TRANSNATIONAL HIGHER EDUCATION PARTNERSHIPS IN THE COVID-19 ERA; STUDENTS' RATING OF AN ONLINE AND MODULAR LEARNING PROGRAMME

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Abstract:

Transnational educational partnerships among tertiary institutions have been around for a long time all over the world. There will always be cases where some institutions or countries have a better capacity and operational advantage over others. It is because of this rationale that educational institutions from two or more countries through collaborative partnerships and or relationships, rally or agree to counter contemporary challenges in their countries and they have been very successful in this for a long time. The COVID-19 pandemic created a disruption of education systems, affecting over 1.6 billion learners globally and hence the numerous surges of transnational educational partnerships. The study investigated the rating of a programme that is running under a transnational higher education partnership between two institutions in two different countries. An exploratory study of a qualitative design was adopted for this research and by use of a closed and open-ended questionnaire, data was collected. The questionnaire was designed to benchmark the three instructional strategies of the Community of Inquiry framework model, and these are cognitive presence, social presence, and teaching presence. Results reveal positive students' ratings of the programme on all instructional strategies social, teaching, and cognitive presence with a few outliers. The study portrays an effective switch from a face-to-face lecture learning session programme, to online-modular learning without so many obstacles to affect the teaching-learning process. Future research could pick interest in more detailed experiences of students on such programmes, and this is in addition to the detailed responses for other stakeholders like instructors, administrators, and possibly parents.

Keywords: transnational higher education, partnerships, online-modular learning

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1. Introduction

The forces of globalisation have rendered societies around the world restless, and the unending changes have left mankind no option but to adjust and fit in accordingly. It is the reason why institutions and organisations plan, prepare and set up mechanisms to ease the processes of adjustment in a gradual evolutionary manner through knowledge creation and application. Education institutions like universities have been at the centre of this evolution since time immemorial and they still do to date. Chetro-Szivos (2010) argues that because of the well-recognised role of tertiary education institutions, education has been regarded as a key factor in capacity development, especially in regard to the fact that these institutions provide knowledge, teaching, and research. That with knowledge being an engine of economic growth and development, the pivotal role of tertiary education in economic growth and development has been well-established in the world. Universities serve as think tanks to assist mankind and societies as a whole in encountering these emerging trends and over the years they have been agents of social responsibility (Chetro-Szivos, 2010), and this prevents crisis situations or reduces their severity in case the crisis is not preventable.

However, there will always be cases where some institutions or countries have a better capacity and operational advantage over others. It is because of this rationale that educational institutions from two or more countries through collaborative partnerships and or relationships, rally or agree to counter contemporary challenges in their countries and they have been very successful in this for a long time. The collaborations enhance their resource and technical capacity and such are the International cooperations established among tertiary institutions. They usually will mobilise resources both financial and human, domestic and transnational to address issues, improve responses and seek solutions to crises or wanting situations like poverty, pandemics, famine, drought, and many others. They address issues, improve responses and seek solutions through research to generate more knowledge, training, and development to empower human resources or through community outreach. Such engagements have been categorised as Cross Border or Transnational Higher Education partnerships or collaborations (CBHE). Early forms of CBHE were so much prominent and popular between the developed and the underdeveloped world. These were so much fostered through for instance western countries whereby their institutions provided technical advice, support, and validation to institutions and organisations in Africa and parts of Asia (Lane, and Kinser, 2013). Multidimensional processes and procedures of cross-border higher education are key to achieving the intended objectives of the stakeholders' key operational aspects like compatible learning approaches, liaison offices, and many others. Chetro-Szivos (2010) argues that if cross-border tertiary education is going to be truly effective, then it cannot remain unidirectional.

Transnational or Cross Border educational collaborations among tertiary have been around for a long time and universities have over time engaged in some controlled Transnational or Cross Border education collaborations. These would employ various

channels like distance learning, modular approaches and partnership-based models where a third party would deliver a franchised or validated programme, this has expanded over the last years. In countries where education opportunities are inadequate, transnational education has become a blessing with realities manifested based on the fact that education is a key player in any country's economic development, social services, living standards, and political empowerment (Naidoo & Sibiya, 2019; Fearnside & Chung, 2017). The emerging emphasis on higher education and especially quality higher education, and in circumstances where higher education in some countries has encountered quality assurance issues, transnational education has easily covered the gap. There is an increase in the influx of people to various parts of the world in search of quality education, hence translating into cross-border education (Knight, 2006). This trend is irrespective of the field just like (Knight, 2008; Naidoo, & Sibiya, 2019) argue that transnational education can be very instrumental in providing opportunities that can increase countries' health and welfare by ensuring adequate training of human health resources. However, cross-border or transnational education has over time been validated by agreements, collaborations, or partnerships between institutions across borders. These institutions could agree to share curriculum, research, staff, students and sometimes one university could grant permission to another university in another country to run or host its academic programme. In this research, I was interested in the students' rating of an online and modular learning programme that is running under a transnational higher education partnership between two institutions in two different countries.

2. CBHE as a Driver of Higher Education Internationalisation

The popular term of internationalization of higher education involves integrating global dimensions into the higher education system of any territory. In order to admit foreign students and generate gross revenues, and elevate their national and international profiles, frugal universities and other tertiary educational institutions have modified their mode of operations by enriching their curriculum designs to fit into the international context to a reasonable extent. Internationalisation will involve the admission of foreign students, setting up international campuses, internationalisation of the curriculum, exchange of students and staff, international collaborative research and partnerships between institutions across borders, that is regionally and internationally (Chetro-Szivos, 2010; Juusola & Rensimer, 2018; Ogachi, 2013). Internationalization of higher education is today presented as a process that institutions in especially developing countries could adopt if they are to address the pervading challenges of growth and development. There are many scholarly arguments in favour of internationalisation like the fact that institutions in Africa have benefitted through opportunities that prop their academic disciplines, knowledge systems, and institutions by exposing them to institutions and academics in the developed world. Under such arrangements, they can access the world's best scientific research and infrastructures. This opens possibilities for realizing

institutional capacity development, increased research output, and success in human capability in these institutions and countries in the long run, (Ogachi, 2013).

It is no longer strange for institutions to incorporate internationalisation in their strategic plans as a way of diversifying their student nationality composition, enhancing their global presence, and of course increasing their revenue (Chetro-Szivos, 2010). Just like (Hou et al., 2020) indicate that due to an increase in global education recently, transnational learning has become a mainstream issue and that there are several kinds of overseas learning joint double degree, degree-seeking, student exchange, service learning, and internship to mention a few. The learning scope takes a dimension of the main objectives of any contemporary higher education institution and that is teaching/learning, research, and community outreach. It is also important to emphasise that with so much hyped transnational or cross-border education, there will hardly be a time when higher education entities the world over can agree to an internationally agreed view of this approach of education and its quality assurance (Trifiro, 2019).

International collaborations and partnerships have taken centre stage in dominating internationalisation of higher education today. Universities are gradually dropping the ivory tower principle and extending services to where they are needed both locally, regionally, and internationally. Findings indicate that by coming down from the ivory tower, university academics will exhibit a strong commitment to engagement and interaction with communities. This applies to both principal and practice and such will take place in various geographical locations and could be both local and international (Ross & Lindsay, 2005). These partnerships among institutions will differ from one another and therefore each of them possesses very unique entities. Gieser (2015) emphasises that with the increasing importance of the internationalisation strategy, stakeholders' shaping of implementation processes should be clearly understood. Much as international partnerships are propped by human interactions, human beings' interactions are at the same time reason for their complication. Indeed, to achieve effective international higher education and academic collaboration, players should prepare for a rugged terrain with numerous obstacles and setbacks. However, scholars argue that there is a great deal of opportunities in the pursuit of more internationalised and globally-connected campuses (Gieser, 2015; Shams, 2017). It is therefore no surprising that higher education institutions are prioritizing these international education partnerships. These partnerships are mostly international, and this is why senior administrators are advised to involve faculties since their support is crucial in grooming these international engagements (Gieser, 2015)

According to (Knight, 2007) typology programmes mobility, there are six models for delivery of cross-border education and these are (1) Franchise, where an institution of higher education in another nation (guest) will authorize an institution of higher education in another nation (host) deliver the guest's courses in the host's nation or other countries. In this case, the credits for completed work will be awarded by the guest institution and of course, in the agreement, all regulatory and accreditation standard issues in both countries are followed accordingly. (2) Twinning model where both the

guest country and host country allow students to earn credits in either country. Just like franchise, the credits for completed work will be awarded by the guest institution and of course, in the agreement, all regulatory and accreditation standard issues in both countries are followed accordingly. Then (3) is the Double or Joint Degree where providers in different countries form a partnership to offer a program. The students can either receive credits from each provider or a joint award from the collaborating institutions. Number (4) is validation and just like the name, in this type of collaboration the guest institution will allow the host to award credits, and (5) is the E-learning or distance learning where courses can be offered to students anywhere in the world through electronic, distance or modular models. The outbreak of the Covid19 and the effective global lockdown evidenced an explosive trend in the application of this type of learning and it is possible many institutions around the world have gotten stuck to it even after easing the lockdown world over. This coupled with the advancement in information communication technologies (ICT), has been instrumental in increasing accessibility to higher education and hence the skyrocketing proliferation of cross-border education. Linking Higher Education institutions with partners in other parts of the world is now a keyboard away. This eases the process of accessing programs and courses through various ICT platforms that are user-friendly. The crisis-inclined shift to E-learning by universities during the Covid19 pandemic lockdown was not void of any incumbrances especially accruing from financial and human resource incapacitations, and prominent among these was adequately trained teaching staff in digitalized education techniques (Perrin and Wang, 2021).

3. The Necessity

According to the United Nations or UN (2020), the COVID-19 pandemic created the largest disruption of education systems around the world. With approximately 1.6 billion learners in over 190 countries across all continents being affected. Over 94% of the world's student population has been affected by the closure of schools and universities and hence many of these migrated to online learning platforms. The pandemic has grossly impacted on higher education development through aspects like the adoption of online learning from physical face-to-face lectures, many physical activities and events being cancelled and a partial cease in the mobility of international students which affected university finances (Perrin & Wang, 2021; Tesar, 2020). Nonetheless, the disruption came with numerous opportunities too within education and specifically the higher education sector. There has been a general rethinking of higher education with mind-blowing questions like how the teaching/learning process can competently be managed through increased use of technology. The greatest questions of the day concentrate on issues like quality assurance, assessment, measurement, and evaluation in the new era of higher education (Sambell & Brown, 2021; Boud & Soler, 2016; Perrin & Wang, 2021). Cross-border tertiary education can be a key influencing factor in generating new forms of knowledge, creativity, and innovation for the benefit of society if institutions adopt a

collaborative model. Institutions can elevate themselves to the level of agents of social responsibility in a bid to address the pressing issues of famine, political instability, human rights abuse, access to health, poverty, and so on (Chetro-Szivos, 2010).

Somalia has been politically unstable since 1991, and this has disrupted all its social and economic systems including education. This is a country that recorded tremendous educational growth and development after independence, which was all shattered after 1991, and the country is still struggling to recover from this trauma but in vain. Abdi (1998) writes that the post-independence development of Somalia was so sporadic that there was widespread construction of schools, training of teachers and literacy programmes were spread all over the country. However, this was short lived with the collapse of the state in 1991 and all modern systems of learning were destroyed by fighting factions which has stretched on to date with some staggering rehabilitations in some parts of the country. Efforts to reform structures and processes after the intense crisis have been fraught and were not well contextualised. Ahmed and Bradford (2011) for instance conclude that Somaliland's priority of its economic function of the education policy is just in line with discourses of education reforms in the western world. This is in a bid to restore the education system that was destroyed by the Somali crisis and this is the same spirit that is felt in the rest of Somalia as a country (Abdi, 1998; Ainebyona, 2016). Among the measures introduced to revive education include neo-liberal education policies which have empowered the private sector hence introducing more stakeholders in the sector (Ahmed and Bradford, 2011; Ainebyona, 2016; Hussein, 2015). Addressing the education crisis in Somalia requires an immediate concerted and collective effort, just like (Hussein, 2015) argues that areas like curriculum, language policy, and teacher training must be accelerated and systematised. Looking at the higher education sector, (Ainebyona, 2016) notes that the civil war aftermath was accompanied by an influx of universities with less trained or untrained academic staff, implying that the other most urgent need is a reliable and valid higher education system in the country.

Since 1991, there has not been a reliable state-managed education system and this prompted the intervention of intellectuals within and abroad along with members of the community acting as stakeholders to revive higher education (Eno et al., 2015). Indeed, without any direct state involvement, the role of the community was very crucial although the intellectuals were also needed to play key technical roles. Eno et al., (2015) in their paper on the revival of higher education in Somalia recommend that players should think about introducing distance and online learning where possible. Just like (Chetro-Szivos, 2010) indicates cross-border tertiary education could offer several opportunities for collaboration and this can help in building human capital and capacity development worldwide. It is no doubt that for capacity building of human capital, Cross-border or transnational education can be a reliable measure in many underdeveloped and developing countries like Somalia. It can be a good capacity development tool for both tertiary education systems and also economies. In return, strong tertiary education systems will support the general education system in these countries hence uplifting and improving human and social capital, contributing to a

virtuous development cycle. In their conclusion (Eno et al., 2015) recommend higher education institutions in Somalia to join regional and continental higher education regulatory and standardisation bodies like Association of African Universities, the Inter-University Council of East Africa, and so on. This is a purely clear-cut route to internationalisation and can easily accrue into cross-border or transnational education partnerships like the one that this research investigated. The result of this study is instrumental in upgrading and enriching transnational educational partnerships' academic programmes that were adopted in a crisis mode during the Covid-19 pandemic and are running online, modular, distance, or blended.

4. Theoretical Inclinations

4.1 Community of Inquiry

The Community of Inquiry (CoI), is very popular framework for building communities online using its instructional strategies of cognitive presence, social presence, and teaching presence. These are applied by practitioners like instructors, e-learning and online course developers, and instructional designers for use in online courses (Garrison et al., 2000; Fiock, 2020). Community of Inquiry was introduced by (Garrison et al., 2000), although it is embedded in John Dewey's view of practical inquiry of 1938 (Swan and Ice, 2010) and a recommendation on the need for practical strategies and guidelines on how to facilitate presence from a real-world pedagogical perspective was made by (Garrison and Arbaugh, 2007) for future research in Community of Inquiry.

The Community of Inquiry advocates that interaction between learners within online settings is of great value since it is key to students' success (Akyol & Garrison, 2008; Arbaugh, 2008; Richardson et al., 2017; Fiock, 2020). According to the Community of Inquiry, there are three core elements, the cognitive presence where learners have the ability to construct and confirm through sustained reflection, the social presence which involves emotional expressions, open communication, and group cohesion, and lastly the teaching presence which wraps up as the design, facilitation, and direction of the cognitive and social presence (Garrison et al., 2000; Fiock, 2020). The Community of Inquiry was, therefore, my benchmark theory in this study and it guided my questionnaire design which was in accordance with the three instructional strategies of cognitive, social, and teaching presence to find out students' rating of an online and modular learning programme under a transnational educational partnership.

4.2 Problem Statement

The impact of COVID-19 on education globally was gross and endures, many countries are still staggering with a backlog of students in candidate classes. The pandemic has also grossly affected the future of cross-border entities like the internationalised higher education partnerships and programmes (Pan, 2021; National Conference of State Legislatures, 2020; Redden, 2020). The enrolment of international students has been interrupted due to the lockdown effect and this has affected the financial situation of

universities -these had become so addicted to foreign students as a source of income through exorbitant fees payments (Mueller, 2020; Pannett, 2020; Pan, 2021). Universities in the western world reported a record shortfall in applications due to the travel ban and in some extreme cases some almost collapsed (Pannett, 2020; World Education Blog, 2020; Pan, 2021). However, in a bid to overturn the would-be consequences of the pandemic on enrolment, some universities adopted online learning and they were able to retain some foreign students who would easily study from their respective countries.

The study investigated students' rating of an online and modular learning programme that is running under a transnational higher education partnership between two institutions in two different countries. That is University of Bosaso, Garowe (UOBG) in Somalia and the Islamic University in Uganda (IUIU) in Uganda. The agreement was supposed to proceed as a normal transnational education partnership with face-to-face sessional lectures followed by a modular self-study period of two and half months before semester exams, and it was supposed to start effective in 2019. This was intercepted by the outbreak of covid19 pandemic that later culminated in a global lockdown. The pandemic presented some major global issues like disconnection due to border control, state shrinking of public funding, and threatening of the university financial base due to factors like interrupted student enrolment for both local and foreign (Pan, 2021). There was a change in the international higher education global landscape and this was worsened by a shift in geopolitical relations, all of which were reshuffled by the pandemic and after effects (Pan, 2021). The internationalised higher education system today enjoys a buoyance of numerous transnational education ventures and engagements and there is limited research on the transnational higher education programmes where programmes of one university in a guest country are run by a university in a host country and in this case online. Even when the university in the guest country awards the credits and the university in the host country just accommodates the programmes (Mikecz, 2021). The Community of Inquiry in this study was used as a theoretical reference, although while adopting the online teaching of the programme, the two universities did not benchmark with the framework.

5. Materials and Methods

An exploratory study of a qualitative design was adopted for this research and by use of a closed and open-ended questionnaire, data was collected. I benchmarked the Community of Inquiry framework model for online learning and it is basing on its instructional strategies that I developed the data collection questionnaire. These are cognitive, social, and teaching presence, and they were supplemented by additional open-ended questionnaire items to probe into the management and administration of the programme. A questionnaire was sent out to 40 respondents which is the total number of students who have so far completed their studies and are awaiting graduation. Respondents were sent emails requesting them to participate in the study by answering the questionnaire and they all consented to do so. The questionnaire Language was

simplified to cater for the language needs of the respondents whose proficiency is still inadequate given that their previous education language background is Somali. 20 respondents successfully responded and returned questionnaires which comprised of both nominal items and open-ended questions. The questionnaire was sent out to the entire population because it was small, this was workable because the study was also qualitative. According to (Vasileiou et al., 2018), there are no straight forward criteria on determining sample size in qualitative research. Findings by (Hennink and Kaiser, 2021) conclude that most popular sample sizes where data reached saturation were (9–17) for interviews and (4–8) for focus group discussions especially in homogenous study populations. Data was grouped into percentage means and presented graphically to get a critical observation of the students rating of the online programmes. The students' responses to the close-ended items were limited to the nominal responses of Always, Sometimes, and Never since the students' exposure to the programme is recent.

5.1 Participants Details

Questionnaire respondents to the study were students enrolled in the postgraduate diploma in management and teaching at higher education who have completed their studies and are awaiting graduation. Just like the nature of the programme whose lectures are running online, even the questionnaire was sent to them and they had to respond online since they are scattered around Puntland. The respondents studied the programme under similar circumstances and conditions, they were therefore sharing more or less similar characteristics in addition to the fact that all their minimum qualification is an undergraduate qualification.

6. Results

Results reveal that the students' rating of the programme is generally positive on all instructional strategies social, teaching, and cognitive presence. However, there are items where respondents under some instructional strategies, indicated that they were not sufficiently handled and therefore indicated sometimes. Areas like instructors allowing students to share their feelings on different concepts, communication and feedback and group discussion, and so on as represented below;

6.1 Social Presence

There was general positivity towards respondents' experiences with social presence of the programme. There was regular communication on matters pertaining to the programme among students, the same applies to the formation of groups and discussions and the sharing of feelings about concepts during lectures and discussions. Results indicate that the main sub-themes of social presence like open communication, emotional expression, and group cohesion were well exhibited during the teaching of the programme.
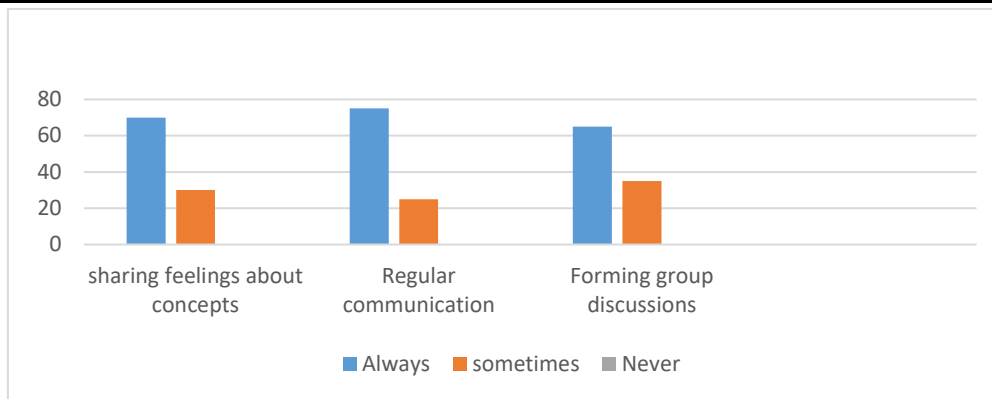
Figure 1:

6.2 Teaching Presence

The teaching presence strategy is emphasised under sub-themes of facilitating discourse, design and organisation and direct instruction. Respondents indicate that there were some gaps during direct instruction like instructors 'inadequacy in the preparation and planning for teaching, and under design and organisation, respondents indicate that learners were ineffective during participation and administration of instructors' group tasks.
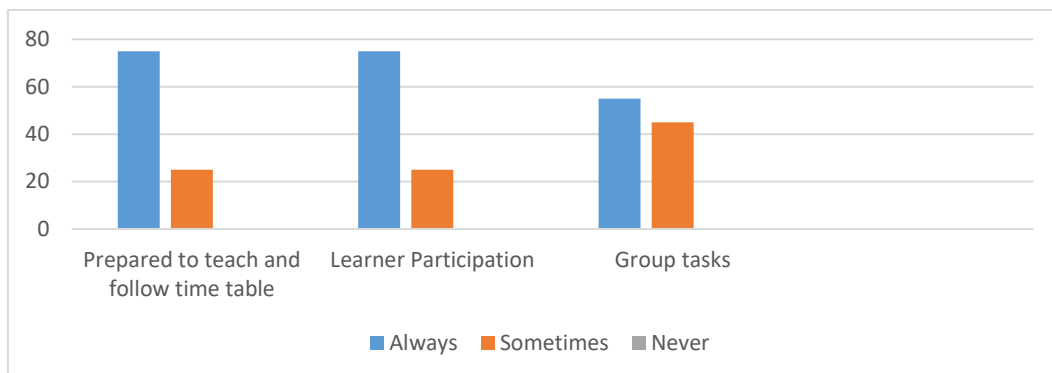

Figure 2:

6.2 Cognitive Presence

Results indicate that there is more input required to improve on the cognitive input aspect under this online learning programmes. Respondents reported varying perceptions about their experiences with the programme with regard to cognitive presence. Results indicated that there are gaps in learner stimulation, relating content with learners' previous experience, assigning problem-based tasks, and case study-based teaching to enhance competency, and all these sum up to developing learners' critical thinking skills. Online learning programmes should emphasise how technology can be used more innovatively to enhance more cognitive presence and movement through critical thinking processes.
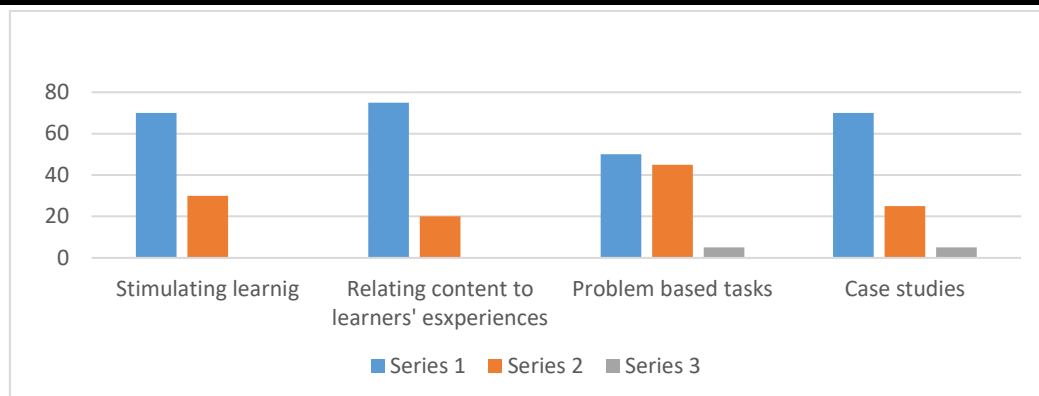
Figure 3:

Concerning the benefits of the programmes, all students agree that the programme has indeed added value to their professional career and that the cost was worth it. The respondents also indicated that they would recommend a friend or relative to join the programme.

6.3 Open-ended Responses
To supplement the findings of the closed ended items, two open ended items were added onto the questionnaire to allow respondents briefly reveal their inner feelings about the programme.

6.5 Challenges Faced during Studies under the Programme
Respondents cited several challenges inclined towards the running the of the programme like communication, inflexibility in timetabling and several hiccups accruing from information communication technology related issues. There were numerous ICT related challenges and they included the management of the Enterprise Resource Planning system, instructors' ability to use ICT platforms like Zoom, and the intermittent internet on both sides. Other challenges included communication gaps especially on feedback from lecturers and managers, inadequate instructional and reading materials, and a crash timetable.

6.6 Recommendations for Improvement
Students' recommendations include improvement in ICT services and also train lecturers to equip them with online teaching skills. This is in addition to upgrading internet facilities in both institutions. There is a need to improve on the management and coordination of the programme and also the communication, especially the feedback.

7. Discussion

7.1 Social Presence
There was sufficient social presence during lectures, students indicate that they always felt involved by their fellow students and instructors, and to some extent their feelings

on certain concepts during lectures were recognised. They feel that the regular updates on the programmes were well done, they felt united and to some extent formed group discussions. There are a few exceptional cases where results indicate that sometimes there were gaps in some aspects of social presence and most vulnerable area was the formation groups for discussion amongst students during self-study sessions. Given the fact that the adoption of online learning was as crisis management option, it is possible that students were not ready for it. Studies on Covid-19 induced online learning reveal that there were varying comfort levels among students when adopting this mode of study. Actually, in some cases, students expressed less interest in proceeding with the online learning mode (Roy & Covelli, 2021). Much as students; responses indicate that they were always allowed to share their feelings about concepts during lectures, 30% indicate sometimes. This is a key variable for learning since not only does it build personal confidence in a class but also promotes student-centred learning environments. Given the nature of the study, it is difficult to discern the root cause of some of these possible short comings in the application of online learning platforms just (Mo et al., 2021) conclude in their study that the teachers' positive attitudes towards teaching influenced students' perceived use of online learning. It is therefore possible that in some courses during certain lectures, instructors presented low attitudinal behaviours that could have affected how they conducted their lectures hence lowering students' participation.

7.2 Teaching Presence

Results indicate that instructors always tried to achieve the required teaching learning expectations like preparation and planning, engaging learners, learner participation, some level of group work tasks, and being motivating and lively. Although only 45% of responses indicate that instructors engaged students in group tasks, implying 55% ignored the group tasks aspect of learning. This is possible given the timing in which online learning in higher education institutions was adopted. It is possible that instructors had less time to prepare adequately for these lectures and in addition to the fact that this was a new mode of study that involved adopting ICT technologies that were not acquainted with many higher education instructors at the time especially in the developing and under developed regions of the world. Roy & Covelli, (2021) observe in their study that switching to online learning was easier for those with prior experience and indeed they felt comfortable with the new format. They, therefore, recommend that institutions should always prepare for unforeseen circumstances.

7.3 Cognitive Presence

This instructional strategy recorded the highest percentage of dissatisfaction from the students. In some variables like assigning problem-based tasks and use of case studies 5% of responses in each indicated never. With 45% indicating sometimes for use of problem-based tasks by instructors and 30% for use of pragmatic examples. With all these limitations, indeed there was an inadequate cognitive presence during the running of online lectures under the programme. In some cases, instructors hardly related their

learning content to higher education and yet this was a key ingredient in the programme. Adopting and switching to online may not have been the best alternative after the pandemic lockdown, but it was the best option available. Many institutions took it up under crisis-oriented circumstances and therefore progressed with it the hard way irrespective of its shortcomings. For private education institutions, online learning meant continuity in tuition collection from students and to the instructors, this was an advantage for them to continue working and support their families which somehow elevated their attitudes and willingness towards the mode of study (Mo et al., (2021; Stodel, 2006)

7.4 Open-ended Responses

Results from the open-ended questions reveal and confirm the outliers in the close ended questions. The level of incapacity in using information and communication technology platforms explains why in some cases instructors were inadequately implementing certain skills. The intermittent internet is an indicator of unpreparedness for such crisis situations by institutions of higher learning. It is possible institutions were not able to adjust effectively to some of these shocks given the circumstances at the time and they were reluctant to supplement traditional pedagogical platforms with modern ICT ones. therefore, with the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown, tables were turned and crises were encountered with limited counter options. An abrupt shift to online learning was inevitable with numerous arguments on the digital divide, digital infrastructure, digital literacy, technical and pedagogical skills for lecturers, orientation of students all these supposed to be decided and implemented in a very short time (Rahman, 2021). It is therefore possible that instructors in this transnational programme experienced a need for the effective application of online learning platforms as revealed by the students. In their recommendations therefore, students suggest that, on addition to developing reliable ICT infrastructure plus upgrading the internet facilities for the two institutions, there is a need to train the programmes instructors in skills of using online learning platforms. It would be prudent to align the online programme with the Community of Inquiry or any other model that elaborates a detailed pedagogical approach to teaching online. Online learning programmes should be designed to be easily used by all parties since whenever they are easy to use, it becomes more possible for stakeholders to be willing to use them (Mo et al., 2021; Roy & Covelli, 2021). Of course, in some instances, these programmes seemed very difficult to use in the beginning, but they got simpler with time as noted by (Roy & Covelli, 2021). The need to improve the management of the programme through proper coordination channels is also a key factor that was revealed by the students. For a programme running in two institutions in two different countries, communication channels should be well coordinated, managed, and explicit to all key players and stakeholders.

8. Conclusions

Transnational educational partnerships in the post Covid-19 era are going to take a fundamental twist of operation, especially for postgraduate programmes. Institutions of higher learning have realised how it is possible to collaborate with partners around the world without having to move students and staff. The study portrays an effective switch from a prospective face-to-face lecture learning session programme, to online-modular learning without so many obstacles to worry about. A study by (Giovannella, 2021) also notes that students and lecturers positively absorbed the abrupt switch from physical to virtual learning, although students seemed to be missing the physical class environments. Theoretical references to the Community of Inquiry framework in this study were for purposes of methodology, but the online programme of Postgraduate Diploma in Management Teaching at Higher Education under the partnership was not designed and implemented following the principles and strategies of the framework. Given the circumstances under which the online strategy was adopted, it was not possible to adopt any theoretical frameworks, and this was common for most online programmes adopted during the apex of the pandemic in 2020. It was about institutions saving their existence by trying to manage the pervading crisis (Shea et al., 2022).

The adoption of new pedagogical strategies like online, modular, distance, and blended learning without reference to theoretical frameworks could result in lowering educational standards due to omitting procedural and competence needs in the learning outcomes and programmes' objectives. Developing theoretically informed practice requires enhanced effort, and this includes research in already existing online learning frameworks like the Community of Inquiry (Frank, 2020; Villasenor, 2020; Shea et al., 2022). Much as the results of this study reveal a successful adoption of online-modular learning in a transnational higher education partnership programme, there are underlying revealed challenges like inadequate instructional and reading materials, insufficient ICT facilities plus inadequate preparedness of instructors and students, which could cost the programme its intended learning outcomes. Perrin and Wang (2021) observe that the shift to e-learning by universities was coupled with some incumbrances emanating from financial and human resource insufficiencies and among these was adequately trained teaching staff in digitalized education techniques. Indeed, the global higher education landscape was highly altered by the Covid-19 pandemic and the proceeding lockdown. With the aftermath of Covid-19 experiencing a rescinding prognostic situation and opening up of social, economic, and other systems, some institutions may choose to continue with the adopted non-physical learning platforms or even adopt blended learning approaches. However, more research into these ventures is a primary requirement to enrich their pedagogical, content, and assessment requirements if they are to meet the intended objectives and learning outcomes to produce competent graduates (Shea et al., 2022; Giovannella, 2021).

9. Recommendations

The study aimed at uncovering students' rating of an online and modular learning programme run under a transnational higher education partnership between a university in Uganda and another in Somalia. Programmes like these are relevant for empowering nations like Somalia that are in dire need of building their social and economic structures and systems. It is paramount that when institutions in such countries develop such ventures, they are supported by governments and any other agencies in the countries involved. The post Covid-19 era has exposed numerous weaknesses in various sectors around the world, including the education sector. It is the right time transnational partnerships like those in higher education and education are stepped up more than ever before. In the event of adopting and implementing such programmes, the available well-researched theories, models, and works should be benchmarked. Otherwise without such venture being hyped, then the Sustainable Development Goals shall always remain conference fallacies.

Future research could pick interest in the detailed experiences of students on such programmes, and this is in addition to the detailed responses for other stakeholders like instructors, administrators, and possibly parents. It is important to explore the experiences of the instructors about the programme if enriched amendments in such programmes shall be effective in future and this could penetrate the experiences and feelings of the students about the programme. However, the findings in this study are enough to set the pace for future studies on such programmes since the transnational higher education partnerships and online learning trend keeps growing every day.

Conflict of Interest Statement
There is no conflict of interest from any party.

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