islands. However, everyone understood the reasons behind the lockdown as the (Government) was ensuring that the spread of COVID 19 was contained and did not spread to maritime region.

Fiji has not been only affected by COVID 19 but was also brushed by tropical cyclone Harold in the month of March in 2020. The deadly Pacific storm Cyclone Harold did massive damage in Fiji, tearing off roofs and flooding towns as it caused mass devastation across the country. Many of the students attending the university were socially and economically affected as their houses were damaged and crops were destroyed. As such it can be established that students attending the university were not only affected economically and physically by COVID-19 but also by the destruction caused by Cyclone Harold.

3. Aim of the Study

The swift and sudden evolution to online learning seemed to be the only option for universities for maintaining continuity of teaching and learning while facing the threat of extended closures due to COVID-19 pandemic. Subsequently, this study intends to examine how students were coping with their online studies and the issues that were affecting them in their studies during such unprecedented times.

Subsequently, the study was guided by the following research questions:

1) How are you coping with rapid transition to online learning?

2) What are some of the challenges you face in adapting to online learning?

3) How do you intend to address these challenges if the situation is prolonged?

The above questions assisted in addressing the aim of the study and in revealing how students were trying to cope with online and distance education during COVID 19 Pandemic and closure of tertiary institutions nationally.

4. Literature Review

In response to COVID-19 Pandemic, education systems worldwide have started strategizing the online delivery of education so that students' studies are least affected. The rapid transition has created stress on our educational systems from primary to higher education settings. During this emergency period, our higher education students are moving away from the traditional classrooms to online learning from their homes. These new environments and contexts are diverse and dramatically different from each other, which has significantly changed the way in which students engage and learn (Xie, Heddy, & Vongkulluksn, 2019). Likewise, there is substantial literature on the integration of ICT in classrooms. In a global context, both developed and developing countries recognize the value of integrating ICT tools for their economic development. Developed countries, like United States, for instance, spends more than US$10 billion annually in educational technology in public schools while Australia spends approximately AUD$8 billion in ICT integrated related activities in schools (Albugarni & Ahmed, 2015). Likewise, a number of developing countries like India and Uganda have adopted programs aimed at implementing ICT integrated pedagogies to reinforce the teaching learning process (Ssewanyana & Busler, 2007). As they believe the use of considerable ICT tools act as sufficient drivers to boost the country's education towards creating economy based development.

Literature entails that success comes more easily where online learning was already widespread and where tools to support online learning, are already a constituent part of what an education system (WHO, 2020). Previous research indicates that the sheer presence of ICT does not directly influence teaching but instead it should be effectively integrated with teaching contents and pedagogies (Earle, 2002). Likewise, Chen (2010) supports the views of Russell, Bebell, O'Dwyer, and O'Connor (2003) that teachers can use ICT for improving the productivity of conducting daily tasks such as preparing and delivering lessons, keeping student records and communicating with parents. Not only ICT integration benefits students, it also provides a learning platform for the teachers by enabling them to take ownership and practice knowledge renewal on their own (Li, Yamaguchi, & Takada, 2018). Given the relentless advent of ICT in education arena, its use in enhancing classroom based instruction to support student-centred education has been widely discussed. American Psychological Association, as one of its recommendations has encouraged teachers to consider implementing appropriate technological and instructional practices to facilitate student-centred learning (Li et al., 2018).

However, Vrasidas (2015) is quite sceptical about the use of ICT despite being equipped with computers and internet services as there may be lack of adequate time for lesson preparations and unsupportive curriculum design. He reiterates that just having the resources does not imply that ICT can be easily implemented but there needs to be the presence of other supportive factors and one such factor is teacher readiness (Vrasidas, 2015). That is why Yunus (2007) is assertive that before ICT can be effectively integrated teachers should be provided adequate training and support in ICT and pedagogy. In this regard, Veen (Veen, 1993) establishes that teachers' pedagogical skills were more important than their technical ICT skills in influencing their use of computers for teaching and learning.

Nevertheless, the use of ICT in education is considered an important innovation in classroom teaching, and is advocated by many educational policy-makers (Mirzajani, Mahmud, Ayub, & Wong, 2016). The integration of technology in the classroom is viewed as an important strategy to increase the effectiveness of the teaching-learning process. Likewise, literature stresses the availability of personal computers and laptops as essential for the effective utilization of e-learning since this mode of pedagogy is computer-based (Mutisya & Makokha, 2016).

Likewise, staff are encouraged to integrate technology into their instructional practices, as ICT is believed to have the potential to revolutionize an outmoded educational system (Aczel, Peake, & Hardy, 2008). Similar views were held by Hew and Brush (2007) who are confident that integration of ICT in the field of education is inevitable, as technology becomes a "need" and not just a "want" in our lives. ICT induced pedagogy favours our students as they prefer to discover and create unique solutions to learning problems (Wheeler, Yeomans, & Wheeler, 2008). Hence they do not view the staff as the one who has all the answers, rather view the them as a resource person, model and helper who should encourage explorations (Cheta, 2014). Subsequently, this generation has a special affinity to mobile devices such as smart phones as they want to be connected with a special appetite for digital media (Kurkovsky & Syta, 2010). The preceding views are supported by a study undertaken by the Government of Canada where they found that millennials like to be connected 24/7 and they prefer using mobile phones over land lines and texting over talking using the phones (Tanner, 2010).

Indeed, digital environments have infiltrated and changed the lives of young people the world over and this alteration in them needs to be understood and appreciated by all. Ultimately, preparing to move education outside of traditional physical classrooms in response to COVID-19 requires thought, coordination and careful decision-making. This paper is a starting point for planning and supporting a significant district transformation.

5. Methodology

Methodology demystifies the research process and the belief systems that are constructed on ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions. Subsequently, this study was conducted from within an interpretive paradigm, and this action has implications for the selection of an appropriate research design. Accordingly, an exploratory research design was found to be most appropriate to unveil the salient intricacies associated with online learning especially in wake of COVID 19, the worldwide lockdown and social distancing. Exploratory studies are a valuable means of asking questions to establish baseline information that could be later used as a launch pad for further research. The sample size was small but each participant did provide a considerable body of data in response to the interview questions, giving each participant ample opportunities to revisit ideas and report their own experiences in detail.

Subsequently, telephone interviews were held and meta-synthesis of pertinent literature on how teachers were seeing that students' education is not affected during this lockdown. The use of telephones as a medium for conducting interviews is becoming an increasingly popular data collection method. In recent years, interviewing has transformed in response to the proliferation of technology as researchers seek alternative methods to reduce costs and increase the reach of their data collection. One way that researchers have approached this is through the increasing use of telephones in the collection of interview data and the current situation leaves no option. The increasing popularity of the telephone interview as a research method may be a reflection of broader social change and technological advances, with increased use and acceptability of telephone communication. Research has revealed that telephone interviewing is comparable to face to face interviewing (Carr & Worth, 2001). In this case eight students known as S1-T8 were interviewed and the findings are presented in a thematic approach. These students were part of a cohort of students enrolled in the first year program at the university. An interview protocol was developed with the following questions:

1) How are you coping with rapid transition to online learning?

2) Do you have a laptop or desktop at home?

3) What other electronic gadgets do you use to access your work?

4) What are some of the challenges you face in adapting to online learning?

5) How do you intend to address these challenges if the situation is prolonged?

Likewise, qualitative meta-synthesis is an intentional and coherent approach to analyzing data across qualitative studies. It is a process that enables researchers to identify a specific research question and then search for, select, appraise, summarize, and combine qualitative evidence to address the research question. This process uses rigorous qualitative methods to synthesize existing qualitative studies to construct greater meaning through an interpretative process. The purpose of this article is to describe qualitative meta-synthesis as an innovative research approach in light of COVID 19 and the associated lockdowns and social distancing regulations. Although this is not a new research approach in other fields, it offers a promising practice in the fields of online and remote learning interventions. This article explores how qualitative meta-synthesis can be a practical and effective approach of inquiry about how online and distance learning can enable the continuation of the teaching and learning process in the midst of COVID 19 and associated lockdowns.

6. Findings and Discussion

The ensuing sections present the findings in collaboration with pertinent literature on the influence of technology in conceptualizing pedagogy and practice at HE level.

World Context

According to World Health Organization there are 1 699 595 confirmed COVID 19 cases in the world, with 106 138 confirmed deaths and the virus has affected 213 countries as at 12th April, 2020. In the emerging and ever-changing COVID-19 context, many countries are being affected by COVID 19

(WHO, 2020). According to UNESCO some 190 countries across the globe have closed their schools and university to stop the spread of Coronavirus. This has forced an estimated 1.5 billion learners to stay at home (UNESCO, 2020). UNESCO further recommends that investment in remote learning should both mitigate the immediate disruption caused by COVID-19 and establish approaches to develop more open and flexible education systems for the future. Since closing schools to contain the COVID-19 pandemic, governments have been deploying distance learning solutions and grappling with the complexity of provisioning education remotely, from delivering content and supporting teachers to providing guidance to families and addressing connectivity challenges. Equity is the paramount concern because closures disproportionately hurt vulnerable and disadvantaged students who rely on schools for a range of social services, including health and nutrition.

Closure of educational institutions, even when temporary, is problematic for numerous reasons. Foremost, there is a reduction in instructional time, which impacts students' learning achievement. When schools close, educational performance suffers due to lack of instructional time. Disrupting schooling also leads to other harder to measure losses, including inconveniences to families and decreased economic productivity as parents struggle to balance work obligations with childcare. The closures also compound educational inequities as economically advantaged families tend to have higher levels of education and more resources to fill learning gaps and provide enrichment activities to children who cannot attend school. Similarly, COVID-19 pandemic has brought about an evitable situation where educational institutions have been closed causing them to look at other options of lesson delivery like online learning.

Likewise, many educational institutions are either closed or on the verge of closing physically and are moving towards online and remote learning. For example, schools in New York offer examples of successful adaptation and rapid deployment of educational technology products, like the video-conferencing platform Zoom and Moodle. Significantly, some schools had existing experience with these technologies that they were able to expand; they weren't starting from scratch with new and untested tech solutions (Czerniewicz, 2020). Likewise, some schools in Australia have struggled with accommodating the rapid switch to online learning. In like manner, institutions have rapidly innovated and implemented online learning, due in part to established familiarity with the necessary tools, teaching approaches and considerations with online learning. This has resulted in less disruption for many students unable to return to face-to-face classes. Literature further entails that teaching online isn't a solo sport. Teachers and parents need training in how to involve students in online discussions and facilitate their deeper understanding of taught material. According to Czerniewicz (2020) instructional designers or educational technologists can help staff figure out how to best teach with technology and make the most of online learning.

There is no doubt that institutions lack preparation and planning measures, to avoid the excessive demands and tensions that come from adopting things quickly (Pan, 2020). There is a clear need for online learning expertise in this crisis and it should serve as a reminder that institutions need to

cultivate this competency. Institutions may like to outsource online learning so that they are able to benefit from the expertise of expert professionals. The mass closure of schools in the EU was done to slow down the spread of COVID-19, the respiratory infection that has now killed more than 106 138 people worldwide. Governments' world over are looking for measures that will keep students safe, while finding ways to continue to provide courses online. Literature shows that education administrators are urging staff to cooperate and share know-how and digital infrastructures for teaching online in the quarantined and locked down areas (Czerniewicz, 2020). Countries most affected by the virus are doing their best to continue teaching. For example, Italy was the first EU member state to close its schools and move to online learning before the entire country was placed under quarantine.

Similarly, Denmark, Greece, Ireland, Hungary and Poland have followed suit and suspended face-to-face teaching in all schools. Likewise, Italy distributed free SIM cards to students without access to internet. Notably, in Romania, after the government closed all schools, several of them moved their courses online as a precaution. Since social distancing is as important as being locked out, schools across Europe are scrambling to set up technical systems needed to move courses, exams, research and other activities online. The University of Warsaw has cancelled all lectures and classes unless conducted on-line. By the same token, Belgium has decided to move classes online as much as possible and cancelled large-scale events. Staff members have been asked to work from home as much as possible. Literature reveals that schools globally are assuming responsibility, and are doing everything they could do to slow down the further spread of the Corona virus.

Similar precautions have also been taken outside the EU in neighbouring Ukraine and Moldova, where governments have decided to suspend face-to-face courses in schools and banned large gatherings. Educational institutions want to ensure that students are not disadvantaged by this unprecedented global situation. They encourage universities to continue offering classes in virtual mode to avoid the likelihood of being exposed to the Corona virus. In order to complete the academic year, senior decision makers announced that blended learning or remote learning strategies that could be used to enable students to complete their courses. This action has caught many academics and professionals supporting teaching and learning off guard, especially to those who are doing it for the first time. However, according to Czerniewicz (2020), this change is inevitable as the current COVID 19 situation demands it for the safety of students and the teaching staff.

Coping with Rapid Transition

The emergency transition to online and blended learning in light of COVID-19 brings along with it, its own share of difficulties and complications. In contrast to experiences that are well planned from the beginning and designed to be online, Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) is a temporary shift of instructional delivery to an alternate delivery mode due to crisis circumstances (Hodges, Moore, Lockee, Trust, & Bond, 2020) as in this case it is due to COVID 19. It involves the use of remote teaching solutions for instruction or education that would otherwise be delivered face-to-face or as blended mode and that would return to that format once the crisis or emergency is abated. Interview

findings revel that all (100%) the students found the rapid transition difficult and complicated. Student 8 stated that:

> The change to go fully online learning is not only difficult but impossible for me in my village in the island as it doesn't have constant internet service. As such, I had to move to another village on the island that has a tower and stay with my relatives to access internet on my mobile phone. This village is about 2km away and only accessible on horseback or a boat around the island.

Similar sentiments were shared by S5 who stays in the highlands and has no internet reception in her village. She also has to travel to a nearby settlement to have the internet reception. Even then the internet reception is of poor quality. According to S5:

> My biggest issue is the internet connectivity. The internet connecting symbol or the loading symbol keeps moving in circular motion searching for internet signals which leads to lack of synchronization between sound and movement especially during online classes. This settlement is nearby but it is very time consuming due to poor reception and slow internet.

During systematic transition all these environmental factors are taken into consideration but not much could be done during rapid transition period. Moreover, Hodges et al. (2020) are assertive that the primary objective in these circumstances is not to re-create a robust educational ecosystem but rather to provide temporary access to instruction and instructional supports in a manner that is quick to set up and is reliably available during an emergency or crisis. In this case COVID 19 did not give the opportunity to pre plan but to take immediate action. It must be established that staff and students were not prepared and caught off guard for this sudden change, especially those in developing countries (CoSN, 2020). There is no exception to the situation in Fiji as students in the study faced similar problems.

It must also be noted that students in this case were neither mentally nor socially prepared for online learning. Likewise, there are certain paradoxes and delusions associated with net generation that needs to be considered as the belief that they know all about ICT is a fatal misconception. Similar sentiments are shared by World Bank (2020a) that by simply pointing students to large online repositories, without appropriate guidance would not auger well during the COVID 19 pandemic lockdown. For despite they may be technology canny, they may lack the theoretical knowledge base required for particular occupation. Evidence for in support can be found in the study of O'Sullivan (2018) who strongly advocates that many young people, the so-called digital natives, have shown limitations in their use of technology. There have been numerous studies worldwide and one such study in 2014 signposted a huge disparity between young people's false impression and their real knowledge of computer skills (Sommer, 2014). Considering COVID 19 pandemic World Bank further reiterate that most students will have great difficulty accessing online learning, especially those staying that have poor Internet access and are subject to numerous other disadvantages (World Bank, 2020b).

Major Challenges

Moving online, on an untested and unprecedented scale brings along with it many challenges and dilemmas. This is because moving educational institution systems to remote learning environment isn't just a technical issue but it is a pedagogical and instructional challenge. Likewise, CoSN (2020) is assertive that a successful effort to move learning outside of traditional classroom and building structure requires a close cross-collaboration between instructional, content, and technology teams. Before pulling the trigger on technology initiatives there are a number of issues that should be taken into consideration. Moreover, according to CoSN (2020) taking students and staff out of the classroom is a pedagogical transformation that requires rapid mobilization across the different stakeholders for effective delivery of online learning. Findings reveal that one of the main challenges faced by students is the lack of appropriate digital gadgets. Many of the students do not have the necessary technologies and resources that they need to engage and succeed in emergency online courses. Table 1 shows the gadgets students use to access online learning.

Table 1. Gadgets Used by Students during the Lockdown

Student	Gadgets used	Availability of Internet
S1	Laptop	Yes, no problem with speed and connectivity
S2	Smart Phone	Yes, but slow speed
S3	Laptop	Yes, no problem
S4	Desktop	Yes but slow at times
S5	Smart Phone	Slow service in nearby settlement
S6	Tablet	Yes, no problem with speed and connectivity
S7	Analogue Phone	Not at home but in village tele-centre
S8	Smart Phone	Not in village but another village on the island

Findings reveal that majority of the students have access to some sort of electronic gadgets but only some of them have access to a laptop or desktop. It must be realized that these are the ideal gadgets for effective online learning as compared with just smart phones at university level. Unfortunately, one of the students' interviewed stated he did not have any digital gadget apart from an analogue mobile phone. Similar sentiments are shared by students' association of another university that their students who are studying online also lack information and communication tools like laptops and smart devices (Deo, 2020a). As such, it can be concluded that lack of access to basic digital tools is a major impediment to successful online education. Consequently, another tertiary institution in Fiji is making available 700 tablets to its students who do not have access to learning tools from home. The institution is hopeful that the distribution will ensure everyone has a fair chance to education and equal learning experience (Deo, 2020b).

Findings further reveal that availability of internet is the second major problem faced by the students in the current study. While majority of them have access to internet, the quality is not good enough for online learning. Three of the students do not have access to good quality internet while two students do not have internet access at all. The world is moving swiftly towards ubiquitous connectivity and this phenomenon has changed how we think and live in the 21stcentury. The internet has revolutionized the world as it has broken all barriers of distance, location and time (Tran Dinh Tan, Polyakova, & Shipilova, 2015). Likewise, internet has become an important instructional tool in higher education institutions globally. According to Hung, Huang, and Hwang (2014) a simple search online can result in getting many educational websites with abundance of learning resources in a short span of time. As such, the availability of high speed internet is vital for effective delivery of online and remote learning.

In like manner all the students mentioned the difficulty in accessing Google Meet online learning platform. This was something new for them and they didn't have any training or workshop in this regard. S2 stated that:

> This was the first time I heard about this learning platform and did not know how to use it. We should have been taught how to use it or we should have used it during our classes at the university. However, the tutorials prepared by the IT Department were very helpful. Although, I had faced difficulty initially, but now I am able to come online with my lecturer. I found this quite interesting as we could talk and discuss and even see one another.

It can be assumed that the adoption of e-learning will be slow as it is still at its infancy stage and that the initial period would have certain teething problems. According to Wang and Wang (2020) the transition to fully online, virtual learning almost always results in adaptation difficulties. They further state that this occurs for a number of reasons, including a lack of familiarity with the tools and a lack of a conducive environment at home to support online learning. Likewise, motivation to continue with online learning despites the odds including insufficient access to bandwidth and devices present a real challenge for the students (Wang & Wang, 2020).

On similar note, the Ministry of Education in Fiji encourages all students to complete secondary education with good results so that they could have quality tertiary education. Ministry of Education offers loans under Tertiary Education Loans Scheme (TELS) and Toppers Scholarships to deserving Fijians to study at universities and other tertiary institutions in Fiji. Subsequently, TELS is a scheme that is intended to provide finance to Fijians who qualify for higher education at any approved institutions, but are unable to support themselves financially. The Scheme provides student loans to eligible Fijians to enable them realize their dreams of higher education in line with the Fijians Government's vision of "Building a Smarter Fiji" (TSLB, 2019). Considering the current situation it is unequivocally recommended that part of the grant should cover the purchase of online learning gadgets such as laptops and tablets for the students. One of the universities has already begun discussion with Tertiary Scholarship and Loans Board to allow students to purchase laptops for students using the Tertiary Education Loans Scheme book allowance in an effort to bridge the digital divide faced by

some of its students (Narayan, 2020). This is because some students do not have laptops or tablets which can enable them to actively participate in online learning.

University administrations try to ensure students have access to devices that can aid their studies, as some students don't have the resources or the finances to purchase or borrow these devices to continue learning online. According to Narayan (2020) the administrations are aware that these unprecedented times require innovative thinking to ensure that none of the students get left behind without any fault of theirs. On similar note, The World Bank is mindful of the fact that few education systems, even the most high performing, may be not be that well equipped to offer online learning for all students at such a large scale. Technological advances often outpace the ability of decision makers to keep up considering the cost and infrastructure support (World Bank, 2020b). It must be established that to deliver effective online and blended learning there needs to be appropriate ICT support in way of infrastructure and tools as well as hardware and software support system. There is no doubt that the integration of the ICT as an instructional device in academic courses has escalated at a rapid rate. Subsequently universities and colleges have started implementing applications like Moodle and educational Blogs to supplement existing pedagogy and practice (Becker, 2000). Likewise, Ruzgar (2005) agrees with (Becker, 2000) that it is common in universities and colleges to provide online resources to supplement online learning.

However, it must be acknowledged that majority of the educational institutions in developing countries neither have the infrastructure nor expertise about how to go online and Fiji is no exception. To go truly online one needs to have software and hardware infrastructure system. In other words, institutions need a Department that can handle all ICT related activities. Accordingly, all participant spoke highly about the university's supportive IT Department. According to S2:

> Our IT Department staff has been very helpful and respond to our inquiries in very efficient manner. They always attend to our calls and explain the issues requested. They are also very prompt in responding to our emails and attend to our log in issues. I am really thankful to them for their expert guidance and timely assistance. I wouldn't have been able to do my course without their assistance.

Likewise, literature entails that in order to deliver effective classroom experience, there are key systems that need to be in place including a Learning Management System and Student Information System for effective delivery of online lessons (CoSN, 2020). In addition to having access to online learning environment, students and staff need devices laptops, tablets and smartphone with which to access online learning. Ensuring access to systems and devices only provides limited options for taking teaching and learning into a virtual environment. The success of this approach is also heavily dependent on internet connectivity and speed. The online experience can be extremely frustrating if students find systems slow and unresponsive due to bandwidth challenges. Maybe COVID 19 has provided a launch-pad for further discussion and adoption of online softwares and hardwares for fully fledged delivery of online classes. Subsequently, COVID 19 pandemic has provided a solid reason for

those who were thinking of going online to make the move.

However, World Bank has stressed that most online learners will experience difficulties if they are not assisted. Considering COVID 19 pandemic World Bank further reiterate that most students will have great difficulty accessing online learning, especially those staying that have poor Internet access and are subject to numerous other disadvantages (World Bank, 2020b)

Way Forward

The current crisis crystallises the dilemma policymakers are facing in going online in the interim closure of educational institutions to reduce the spread of COVID 19. On similar note, Moorhouse (2020) stresses that whenever educational planning is done in times of crises, it requires quick and creative solutions. Literature entails that during times of crisis one needs to think outside the box to generate various possible solutions that help meet the new needs for our learners and communities (Hodges et al., 2020). Findings reveal that the severe short-term disruption is felt by many families in Fiji as this home schooling is not only a massive shock to parents' productivity, but also to student's social life and learning.

It must be recognized that COVID-19 pandemic is first and foremost a health crisis and schools are closed to prevent the spread of Corona Virus. Bearing the previous statement in mind, teachers and parents have accepted that online and distance learning is appropriate and good for all and in combating the spread of COVID 19 (R. H. Huang et al., 2020). It is wise to understand ERT in this manner, so that we can divorce it from planned online learning. There are many examples of other countries responding to closure of educational institutions in a time of crisis by implementing models such as mobile learning, radio, blended learning, or other solutions that are contextually more feasible (Murgatrotd, 2020). Likewise, the university has made arrangements with internet companies to enable students to access university website and subsequent learning platforms free of charge.

On similar note, the added stress of the virus pandemic may have caused some students' disengagement in overall academic activities. In addition, when rapidly moving from face-to-face to online, both learners and instructors get physically separated leading to a sense of isolation and detached. Even UNESCO (2020) agrees that in many instances students, may not be ready for emergency online learning; therefore, engaging them is a major challenge. However, it must be established that emergency remote teaching or rapid online learning may be different from systematic online learning which requires a lot of pre-planning (Hodges et al., 2020). In this instance the schools were shut suddenly to avoid the spread of COVID 19 and not much time was given for the preparation for the online delivery of the lessons. This is why the speed with which this move to online instruction is unprecedented and staggering. There is no doubt that the global lockdown of education institutions has caused major interruption in students' learning and evoked disruptions in internal assessments.

With the spread of the covid-19, countries are implementing emergency plans to slow down and limit the spread of the virus and simultaneously prepare for a possible longer term disruption of face to face sessions. In the context of necessary closures, different forms of online education and distance

education resources are being mobilised. Findings reveal that students are going beyond their means to see that their education is least affected during COVID 19 Pandemic.

To make the rapid online transition feasible:

- Students need to have access to digital learning tools like laptops, desktops and tablets;
- Students need to have access to high quality internet service;
- Staff need to be well versed with online teaching strategies;
- Video tutorial about how to use learning applications could be placed on the Moodle;
- Administration should ramp up information dissemination and awareness-raising activities; to inform students, and parents of the risks associated with COVID-19; and
- Administration should ensure that adequate information about the pandemic is provided, especially when it comes to reducing the risk of getting sick and infecting others.

Moreover, the World Bank has highlighted a number of concerns as education providers are rushing to go online so that education of the students are least affected in times of social distancing amidst COVID 19 pandemic. For example, transitioning to online learning at scale is a very difficult and highly complex undertaking for education systems, even in the best of circumstances (World Bank, 2020b). World Bank goes further and states that academic subjects that are largely lecture-based and lend themselves to self-study are easier to move online quickly. Subjects in which learning content has already been digitized, especially where it is explicitly aligned with official school curricula, offer better candidates for online learning in the short term than those that do not. World Bank also cautions all to be aware that much of what happens in classes cannot be easily transferred online. Instructional approaches, content, pacing, interaction models, and assessment may all need to be adapted when transitioning to online learning (World Bank, 2020b). All these processes may be time consuming but a start needs to be made as it is not a matter of choice but a necessity in response to COVID 19 pandemic.

7. Limitations

Naturally, studies do have certain limitations and, in this case, only qualitative methods were used. The results in this study could not be verified by other means such as survey and other independent measures as only interviews and meta-analysis were used in the study. Consequently, these results should be viewed as a snapshot of online learning as an option in light of the drastic impact of COVID 19 pandemic. Thus, the exploratory findings present a solid platform for debate and discussion and a sound platform for further in-depth research on the subject matter.

8. Implications and Conclusions

There is no doubt that lockdown is causing considerable hardship and disruption everywhere and has really affected the education globally. In order to effectively transit to emergency remote learning amidst COVID-19 Pandemic it is recommended that:

- Students need to have access to e-learning gadgets like laptops, smart phones and desktops;
- Students should be supported with ICT technology and internet connectivity;
- Students need to have access to high quality internet service;
- Students need to be well versed with online learning platforms;
- Authorities need to subsidise the purchase of online gadgets for students;
- Lecturers need to be well equipped with online teaching strategies;
- Online assistance services should be provided to students needing ICT assistance;
- Universities need to establish decentralised libraries and printing services; and
- Universities should invest heavily in the improvement of e-learning infrastructure, e-learning content development and enhancement of e-learning awareness.

In essence, COVID 19 pandemic and social distancing requirement has presented undue challenges on all stakeholders to go online as they have to work in a time constraint and resource restraint situation. It must be established that adopting online learning environment isn't just a technical issue but it is a pedagogical and instructional challenge too. Technology is the means for delivery and requires a close cross-collaboration between instructional, content, and technology teams. In essence, ICT has become a potent force in transforming the educational landscape the world over. However, preparing to move education outside of traditional physical classrooms in response to COVID-19 requires thought, coordination and careful decision-making.

Likewise, students in the study mentioned lack of electronic gadgets like laptops and desktops as the leading challenge followed by poor or inadequate internet connectivity. This document is a starting point for planning and supporting a significant learning transformation. There has obviously been a great influence of technology in the online lives of young people. This digitalised revolution can synergise the educational ambitions and interests of the students who have become digital addicts. In essence, COVID 19 has provided us with the opportunity to adopt online learning as education systems need to be abreast with the rapid emergence of new technologies, thus making online, blended and remote learning a necessity in universities as countries are still affected by COVID-19 and frequent lockdowns.

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