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Exploring Sustainable E-Learning Platforms for Improved Universities' Faculty Engagement in the New World of Work

by

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Abstract

The familiar places where faculty and students engage, collaborate, debate, interact and exchange viewpoints appear to have been improved by introducing digital technology. This study investigates the influence of e-learning opportunities on faculty engagement in Nigerian universities. Five hundred faculty members were surveyed across eight private universities in Nigeria using purposive and convenient sampling techniques. Only 431 copies of the questionnaire, representing 86.2% response rate, were analysed with Smart PLS 3.0. The results show that virtual learning platforms, digital databases, online short courses and webinar learning platforms significantly influenced teaching, research, administrative and community engagements. The study concludes that the faculty of various universities should leverage e-learning platforms to be more engaged. The study recommends the machinery needed by the faculty members of Nigerian universities during the COVID-19 lockdown that challenged the conventional practice. The study empirically contributes to strengthening the current teaching, research, partnership and collaboration trends for improved faculty engagement in the new-normal world of work.

Keywords:

[e-learning](#); [digital databases](#); [sustainability](#); [administration](#); [teaching and research engagements](#)

1. Introduction

The outbreak of COVID-19 in December 2019, which the World Health Organization (WHO) described as a global pandemic, has forced many governments and other organisations to put in place several measures to curtail the spread of the virus [1,2]. Some of the measures put in place to stop the spread of the virus include social distancing and discouragement of social and religious gatherings, among others, necessitating the closure of many organisations before the vaccination exercise. The education sector is not left out of this as schools, including universities, were shut down, forcing students and faculty to stay safe at home [3,4]. However, many universities around the world had been working remotely using different e-learning platforms before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The case in Nigeria is different. Only national open universities in Nigeria used e-learning platforms for their full operations before the COVID-19 pandemic. Some of the critical job responsibilities of universities' faculty include but are not limited to teaching engagement, research engagement, administrative engagement and collaborative/partnership engagement. Universities in the developed world have been using technology to engage with their core job responsibilities. However, the lockdown compelled many universities' lecturers in Nigeria to work remotely, and the attention was shifted to remote learning during the lockdown. Most universities' lecturers in Nigeria now explore e-learning platforms for teaching, research, community service and other administrative roles.

Existing studies have acknowledged the influence of e-learning on students' performance. In [5], the authors examined how digital literacy enhanced students' performance, while [6] also emphasised the role of digital media in student academic engagement. Studies have also shown how the e-learning environment influences students' learning culture [7]. Moreover, in [8], the authors investigated how the e-learning engagement framework promotes the reading culture among students at all levels. In [9], the authors also studied the relationships between e-learning, reading culture and education, while [10] assessed the impact of digital technology and how it influenced university education. In a related development, some scholars have also studied the job engagement of academic staff in the university system. In [11], the authors examined the effect of job engagement strategies in Nigerian universities. In [12], the authors analysed how employee engagement helps fortify the service–profit chains. Other researchers studied the relationship between employee engagement and job satisfaction [13,14,15,16,17,18,19]. Some scholars looked at job engagement in multigenerational workplaces [20,21], while [22,23,24] investigated the relationship between engagement, learning culture, work performance and organisational survival. In [25], the authors examined the implications of faculty stress for the performance of public universities' lecturers, while [26] worked on “The Performative University: ‘Targets’, ‘Terror’, and ‘Taking Back Freedom’” by the faculty members. As a sequel to the above, most existing studies look at the relationship between e-learning and students' performance in universities. Besides, the existing studies also emphasise engagement strategies and faculty performance. None of these studies examine the influence of e-learning platforms on teaching, research, administrative responsibilities and partnership/collaboration engagements of faculty in Nigerian universities; this implies that there is a research gap.

Since 2015, the United Nations has introduced 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for the purpose of environmental and social sustainability; attention has been given to clean and affordable energy, economic growth, sustainable cities, climate change and public–private partnerships, i.e., SDGs 7, 8, 11, 13 and 17, in that order. However, quality education (Goal-4) is one of the SDGs that have received little attention in the literature when teaching, research and innovation have significant roles in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Both faculty and students will have the knowledge and skills needed to promote long-term development because scholarly e-resources are excellent academic tools that can be used to facilitate teaching, research and innovation. No doubt e-learning has helped in enhancing social and environmental sustainability. This is noticeable in the reduction of harmful emissions from transportation and travel. Students can connect to virtual classes from anywhere in the country without having to travel to a campus. Therefore, transportation-related pollution and the use of fossil fuels will be drastically reduced. As a result, the negative impact of pollution on the environment could be reduced.

Furthermore, universities would use less energy for power, electricity, heating and cooling systems, benefiting the environment. In virtual classes, facilitators/faculty and students use e-materials, which may help to reduce paper waste and tree consumption. All of these will enhance the environmental sustainability drives of universities.

To this end, the current study examines the influence of e-learning platform opportunities (virtual learning platforms, digital databases, online short courses and webinar learning platforms) on faculty engagement with core job responsibilities (administrative engagement, collaborative partnership, teaching and research engagements) in Nigerian private universities. Thus, this study will provide insight into how e-learning platforms can influence faculty engagements in Nigerian universities. Consequent to the foregoing, this study seeks to investigate the influence of e-learning opportunities on faculty engagement in Nigerian private universities. The significance of the study stems from the specific objectives of this study, which include examining the effect of virtual learning platforms on faculty engagements, investigating the influences of access to digital databases on faculty engagements, analysing the impact of online short courses on faculty engagement and examining the effect of the webinar learning platform on faculty engagement. The study is structured into five sections: introduction; insight from existing literature on the subject matter, materials and methods; discussion of the findings; and conclusion, recommendations, limitations and suggestions for further studies.

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