



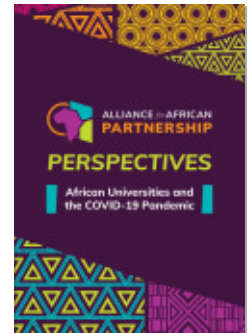
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Strategies of the Dominican University Nigeria in Coping with the COVID-19 Pandemic

Obiageli C. Okoye

Abstract

In this chapter, using qualitative research methods, I accounted for the strategies adopted by the management of Dominican University to help students continue their educational activities during COVID -19 pandemic. The challenges experienced by students using the online learning platform and strategies they devised to manage these challenges were also examined. The Dominican University switched to online learning method during the lock down. Students were faced with various challenges during their on line classes. These include erratic power supply, high cost of data bundle for Internet connection, and poor network connection among others. To manage these challenges, students resorted to the use of generators and power banks to charge their electronic devices, some went and lived with friends or relatives living in areas with stable network connection to receive their lectures. The online learning made the lecturers and students more Internet savvy and enabled students continued their lectures without disruption. However, students missed the face to face interaction with their lecturers and fellow students. Coming back on campus after the lock down, the management of Dominican University provided taps and wash hand basins at strategic places in the school, made compulsory the use of face masks as well as discourage the crowding of students at the cafeteria to ensure the students safety. The study recommended that for online learning to be effective in higher institutions in Nigeria there is need for stable power supply and good Internet connection.

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Strategies in Coping with the COVID-19 Pandemic

The first case of COVID-19 was reported in Nigeria in late February 2020, and by late March 2020, fifty-one cases had been recorded in the country. To curb the spread of the virus, the Nigerian government imposed a nationwide lockdown in March, shutting down all sectors of society except those that were deemed essential. The lockdown meant all educational institutions were closed and all students boarding at primary and secondary schools as well as those living on campus at the country's tertiary institutions had to return home. Children in elite private primary and secondary schools continued their classes online as did students in private tertiary institutions. However, children in government primary and secondary schools could not participate in the online learning, because the government did not make provisions for their use of an online learning platform and many students could not afford the costs associated with online learning. Students in the federal and some state universities were also unable to engage in online learning because the Academic Staff Union of the Universities (ASUU) in the country was on strike. Private universities in Nigeria continued their lectures online during the lockdown.

The university is the highest institution of learning devoted to knowledge production (Lawuyi and Ukpokolo 2012). In the context of Nigeria, a university education has made it possible to help many of the country's citizens make valuable contributions to nation building (Otonko 2012). The country's first federal university, the University of Ibadan, was established in 1948 whereas the first group of surviving private universities were established in 1999 (e.g., Igbinedion University Okada in Edo State, Babcock University in Ilisan Remo Ogun State, and Madonna University Okija in Anambra State Ajadi 2010). Private universities were established in the country to help the federal

and state universities provide quality higher education for Nigeria's growing population. In this article, I reflect on how one private university in Nigeria, Dominican University, switched to the online learning mode during the lockdown to continue its educational activities during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the challenges students experienced using the University's online learning platform and how they mitigated these challenges.

Context

Dominican University is situated in Samonda, Ibadan, close to the University of Ibadan, which is located in Ibadan, Nigeria. Opening in 2017, it is the first university established by the Dominican Order (Order of Preachers) in Africa. It was established to provide high-quality education in the humanities, management, and science and technology. The university has two faculties: the faculty of sciences and the faculty of humanities, social, and management sciences. The departments in the former are physical and mathematical sciences, chemical sciences, and biological sciences, whereas the latter is comprised of the departments of philosophy, mass communication, accounting, business administration, and economics. Dominican University is affiliated to the University of Ibadan and to St. Thomas (Angelicum) in Rome. It awards Bachelor of Philosophy and Bachelor of Theology degrees.

Online Learning at Dominican University

As already stated, Dominican University is one of the private higher educational institutions in Nigeria. Some of the students live on campus whereas some live outside the campus. When Nigeria implemented a nation-wide lockdown in mid-March 2020

in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, all students living on campus had to leave. Two weeks after lockdown began, the University made the transition to online learning to continue its academic activities, helping students continue their course work without disruption. The platforms used were Google Classroom, Google Hangout, YouTube, WhatsApp, and Zoom. The type of learning platform selected depended on the course, e.g., in the department of religious studies, Google Classroom and WhatsApp were used, whereas in the department of philosophy, third-year students used Zoom. Many lecturers had to use WhatsApp because of network issues and the inability of some students to connect to Zoom with their electronic devices. Some lecturers shared audio recordings in the class's WhatsApp group. Some students admitted that this method was boring and noninteractive because they could not see the lecturer and therefore missed gesticulations and tone, which help in communication. As a result, students had to listen to the audio recording and read more than they would have after a face-to-face class in order to understand a topic. Most students preferred using Google Classroom because it used both audio and video: they could see their lecturer, helping them better understand the topic being taught. However, this platform consumes much more data than the others. Most lecturers followed the normal lecture timetable whereas some scheduled lectures and notified the students to join in at an agreed time. It is important to note that due to the second wave of the pandemic, the federal government postponed the resumption date of schools in Nigeria to January 18, 2021. As a result, Dominican University went online again but this time both lecturers and students logged in via the school website to an e-classroom. The new online learning platform has all the features

of Zoom with audio visual capabilities, the hand-raising feature, and the chat box where people can write comments or ask questions. However, the challenges of an erratic power supply and the high cost of the data bundle remain unresolved. Although students found the modality of online lectures helpful, they encountered many challenges using this medium, which will be discussed below.

Poor Power Supply

In general, Nigeria's power supply is erratic. People living in some residential areas can remain without power for days, weeks, and even months (Oye, Salleh, and Lahad 2011). This issue caused serious challenges for the students, because their electronic devices needed electricity to ensure they could use them for their online lectures. To address this problem, some students reported using generators and power banks to charge their electronic devices, whereas others charged their phones and laptops in internet cafés to ensure they were prepared for their online classes.

Poor Network Connection

In Nigeria, MTN, Glo, Airtel, and 9 Mobile provide internet and mobile services in the country. A strong network connection is required for stable internet connection; yet some areas in Nigeria do not have access to the network and others have poor network connections. The unstable network connection hinder students and lecturers' abilities to participate in online learning. According to one third-year student, "At times, you miss like twenty to thirty minutes [of the lecture] due to poor network before you joined the class again." To manage this problem, students identified the service providers with strong network connection in their area and switched over to such

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network. Students living in areas with no network connection travelled to stay with friends or relatives living in areas with good network connection. In some cases, students simply had to wait until the network became stable before they could continue with their lectures.

High Cost of Data Bundle

Online learning requires the use of an internet connection and, in the Nigerian context, one can only connect to the internet by buying data bundle, with the cost of accessing the internet in the country still being quite high (Nwagwu 2020). Students reported spending a significant amount of money buying data bundles to ensure they could connect to the internet to continue with their studies. The high cost of data bundles was not a problem for the affluent students, but it was a problem for some indigent students because they had not budgeted for such an expense. One of the students described spending at least N5000 (\$13 USD) each month on data bundles to access her online classes. Some of the students that are not financially buoyant resorted to borrowing data from friends. For the religious students, their communities provided them with free internet connections.

Learning Challenges

Online classes afforded students the opportunity to engage in other activities, such as computer programming, music, and so on, although some students admitted to not managing their time wisely. In other words, they failed to allot sufficient time to their schoolwork and this affected their performance in their examinations. Concentration was also a major challenge for most students when trying to learn in the new online context because other social media platforms were active, and

they continued to receive messages during classes. These distractions resulted in some students being easily distracted by chatting with friends during lectures rather than listening to their lecturers.

Also, some students were assigned house chores while they were at home. For example, one student reported that as the youngest child at home there were daily house chores she had to complete in addition to her schoolwork. She reported that initially balancing the two was a problem, but she eventually became used to taking care of both tasks over time. For some Dominican students living in the religious community, they admitted to also having similar challenges balancing their academic work and cooking their food because the cooks were told to stop work during the pandemic as they lived outside the community. As a result, the students complied a duty rooster and took turns cooking food for the group. This task was quite challenging, especially for those students who had not cooked before in their lives.

Online Learning and Assessment

The online lectures lasted for about four months after which the students wrote their second semester exams online. The students started their online examinations on August 31 with the exam period ending on September 12, 2020. The exams were conducted on Google Classroom. Before the online examination, each department had a seminar with the examination officer. He briefed them on what they need to know about the online examination tool. Teaching staff were able to devise examination questions in two different forms—theories and multiple choice questions. The general courses' questions were purely multiple choice questions. According to the students, the examination questions

and answer sheets were uploaded online. The students downloaded the questions and answer sheets fifteen minutes before the examination started. They were given more time to help them manage the issue of poor network connection and typing. Some lecturers gave students word limit during the online examination. For instance, some lecturers would demand that students should answer a question in not more than ten lines or in not more than 750 words. This method was unlike the written examination given in the physical presence of the instructor where word limits were not enforced. Challenges arose because some students were not fast at typing, and as a result they could not answer all the required questions within the allotted time.

Many students described online examinations being more difficult than the written examination given in the physical presence of the instructor. For example, one third-year philosophy student explained that “the online examination was like take-home exams and more like term papers and since it was take-home, you have to do it well. So, it takes more time and more energy.” Students did describe that one advantage of the online examination modality was that their results came out earlier than those from the written examination given in the physical presence of the instructor. As these student experiences illustrate, online learning can facilitate the transfer of knowledge anywhere and anytime irrespective of subject matter (Oye et al. 2011). It offers a cost-effective way to provide students with an education and prepares students for participating in the global information society, expanding educational opportunities to overcome the barriers of time and space (Nwagwu 2019). Yet, it can also pose significant challenges. As one final-year philosophy student explained, the level of interaction between lecturers and students is limited, and one

“cannot compare it [online teaching] with physical teaching. The interaction between students and lecturers was not there and the interaction between students as in the normal class forum was lacking.”

Dominican University’s migration to online learning at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic helped its students continue their academic work, ensuring they graduate in the allocated time. Although having access to online learning mediums is a sign of technological advancement, as this article has illustrated, many students at Dominican University experienced challenges trying to learn in an online context because of Nigeria’s poor power supply and network connections. The situation was even more challenging for less wealthy students, who had to raise money to purchase data bundles and plan for alternative means to access reliable power sources for their electronic devices. From listening to the students’ experiences trying to engage in online learning during the pandemic, it becomes evident that for this educational modality to be effective in higher institutions in Nigeria, the country and its government needs to ensure that its citizens have access to a stable power supply and reliable internet connection. In addition, students need to understand the importance of acquiring the discipline and diligence required for the online learning.

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