

The Role of International Organizations and Partnerships for Emergency Education in Ethiopian Higher Education Institutions: Online Learning During COVID-19 Pandemic

Tigist Wuhib Tsega

Correspondence: Tigist Wuhib Tsega, Assistant professor, School of Psychology, Addis Ababa University, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

Received: January 17, 2023

Accepted: April 20, 2023

Online Published: May 7, 2023

doi:10.11114/jets.v11i3.5877

URL: <https://doi.org/10.11114/jets.v11i3.5877>

Abstract

The purpose of the study was to explore the role of international organizations and partnerships that provided support to the higher education institutions of Ethiopia during the active COVID-19 emergency period. In addition, the study aimed to explore the experiences and challenges of students in working with the online learning platforms that were made available during the pandemic. Qualitative case study was employed. Official email communications and documents were reviewed from two USA based partner organizations that responded to the higher education teaching need during the pandemic. In addition, 30 graduate students from counseling psychology program of the School of Psychology, Addis Ababa University (AAU) were involved in responding to a qualitative questionnaire in Google forms. The qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis. All partnership and collaboration efforts were important in supporting the teaching need of the local institutions during the pandemic. The major themes that emerged as positive experiences were (a) ensuring continuity, (b) new opportunity, (c) safety and economic management, and (d) working with different platforms. The major themes that emerged as challenges were (a) difficulty to adjust oneself, (b) lack of personal touch, and (c) internet and power disruption. The study provided critical message of social infrastructures are highly important as that of physical infrastructure need during emergency education. Additional implications are highlighted in making education systems more resilient.

Keywords: education in emergencies, COVID-19, online learning, partnerships, higher education

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

COVID-19 outbreak was initially reported to the World Health Organization (WHO) on 31 December 2019, and WHO declared the outbreak on 11 March 2020 to global health emergency (WHO, 2020). The first case of COVID-19 was confirmed in Ethiopia on 13 March 2020 (EPHI, 2020). COVID-19 pandemic has caused the largest education disruption worldwide. While the pandemic interrupted regular formal provision of education, alternative approaches were used for access to learning and ensure higher education students retain the necessary knowledge and skills regardless of the capacity and knowledge variances for online platform education in a countries like Ethiopia (Llisko, Venkatesan, & Price, 2021; Schleicher, 2020).

To ensure the continuity of education despite the lockdown, many institutions around the world had leveraged Blackboard CourseSites to support blended and fully online instruction (Mahyoob, 2020). Blackboard CourseSite is a convenient and reliable online collaborative learning platform that fully engages in digital learning experiences by using computers and mobile devices. It enables learners to participate in virtual classroom discussion and other forms of instructor and learners interaction through its discussion forum applications (Alokluk, 2018).

From personal observation of the researcher, most Ethiopian institutions of higher education were unprepared for such crisis and forced to close regular classes. Some institutions attempted to guide and advise their colleagues to offer courses using distance and online approaches. However, there was no well established training or follow up from these institutions for online course design and delivery system. Few international communities had played key roles to support the process of digital learning and to fulfill the education gap that was created due to pre-existing conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, this study aimed to document the role of international organizations and partnerships

had played in providing support to the higher education institutions in Ethiopia during the active COVID-19 emergency period. The study also explored the experiences and challenges of postgraduate counseling psychology students in engaging with the alternative learning platform provided during the pandemic. The students were engaged in an online learning platform using Blackboard CourseSites for one of their courses during the pandemic.

Documenting and sharing of experiences related to online platform learning in countries like Ethiopia would have a significant advantage in increasing awareness and use of online education systems among the university community. Information Communication Technology (ICT) is being deployed as a powerful tool for communication and has become one of the common languages wherever contemporary people's life and work endeavors. Globalization has forced the modern human being to live interdependently with a greater sphere of influence over one another. Thus, there is a need to awaken various stakeholders to take actions that can be helpful to modernize the communication styles and teaching delivery systems of developing nations. Pandemic situations like COVID-19 would give a greater opportunity to introduce important changes and venture into digitalizing the teaching and learning arenas. Filho *et al.* (2020) argue that crisis needs to be perceived as an opportunity to make changes and to develop effective context-based solutions to an existing problem. Thus, there is a need to document the role of different stakeholders that provided support for educational transformation and resilience during COVID-19 crisis and explore the experiences of students who undertook their education on the designed online learning platforms.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Many studies affirmed that COVID-19 offered the chance to rethink and re-imagine the future of learning process. It has been taken as an opportunity to adapt to the new technology systems and to use the available technology resources in the transformation of the education system (Biag, Gomez, Imig, & Vasudeva, 2021; Bojovic, Bojovic, Vujosevic, & Suh 2020; Llisko *et al.*, 2021). During the pandemic, online learning became a lifeline for education (Schleicher, 2020). Higher education institutions can develop a future plan on how to design and deliver online courses to facilitate learning based on the requirements of the 21st century. A study by Llisko (2021) found that access variance to technologies on both teachers and students, limited access to the internet for some students, and a lack of technological skills of some teachers and others were challenges of online learning. It is necessary to strengthen students' skills in online education by means of in-service and full-time training and mentorship programs. It is important to equip students with resources that could facilitate their training in online learning. Thus, there is a need for more studies in addressing students' challenges for online leanings and in understanding the experiences of higher education institutions, as there are only a few experiences in the higher education sector of Ethiopia with alternative or online approaches to education. This study was guided by the following questions:

- What role did international organizations and partnerships play in providing support to the higher education institutions in Ethiopia during the active COVID-19 pandemic?
- What were the experiences and challenges of counseling psychology students at Addis Ababa University in undertaking their learning using the alternative approaches to education during the pandemic?

2. Theoretical Frameworks

2.1 Emergency Education

Emergency education is one of the *Education for All* (EFA) programs and it refers to education system that does not fit into traditional mode of learning (Bensalah, 2002). It is usually attached to the effects of an event such as a manmade or natural disaster, a drought, civil or international conflict, and existence of minorities and at-risk groups, including internally displaced populations (Bensalah, 2002; Sommers, 2003; UNESCO, 2003). There are suggestions from different stakeholders that education in situations of emergency and crisis should become part of all educational plans at various levels, whether regional or national, and that there is a need for rehabilitation of education systems and strengthening of institutional commitment and preparedness for restoring peace, stability, and sustainable development (Bensalah, 2002).

In this study, education during emergency refers to combination of actions that are required to provide responses for COVID-19 related consequences. Pigozzi (1999) suggested that emergency education during crises incorporates solutions starting from simple to those that continually change over time with the application of new learning models. It is expected that education responses due to COVID-19 will result in profound building of the existing education system and help learners to overcome psychological consequences (UNESCO, 2003).

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted education systems worldwide, forcing university and school closures during its peak of crisis. More than 1.5 billion learners around the planet were affected by university and school closures during the first wave of COVID-19 around March-April 2020 (UNESCO, 2020). These closures have magnified inequalities and intensified a pre-existing education crisis across the globe. There was little professional development support for

educators in many low and middle-income countries to transition to alternative education approaches or online learning (The World Bank, UNESCO and UNICEF, 2021). Lack of facilities and internet connectivity were also the challenges to pursuing remote learning. However, different stakeholders have shown tremendous effort to use alternative education approaches and adapt technology to alleviate the pandemic-interrupted regular classes (Khan & Obiakor, 2020). The COVID-19 crisis forced the global education community to manage the shortcomings of online learning differently and to transform the future of learning for both regular and emergency times.

2.2 Digital Education

Digital education can play a vital role in enabling the continuity of the education system during any needy time and maintaining the quality of education (Bojovic *et al.*, 2020; Schleicher, 2020). The successful implementation of digital learning requires information and communications technologies (ICT) infrastructures, virtual laboratories, smart classrooms, electronic devices, good facilitators, supportive systems, and other socio-economic factors (World Bank, 2021). In developing countries, it may be difficult to get equity services related to technology use. However, emergency conditions like the COVID-19 pandemic force the educational arena to use digital technology to communicate from a distance. Interactive technologies such as the internet, web based education tools, and different inputs for educational expansion have provided instruments for reconstructing and strengthening the education system.

Funders in developing countries have advocated the use of digital skills and had helped develop a digital skill country action plan that includes strategies like expanding and improving online courses, and modernizing campus networks, and IT preparedness at the campus level (World Bank, 2021). Consequently, the Ethiopian government developed a digital literacy plan to enhance employability in the digital work sphere and technology use across higher learning institutions (The *Digital Watch*, 2021).

2.3 Online Learning during COVID-19

Online learning is becoming an integral part of the higher education process. Leading universities indicated that demand for online and hybrid courses or programs was higher than that for the traditional face-to-face delivery methods (Bojovic *et al.*, 2020; Osguthorpe & Graham, 2003). Researchers conclude that in times of crisis like COVID-19, it is possible to shift the complete educational process to the distance learning paradigm in a rapid manner and without pauses in the educational process (Bojovic *et al.*, 2020; Llisko *et al.*, 2021). Further, they argue that class lectures and a variety of assessment activities can be handled using the existing technology infrastructures and using internet-based platforms to deliver education in higher education institutions. Specifically Bojovic *et al.* (2020) conclude that “transitions to distance learning do not need vast preparation and long implementation cycles, and certainly do not need to be year-long processes”. Integration of online learning requires that at least faculty members get the appropriate instructional courses and seminars to equip themselves with the basic digital skills. Different stakeholders can play significant roles in addressing the gaps related to digital learning.

2.4 Partnership for Emergency Education

Partnership can be defined as a form of social capital response for community resilience during some form of disaster and for positive recovery (Jamali, Yianni, & Abdallah 2011). Biag *et al.* (2021) stated that the social infrastructures are as important as the physical infrastructure (e.g broadband coverage). They further suggested that while computers are critical to response and recovery, leaders should pay greater attention to how social infrastructures support responses to the need for emergency education.

The role of different actors is important for reconstruction of education programs during emergency situations. The inter-agency cooperation can be mentioned as one of good examples as far as the coordination or partnership concepts are concerned. Sister United Nations agencies have different but related roles. For instance, the role of UNICEF, UNHCR and World Food Programme (WFP) are either to restore basic education or to provide education for refugees, or to focus on girls' education (UNESCO, 2003). Strategies for emergency education include effective inter-agency collaboration with all actors at global, regional, and country level (Bensalah, 2002; UNESCO, 2003). During the COVID-19 pandemic, the role of international community or the coordination among different agencies has made a significant contribution in handling education disruption and in transferring the experiences of international education to local ones (Biag *et al.*, 2021).

3. Research Method

3.1 Research Approach

A qualitative case study has been used to document the role of two international partner organizations that provided support to few higher education institutions in Ethiopia during the active COVID-19 emergency period. The same qualitative research method has also been used to explore students' experiences and challenges with the alternative approaches to the education system during the pandemic. Online qualitative questionnaire was used to get a large

amount of information in a short time from participants about the specific experiences of online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Qualitative case study is a pragmatic and flexible research approach that provides comprehensive, in-depth understanding of a phenomenon or topic of interest across a number of disciplines (Creswell, 2013; Harrison, Birks, Franklin, & Mills 2017; Merriam, 2009). The quality of a study is depend on the methods, organization, and systematized chain of evidence (Merriam, 2009). Theoretical frameworks or research questions are used (Merriam, 1998). Thus, a qualitative case study is selected for its appropriateness to the present study in order to draw new perspective and build our understanding.

3.2 Participants

The participants of the study were post graduate regular and evening students of counseling psychology program at the school of psychology at Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia. Participants were selected purposely as they were taking a course using an online platform and Blackboard CourseSites from the second semester of the 2019/2020 academic year to second semester of 2020/2021 academic year. A total of 30 participants have responded to the online qualitative questionnaire; 21 were female and 9 were male. The age of participants was within the range of 23 to 49 years. Professionally, twelve of participants have qualifications in counseling, psychology, or related fields. Ten of the participants qualified in physical health related fields, including general medical practice, public health, biology, nursing, and nursing psychiatry. The rest of the participants were professional with the qualifications of marketing and service managers, finance personnel, civil engineers, and a preacher. Years of service in their professions ranges from 6 months to 15 years. More than two-third of participants did not take any courses or training using online platforms before the COVID-19 pandemic. Whereas, about one-third of participants had some form of training using online platforms provided by their institutions or from self effort.

3.3 Data Collection Tools

Document analysis and an online qualitative questionnaire were employed to obtain data.

Document analysis: The study used official e-mail communications and documents from the partner organizations that were addressed to faculty members of some universities in Ethiopia.

Online qualitative questionnaire: The second type of data collection involves online qualitative questionnaire that is comprised of 12 open-ended questions. The questionnaire form has been prepared based on previous works done to explore experiences and challenges of online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic (Almendingen, Morseth, Gjolstad, Brevik, & Torris, 2021; Mahyoob, 2020; Ozudogru, 2021). The questionnaire consists of different sections. The first section was about students' personal information, such as age, gender, professional qualification, years of service, and one question about previous experiences of online learning using different platforms. The second section included a set of questions about learners' experiences and challenges with online learning using different platforms. The third section focused on opinions about the **discussion board forum** of Blackboard CourseSites and additional online platforms like Google Meet, email communications, and telegram group that were used to facilitate the online learning process during the COVID-19 pandemic. The forth was included to elicit responses about the lesson that was taken from the COVID-19 pandemic in relation to online learning and the suggestions students might have to improve online learning in the future. Finally, students were asked to share any other thing they wanted. The questionnaire was checked for content validity by two colleagues from fields of psychology and technology.

3.4 Data Collection Procedures

The online qualitative questionnaire was designed using Google forms, and the web link of the questionnaire was created. An invitation email with a web link to the questionnaire was distributed among selected participants using their email addresses. The email briefly informed students about the study and invited them to participate at a designated website link. The content of the email message and the web link to the questionnaire were also distributed using the students' telegram social group, where students share class information for their course works. Class representatives of each class group helped to forward those messages via telegram. The online questionnaire was open for more than five weeks, and two reminders-one via email and one via telegram- were sent in addition to the initial invitation to participate in the study. Participants were assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their participation.

3.5 Data Analysis Procedures

A thematic analysis was employed to extract possible qualitative data and themes. The responses of the online qualitative questionnaire were coded to provide answers for one of the research questions (i.e what were the experiences and challenges of counseling psychology students at Addis Ababa University in undertaking their learning using the alternative approaches to education during the pandemic?) (Lavrakas, 2008). The open-ended questions allowed participants to provide responses in their own words. From verbatim responses of participants, words and sentences were identified and used as a "Vignette", a shorter narrative, to increase the trustworthiness of the study during analysis

(Seidman, 2006). Official email communications and documents from the partner organizations that were addressed to university faculty members were also analyzed. For the sake of keeping the identities of the partner organizations confidential, the role of each partner organization has been explored by referring to it as “Partner organization-1” and “Partner organization-2” in the following section.

4. Findings

4.1 *The Role of “Partner organization-1” in Enhancing Partnership and Online Learning during COVID-19 Pandemic*

Partner organization-1 is a non-governmental organization that is based in the USA. It has an online platform where it shares many posts among the Ethiopian community and Ethiopian Diasporas on a daily basis. It serves as a bridge to transfer knowledge and different skills, mainly from professional Ethiopian Diasporas and US experts in different disciplines, to Ethiopian higher institutions through its department of national educational affairs.

Partner organization-1 has used model of “Triangular Partnership”, which Ethiopian diasporas use as a means to connect Western and Ethiopian higher education institutions. The model emphasizes strategic collaborations to motivate the Ethiopian Diaspora in the provision of necessary support to build the capacity of local institutions through training, consultancy, and service delivery (Mehari, Gebeyehu, Dickinson, & Watts, 2013). It has provided an emergency response during the HIV/AIDs pandemic. Similarly, it played a significant role in response to emergency education during the COVID-19 pandemic. It created a platform where likeminded education professionals are able to connect and take advantage of training in online teaching 101 (OT101), from designing to delivering courses in Blackboard CourseSites. Partner organization-2 was the one that provided the above response through Partner organization-1’s platform to navigate potentials that could make differences in teaching and learning approaches at Ethiopian higher education institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic period.

4.2 *The Role of “Partner Organization-2” in Enhancing Online Learning during COVID-19 Pandemic*

Partner organization-2 is a result-oriented community-based education center based in the USA that is mainly involved in tutoring services using face-to-face and online platforms for children (K-12) in language, arts, math, and video making. It provides support services for children who are in need of excelling their reading and math abilities. It extends its services to different countries, including Ethiopia.

During email calling using Partner organization-1’s communication platform for training opportunities in online course designing, developing, and delivering using Blackboard CourseSites, more than 200 potential trainees from a few Ethiopian higher education institutions and from other different centers responded. The three Ethiopian universities that were primarily represented include Gondar University, Hawassa University, and Mekelle University. The course consists of four types of modules that were given within 4-5 weeks. Module 1 shows how online students see the courses. It added the knowledge of how to get started and the creation of a “discussion forum” as a self introduction element. Module 2 provided trainees with guidelines on how to design an online course. Specifically, it included how to build content, how to create online course using Blackboard CourseSites, and how to populate students into the course. Module 3 helps to develop a course based on a curriculum and teaching materials. It teaches how to upload course materials to an online system. And, module 4 prepares trainees on how to deliver a course, including but not limited to, using Blackboard Collaborate Ultra (a video conferencing tool). The course training was supported by video conferences, hands-on experience, and self study guide using screen shots. All of these have significantly contributed to the successful completion on the training.

4.3 *Experiences and Challenges with the Alternative Approaches to the Education System during the COVID-19 Pandemic*

Several themes emerged from the collected data using online qualitative questionnaire. The themes were grouped into positive experiences and challenges. The major themes under positive experiences were (a) ensuring continuity, (b) new opportunity, (c) safety and economic management, and (d) working with different platforms: The major themes under challenges were (a) difficulty to adjust oneself, (b) lack of personal touch, and (c) internet and power disruption.

Ensuring continuity: Almost all of participants’ experiences with online learning platforms were positive, and they were happy by the opportunity that was extended to them to ensure continuity of the learning process without any interruptions during the COVID-19 pandemic. One of the participants said, “It was one of the best experiences I had. I was able to manage my time as it allowed me to learn from home. I took one course using Blackboard and four other courses using Google meet. So, we were effective and didn’t lag behind schedule”. Another participant added, “It was a great experience. It gave us an opportunity to stay connected to our education system as well as to a lot more information related to our field of study”.

New opportunity: Significant numbers of participants see the experience as a new opportunity to adapt to the use of technology and perceive that problems are good to see things in different direction and to use as an opportunity. Most of

participants replied that they were able to easily manage the sudden shift to online learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The support they have received from the instructor and classmates, as well as the mentorship efforts within groups, aided in the smooth transition from traditional face-to-face learning to online learning. One of participants mentioned, “it didn't bother me much because our teacher explained it to us in a way that we could practice, and the internet was accessible”.

Safety and economic management: The majority of the participants liked most about the online learning process because of its advantage, such as effective time saving, transportation avoidance, accessibility from anywhere, and COVID-19 safety. One of the participants said, “Some of the courses are being conducted well due to their interactive learning approach, and I got a lesson that such platforms are helpful in terms of time and resource management”. Another participant added, “I was able to learn from home by keeping all my comforts, and this keeps me safe from COVID-19”.

Working with different platforms: Almost all participants supported the use of additional online platforms (Google meet, email communications, and telegram group) in facilitating the online learning process during the COVID-19 pandemic. The majority of participants like the Google meet option as it helps to make virtual classes more interactive and for its offer of audio and video presentations. One of the participants replied that “presentation of one's work through screen sharing was effective where participants had the comfort of following along with the material being presented remotely on their respective screens”. Participants mentioned that the use of email communications and Telegram group support the online learning easily due to familiarity with and previous experiences with those applications before the pandemic. One of the participants replied, “They are good alternatives, each having a specific advantage. I think instead of relying on one single platform, it is better use a combination of the different platforms. They can complement each other; when one fails, the other one can be picked for use”.

Difficulty to adjust oneself: Some participants mentioned that the experience with online learning platforms was challenging due to a lack of prior experience with such technology and issues related to network connections. One of the participants said, “At first, it was a little bit difficult to adjust myself with the technology, but later, I start liking e-learning a lot”.

Lack of personal touch: Few participants mentioned that online learning lacks dynamic interaction, which is prominent in face-to-face learning. They added that online learning is not preferable to visual learners or for those who like social interaction and meeting new people. One of participants said, “It didn't give me a chance to ask questions to clear my doubts, unlike that of face to face learning”.

Internet and power disruption: One of the most frequently mentioned challenges during online learning among participants was poor internet connection and power disruption. It caused intermittent online learning process and made participants miss the virtual classes, and they suggested an expansion of ICT infrastructure.

Generally speaking, almost all participants suggested that online learning could be a good platform in time of inconvenience like COVID-19 pandemic, regardless of the challenges that were faced. The majority of participants suggested that the courses be delivered in the form of online learning in the future. However, caution needs be taken for the type of courses. For instance, courses like research method and statistics and their evaluation format may not be applicable for online delivery. The majority of the participants showed promises for online learning to be one of the best alternatives in the near future. They mentioned that there is always a new way of dealing with different problems. The future will not be the same as the previous ones. Thus, online learning will be the preference method.

4.4 Discussion Board Forum as a Main Tool of Online Learning

Almost all participants responded that they had great experiences with the discussion board forum in online learning using Blackboard CourseSites. The discussion board forum provides a space to communicate and share ideas with fellow students and the instructor. The approach encourages independent reading on selected topics in a given time and offers an interactive system where discussion questions and responses to the questions can be circulated conveniently in quick time. One of the participants specifically mentioned, “It was user-friendly; it had different features which allowed communicating with my peers and my instructor. Especially the Blackboard was nice in the sense that it gave an opportunity to feedback exchange”.

The discussion board forum served as part of course requirements, and students' posts were graded for quality of writing and responses every week during the course time. One of the participants indicated that “Blackboard has its own system of participation and encouraged our reading and writing since it is more of interactive than a direct lecture. So, it provided continuous assessment and feedback”. In addition, one of the participants explained, “I felt the course with discussion board was the best course and method of learning I experienced during postgraduate classes. At the end of the day, it is what we learn that matters more than what we answer at the paper-based exams”.

5. Discussion

The COVID-19 pandemic has created chaos across different institutions, including education. Still COVID-19 has been perceived as a trick that has left many people to live with uncertainty and limited information (Koffman, Gross, Etkind, & Selman, 2020; Wu *et al.*, 2021). The traditional pedagogy in the higher education system has been challenged due to the unique COVID-19 requirement for remote engagement or reduced face-to-face contact. This all pushed for classes to be delivered remotely, and the process has brought a huge opportunity to institutions in low income countries where the pre-existing system of teaching doesn't have that much access to online learning. COVID-19 has created changes in social phenomena as the pandemic requires every individual and organization to respond to those restrictions and keep social order (Biag *et al.*, 2021). The social dimension of educational disasters has been underscored to alleviate the effects of COVID-19.

The present study introduces the role of international organizations and partnerships for emergency education responses during the COVID-19 pandemic. Partnerships enhanced approaches in support of learning and holistic development during the COVID-19 pandemic. Being open to many partnership possibilities increased opportunities for connection of resources; for professional development, and holistic approaches in general (Biag *et al.*, 2021; UNESCO, 2003). Students' social, emotional, and learning needs can be addressed with cooperation and collaboration among stakeholders, institutions, and communities. The present study also confirms that graduate students were benefiting most from the collaboration efforts between USA-based organizations or partners and local institutions. Collaboration efforts resulted in the introduction of a good model of online learning platform, such as Blackboard Coursesites. The availability of such alternative education system helped students to continue their learning process during the pandemic time. This finding is consistent with a study by Bojovic *et al.* (2020). The results indicated that there was high satisfaction rate among participants in the educational processes. Their obtained results have shown that the majority of students can recognize the benefits of remote learning model and are ready to use it actively in the post-crisis period. However, few students cannot easily adapt to the different methods of learning, which demands more attention to have a better understanding of the challenges these students face and design the appropriate support mechanism. This finding was consistent with studies that focused on challenges of online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic (Almendingen *et al.*, 2021; Mahyoob, M., 2020; Ozudogru, G., 2021). The study mainly identified course design adjustment factors such as communication challenge with friends and instructors, live courses time, poor internet connection, and reduced motivation and effort. The findings of the present study highlighted that higher education teachers, particularly in countries where there is pedagogical and technical skills gap for digital learning, need to be empowered to make them responsive to any crisis that might arise from different events (Schleicher, 2020).

6. Conclusion and Implications

6.1 Conclusion

The present study introduces the role of international organizations and partnerships for emergency education responses during COVID-19 pandemic. The present study confirmed that partnerships can play a significant role in transferring of resources and necessary digital skills that helped graduate students of AAU to continue their learning during the pandemic. Several participants see the experience with online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic as a new opportunity to adapt to the use of technology. Poor internet connection and power disruption were mentioned as major causes of interruption of the learning process. Consequently, the following implications have been forwarded in making online learning platforms more productive in Ethiopian higher education institutions.

6.2 Implications

The need to develop crisis management system: The current global health crisis has produced essential insights and COVID-19 pushes many institutions to think more and preparedness is important to provide responses during emergencies. Higher education institutions need to develop crisis management system and can serve as a model for elementary and secondary schools in crisis management and support of students' learning.

The need to build good technology infrastructure and make available to students: The current study has shown that poor technology infrastructure and poor internet connection caused for online learning destruction. As part of solutions, one of participants suggested, "I suggest the network system must be improved for the future to improve the online class because a good access could facilitate online classes". Another participant remained optimistic and said, "things like network hopefully will develop along with our country development". Thus, there is a need to strength technology infrastructures and make sure all students have the access to internet connection to make online learning platforms more productive.

The need for capacity building: Developing mechanisms and programs for educators training is a key feature of education in emergencies and reconstruction. It is also necessary to strengthen faculty members' and students' skills in

digital education by means of in-service and full-time training and mentorship programs. It is important to equip with resources that could facilitate the educators and students training in online learning. Holding of professional seminars or workshop regarding emergency education can be added as suggestion for capacity building among higher education institutions.

The need for partnership mechanism: There need to be arrangements for international organizations to transform necessary skills to local institutions. The collaboration effort shall be facilitated at national levels through regular meetings and shall be chaired by officials from education ministers so that its outreach and sustainability can be maintained. It is also recommended that there need to be partnership or collaboration efforts among different higher institutions with in country level. One of the participants said, “I suggest extending the option of online courses for other universities in the country instead of limiting it only to AAU. Campuses may need to organize an experience sharing workshop with other national and international universities to improve the mode of delivery and accessibility”

The need for hybrid learning: The occurrence of COVID-19 pandemic pushes the traditional classroom education system to be modified to meet the needs of contemporary learners. This highlighted the need to incorporate online learning with the existing systems at Ethiopian higher education institutions. A blended form of learning shall be promoted so that transforms the future of learning.

The need to change literature of emergency education: Emergency education usually refers to effects of an event as a result of armed conflicts or natural disaster. A crisis situation of COVID-19 has emerged as a new phenomenon for literature of emergency education. This study provides a new meaning for literature of emergency education to include an event as a result of COVID-19.

6.3 Future Study

The participants of the present study were graduate students from AAU only. More participation from students of other higher education institutions and from decision-makers would provide more understanding about the purpose of the study. Thus, this has to be considered for future studies.

It is recommended that future researches can incorporate the teachers' experiences and challenges towards online learning during the pandemic. This would help to learn more and to compare the students' view to educators in higher education institutions.

This study highlighted the role of external partnerships for emergency education in Ethiopian higher education institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic. Future researcher may extend the concept by examining the role of internal partnerships in sharing of experiences for developing a good crisis management system in the future.

References

- Almendingen, K., Morseth, M. S., Gjolstad, E., Brevik, A., & Torris, C. (2021). Student's experiences with online teaching following COVID-19 lockdown: A mixed methods explorative study. *PLoS ONE*, 16(8). <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0250378>
- Alokluk, J. (2018). The effectiveness of Blackboard system, uses and limitations in information management. *Intelligent Information Management*, 10, 133-149. <https://doi.org/10.4236/iim.2018.106012>
- Bensalah, K. (Ed). (2002). *Guidelines for education in situations of emergency and crisis: EFA strategic planning*, UNESCO.
- Biag, M., Gomez, L. M., Imig, D. G., & Vasudeva, A. (2021). Responding to COVID-19 with the aid of mutually beneficial partnerships in education. *Front. Educ.*, 5. <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2020.621361>
- Bojovic, Z., Bojovic, P. D., Vujosevic, D., & Suh, J. (2020). *Education in times of crisis: rapid transition to distance learning*. <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.23434.90560>
- Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: choosing among the five approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Ethiopian Public Health Institute (EPHI) (2020). Ethiopia confirmed the first case of covid-19. https://www.ephi.gov.et/images/pictures/pic_2011/pic_2012/First-English-Press-release-1.pdf (Accessed 05 January 2022)
- Filho, W. L., Eustachio, H., Caldana, A. F., Will, M., Salvia, A. L., Anholon, R. R., Platje, J., & Kovaleva, M. (2020). Sustainability leadership in higher education institutions: an overview of challenges. *Sustainability*, 12(19), 3761. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su12093761>
- Harrison, H., Birks, M., Franklin, R., & Mills, J. (2017). Case study research: foundations and methodological orientations. *Forum qualitative sozialforschung /forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 18(1), Art. 19.

<http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs1701195>.

- Jamali, D., Yianni, M., & Abdallah, H. (2011). Strategic partnerships, social capital and innovation: accounting for social alliance innovation. *Bus. Ethics Eur. Rev*, 20(4), 375-391. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8608.2011.01621.x>
- Khan, M., & Obiakor, T. (2020). *Education in crisis. Background paper prepared for the Save Our Future white paper averting an Education Catastrophe for the World's Children. Save Our Future.* <https://saveourfuture.world/white-paper/>
- Koffman, J., Gross, J., Etkind, S. N., & Selman, L. (2020). Uncertainty and COVID-19: how are we to respond?. *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*, 113(6), 211-216. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0141076820930665>
- Lavrakas, P. J. (Ed.) (2008). *Encyclopedia of survey research methods.* <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412963947> (accessed 27 march 2022).
- Llisko, D., Venkatesan, M., & Price, E. (2021). *Sustainable crises management in education during COVID-19.* https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-69284-1_1
- Mahyoob, M. (2020). Challenges of e-Learning during the COVID-19 pandemic experienced by EFL learners. *Arab World English Journal (AWEJ)*, 11(4), 351-362. <https://doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol11no4.2>
- Mehari, E., Gebeyehu, K., Dickinson, K., & Watts, M. (Eds.). (2013). *Triangular partnership: the power of the Diaspora, pre-publication review.* Morehead, KY: P2P Inc.
- Merriam, S. B. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Merriam, S. B. (2009). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation* (2nd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Osguthorpe, R. T., & Graham, C. R. (2003). Blended learning environments: Definitions and directions. *Quarterly review of distance education*, 4, 227-233.
- Ozudogru, G. (2021). Problems faced in distance education during Covid-19 pandemic. *Participatory Educational Research*, 8(4), 321-333. <https://doi.org/10.17275/per.21.92.8.4>
- Pigozzi, M. J. (1999). *Education in emergencies and for reconstruction: A developmental approach*, UNICEF.
- Schleicher, A. (2020). *The impact of covid-19 on education: Insights from education at a glance*, OECD.
- Seidman, I. (2006). *Interviewing as qualitative research* (3rd ed). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Sommers, M. (2003). Education in emergencies: Critical questions and challenges. CARE, Inc.
- The World Bank, UNESCO and UNICEF (2021). *The state of the global education crisis: A path to recovery.* Washington D.C., Paris, New York: The World Bank, UNESCO, and UNICEF
- The Digital Watch (January 2021), *Ethiopia government develops Digital Literacy Plan.* <https://dig.watch/updates/ethiopia-government-develops-digital-literacy-plan> (accessed 19 April 2022).
- UNESCO (2003). *Education in situations of emergency, crisis and reconstruction: UNESCO strategy.*
- UNESCO (2020). *Education: from disruption to recovery.* <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse>
- World Bank (March, 2021). *Digital skills. The why, the what and the how. methodological guidebook for preparing digital skills country action plans for higher education and TVET.* <https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/0a4174d70030f27cc66099e862b3ba79-0200022021/original/DSCAP-MethodGuidebook-Part1.pdf> (Accessed 19 April 2022).
- World Health Organization (WHO) (2020). *Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic.* <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019> (Accessed 02 January 2022).
- Wu, D., Yang, T. Z., Hall, D. L., Jiao, G. H., Huang, L. X., & Jiao, C. (2021). COVID-19 uncertainty and sleep: the roles of perceived stress and intolerance of uncertainty during the early stage of the COVID-19 outbreak. *BMC Psychiatry*, 21(306). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12888-021-03310-2>

Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the [Creative Commons Attribution license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.