Examining the prospect of online education as drivers of effective and uninterrupted university education in the post-COVID-19 era

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Abstract
Purpose – The impact of COVID-19 on the educational systems across the globe was characterized by the shutdown of university education systems. In the post COVID-19 era, examining the prospect of online education becomes demanding with emphasis on promoting effective and uninterrupted university education sector in Nigeria.

Design/methodology/approach – This study employed phenomenological and descriptive research design. The sample size for the study was 15, comprising university lecturers, students and school social workers. In-depth Interview (IDI) interview was the instrument for data collection.

Findings – Findings revealed that university education in Nigeria was adversely disrupted by COVID-19 lockdown during the pandemic. Similarly, the study revealed that online education will facilitate effective and uninterrupted university education in post-COVID-19 era. Challenges such as lack of access to laptops, smartphones, reliable internet services, electricity etc. are major obstacles to an effective transition to online education in the post-COVID-19 University education era. The students lamented that poor knowledge of ICT by their lecturers and inclusivity of indigent/disabled students were major concerns.

Originality/value – Revitalizing the education sector is a core concern for low-income countries. Online education presents the lasting solution to the constant interruption of university education in Africa. Promoting effective and uninterrupted university education is pegged on an adequate government education budgetary allocation targeted towards providing an enabling environment for online education to thrive. The study recommends that school social workers’ engagement in the educational sector would help advocate for the availability of technological infrastructures and mainstreaming of the poor and disabled in the online education dispensation.

Keywords Online education, Effective, Uninterrupted, University education, Post-COVID-19, Era, Nigeria, School social workers

Paper type Research paper

Background
Online Education is an educational experience that has no geographic boundaries, it allows students to participate in classes and communicate with peers from any location (IGI Global, 2022). It was described as a new paradigm in learning (Harasim, 2000). One of the most frequently used terms in the post COVID-19 era was “new normal”. The new normal in the educational sphere is the increased use of and adaptation to online learning tools (Gautam, 2020). Online education is a move from face-to-face traditional education to the use of information and communication technology and an internet-based education and form of learning. Educators take advantage of the new media to impact knowledge on their students through proxy (Mccarty et al., 2006). The concept of distance education, also known as online education, was born in the United States, when lecturers and students at the University of Chicago attempted to connect through correspondence programs while they were in dispersed locations in the 1800s (Sun and Chen, 2016). With online learning, both the
instructor and the student can choose their own speed for learning, and there’s also the extra flexibility of creating a schedule that works for everyone.

Over 150 countries have been hit by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has disrupted education for 1.6 billion students (World Bank, 2021). China, South Korea, Italy and Iran, which were among the first to feel the effects of COVID-19, switched to homeschooling through the use of online learning resources and platforms. Students in Hong Kong began learning at home with interactive applications in February 2020 to try to halt COVID-19’s spread. 120 million Chinese students were able to access educational content through live television broadcasts (Gloria and Diana, 2020). Universities around the United States were compelled to swiftly switch from in-person teaching to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, with little time to correctly restructure programs and courses (Costa et al., 2021). Educational output in the United Kingdom fell by 36.7% below benchmark during the COVID-19 pandemic (Philip, 2021). Despite efforts by school administrations to carry out educational activities remotely, students in England recorded grave academic losses (Howard et al., 2021).

In Africa, children and teens that were already most at risk of being denied access to a high-quality education have been the most impacted by the pandemic. In Congo, Zambia and Central African Republic there was a complete absence of educational activities and learning as a result of the lockdown, necessitated by the pandemic. However, in Morocco and South Africa, online classes were offered to the students, but effectiveness in learning was jeopardized by lack of facilities such as internet credit, laptops, technological “know-how” and difficulty in adapting to the new normal (Human Rights Watch, 2020). Online education in Ghanaian educational institutions is still quite low, despite the global trend toward it as a way to meet the educational demands of the working class and those who are not disposed to face-to-face traditional education (Selira et al., 2015). The greatest challenge to online education in Africa during the pandemic was reportedly access to technology that will facilitate online education (eLearning Africa and EdTech Hub, 2020). Due to issues with legislation, program development, user assessment, access to information and communication technology (ICT) and academic performance, online education hasn’t been successful in Africa (Mahona and Demetria, 2020).

The Nigerian Federal Ministry of Education announced the temporary closure of all schools, beginning on March 23, 2020, in an effort to stop the coronavirus from spreading. The worrisome question is whether Nigeria has enough technology to cater for the remote or online education needs of 46 million students affected by the pandemic. Compounding the foregoing problem is an existing education inequality with about 13.2 million out-of-school teens and youths (Hussain, 2020). Globally, the COVID-19 epidemic is altering digital and online education, but in Nigeria, children and youth in rural and underprivileged communities are falling behind because they lack the skills and equipment necessary to adjust to or make the shift to new learning methodologies (World Economic Forum, 2020). There was a digital divide in access to online education for children in Nigeria during the Corona virus outbreak. A significant relationship exists between socio-economic status and the digital divide in accessing online education. Furthermore, 71% of the students who attend government schools did not have any form of academic engagement during the pandemic, while the number for student who attended private schools was quite low (29%). Similarly, there was a statistically significant association between parental education level and the ability to support children’s remote learning during the pandemic. Parents with a high level of education were better able to engage their children in online education than parents with a low level of education (Azubuike et al., 2021).

Some studies have also buttressed the imperativeness of online education in the post-COVID-19 era. They are as follows: In a systematic review of literature, Jamilah and Fabyuni (2022) investigated the future of online learning in the post-COVID-19 era. The study revealed that the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in a rapid move to online learning in schools across Indonesia. The study recommended that online education can be modified and combined with
offline learning into a blended learning method, which can be adopted and utilized by schools in the post-COVID-19 era. Similarly, Peimani and Kamalipour (2021) in a quantitative study, examined online education in the post-COVID-19 era: the student’s perception and learning experiences. The study revealed that students in the UK during the pandemic switched to live online lectures as a preferred educational pedagogy when compared to recorded lectures or face-to-face traditional education. The study also revealed that the assessment of students’ academic progress was better obtained in the online class when compared with the conventional face-to-face classes. Locke (2021) cited in a commentary that online education has been used to maintain educational continuity in the aftermath of earthquakes. This further supports the major thrust of the study regarding online education as the behemoth driver of effective and uninterrupted university education in the post-COVID-19 era.

School social workers has significant role to play in the transitions from traditional pedagogy of “face to face” learning interface to online classes or distance learning. A particular area of practise within the broad field of social work is school social work. School social workers play a crucial role in advancing the schools’ purpose to offer a setting for instruction, learning and the development of competence and confidence (School Social Work Association of America, no date). School social workers in Nigeria have the responsibility to assist University students and lecturers to adjust to the new normal of online education. They advocate for the availability of laptops, smart phones and internet connections in schools, which will accelerate adaptation to online learning among students and staff of universities. However, the foregoing task has not been executed to its full capacity because of lack of funding and low-level government recognition of social work profession in Nigeria.

Many studies have investigated the challenges of online education in Nigerian educational institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic (Abdulmajeed et al., 2020; Adeoye et al., 2020; Ebohon et al., 2021; Ogolodom et al., 2022; Ogunji et al., 2022), but none has examined the prospect of online education as drivers of effective and uninterrupted university education in Nigeria’s post-COVID-19 era. Hence, this study was designed to void that gap. The significance of this study is that it is going to be a reference point for the government, educational institutions, policymakers and other relevant stakeholders on the imperative of financial investment in online education to facilitate effective and uninterrupted university education in the post-COVID-19 era. This study will also bridge the gap in literature, theory and practice on the prospect of online education as drivers of effective and uninterrupted university education in the post-COVID-19 era. The finding of this study will be a base for other studies on the usefulness of online education in post-COVID-19 era. The findings of this study will also inform programs that will create awareness on the imperativeness of the embrace of the new normal of online education which will guarantee effective and uninterrupted university education in the occasion of future pandemic or epidemic lockdown protocol. Government and other stakeholders’ implementation of the recommendations of this study will boast the confidence of Nigerian on the University education system in the post-COVID-19 era.

Method
The study was designed to examine the prospect of online education as drivers of effective and uninterrupted university education in the post-COVID-19 Era. The study adopted a phenomenological and descriptive research design. Phenomenological research entails an
objective description and interpretation of the lived experience of an individual or a particular group of people (Wilson, 2015). The approach’s main objective is to describe the nature of the specific phenomena. Interviews are done with a group of people who can provide first-hand accounts of a particular circumstance, event, or experience (Creswell, 2013). On the other hand, a descriptive research design is one that seeks data in order to methodically characterize a phenomenon, circumstance, or population (Voxco, 2021). Furthermore, it is a detailed summary of specific events encountered by individuals or groups of individuals (Lambert and Lambert, 2013). These research designs were employed to uncover the prospect of online education as drivers of effective and uninterrupted university education in the post-COVID-19 era.

The participants for this study were drawn from the University of Nigeria, Nsukka (UNN). The university was founded by Nnamdi Azikiwe in 1960 and formally opened in 1955 and formally opened in 1960 and first President of Nigeria from 1963 to 1966. The University of Nigeria, Nsukka is a federal University in Nsukka, Enugu State of Nigeria. With over 36,000 students enrolled and 1,519 academic staff, UNN runs 102 academic departments across 15 faculties and provides 82 undergraduate programs and 211 postgraduate programs. It does so on four campuses: Nsukka; the University of Nigeria Aba campus; the University of Nigeria Enugu campus (UNE); and Ituku-University Ozalla’s of Nigeria Teaching Hospital (UNTH) (UNAC). UNN has a business school as well.

The study had 15 respondents, comprising of five lecturers, five students and five school social workers. Lecturers and students were selected for the study because they were the most affected by the academic disruption occasioned by the COVID-19 pandemic, and they are more qualified to give perspective on the prospect of online education in university education post COVID-19. The school social workers were selected for the study so that they can explain the role of school social workers in facilitating the availability and utilization of online education in Nigerian universities.

The sampling procedure for the study was nonprobability sampling method. Among the various non probability sampling methods, purposive and availability sampling were adopted for the selection of the study respondents. The study chose a purposive sampling procedure because of the unique target population of the university stakeholders. These target population were lecturers and students from the University of Nigeria, Nsukka and school social workers. The study utilized availability sampling to ensure that only available and willing lecturers, students and school social workers were recruited for the purpose of this study.

Data collection was conducted using the Structured In-depth Interview Guide. Using the instrument enabled the researchers to elicit responses from the respondents in response to pre-designed structured research questions. A research assistant was sought from graduate of the social work department at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. During the interview, the research assistant took notes while the researchers conducted the interview. To avoid burnout and fatigue associated with long interview sessions, the interview session lasted between 40 and 60 min. Nvivo 12 was used to analyze the data collected. For easy comprehension, the data were categorized into themes using thematic analysis.

In order to conduct the interviews, an informed consent was gotten from lecturers, students and school social worker. Participation in the study was voluntary, and participants were made to understand that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time if they did not feel comfortable. Approval for the study was gotten from the Health Research Ethics Committee, University of Nigeria Teaching Hospital, Ituku-Ozalla, Enugu, Nigeria.

The major constraint of this study was the difficulty in getting respondents for the study. This difficulty stemmed from the fact that lectures and students in public universities in Nigeria just came back from an eight-month strike action and were very busy trying to cover up the elapsed time during the strike action. Hence, not many lecturers and students had the time to give an audience for the study interview, and as a result, the sample for the study was limited to only 10, instead of the 20 the researcher had in mind from the onset. Researchers
were able to obtain robust information from the few respondents who were willing to participate, despite the challenges.

Findings

Demographic characteristics of respondents
Source: Field study (2022)

Table 1 presented the demographic characteristics of the study respondents. The mean age of the lecturer was 40; similarly, the mean age of the students was 27, while the school social worker was 33. Out the 15 respondents for the study, five were lectures, five were students while five were school social workers. Similarly, among the lecturers, two were from geography department, two were from social work department, and one is from the department of Sociology and Anthropology. In addition, among the five students, two were from social work department, two were from Sociology and Anthropology department, and one was from psychology department. In addition, among the five school social workers, two practice in Shalom secondary school, Nsukka and three practice in the student affairs unit of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. Furthermore, among the lecturers, two were Lecturer I academic staff of UNN, two were Lecturer II, and one was an assistant lecturer. All the students were in level 400, and the five-school social worker is a practicing social worker in school. The study participants were eight male and seven female.

Assessment of the utilization of online education during COVID-19 pandemic and the impact on university education in Nigeria

The COVID-19 pandemic hindered academic progress in Nigeria. Many universities are still suffering from the aftermath of the pandemic, as some universities are yet to meet up with their curricula in the post-COVID-19 era. This section assessed the utilization of online education by Nigerian universities during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants in the IDI session were of the view that Nigerian universities were unable to run online education during the pandemic university shutdown. The implication of that was that students were left behind in their curriculum schedule. The lack of utilization of online education rendered the students and lecturers useless academically. The following are some of the quotes from participants:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondents</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Department</th>
<th>Level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lecturer 1</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>Geography</td>
<td>Lecturer I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecturer 2</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Social Work</td>
<td>Assistant L</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecturer 3</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Geography</td>
<td>Lecturer II</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecturer 4</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>Social Work</td>
<td>Lecturer II</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecturer 5</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Sociology &amp; Anth</td>
<td>Lecturer I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 1</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Work</td>
<td>Level 400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 2</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Social Work</td>
<td>Level 400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 3</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Sociology &amp; Anth</td>
<td>Level 400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 4</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Sociology &amp; Anth</td>
<td>Level 400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 5</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Psychology</td>
<td>Level 400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Social Worker 1</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Secondary School</td>
<td>Practitioner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Social Worker 2</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Secondary School</td>
<td>Practitioner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Social Worker 3</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Student Affairs</td>
<td>Practitioner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Social Worker 4</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Student Affairs</td>
<td>Practitioner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Social Worker 5</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Student Affairs</td>
<td>Practitioner</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source(s): Field Survey 2022/23

Table 1. Socio-demographics of participants
The lack of utilization of online education during the COVID-19 hampered and slowed down learning. We were not able to engage our students. For universities in Nigeria, we were not prepared. We were not proactive. The COVID-19 came suddenly. You have to consider the classroom and the equipment which are very inadequate for online education. We are not even effective with the traditional face to face education, not to talk of online education. We do not have ordinary microphones, how then are we going to have those gadgets which will enable and enhance online education. Basically, we are not prepared (Lecturer 1, Dept. of Geography).

Online education has not been effective in Nigerian Universities. Facilities needed for a smooth running of such educational system is not functional. We do not have funds for online education in the Nigerian universities. Minus these challenges online education would have been the best form of education in Nigeria. We the students were left behind. The educational activities were distorted with the absence of online education during the pandemic (Student 3, Dept. of Sociology).

However, some of the respondents indicated that private owned universities engaged in online education during the pandemic, but many of which failed because of poor internet network and facilities, thus:

During the pandemic most schools were shutdown. Most government own universities did not partake in E-learning. Few private schools such as private universities, and private secondary schools engaged in online education because their parents could afford it. A friend told me they had hitches and hindrances because of inadequate devices and unstable internet access. Generally, government owned universities which are on the majority did not engage in online education during the pandemic (Student Social Worker 1).

Prospect of online education as drivers of effective and uninterrupted university education at future epidemic and pandemic:

This sector examined the prospect of online education as drivers of uninterrupted university education in the post-COVID-19 era and future pandemic. The IDI respondents in the study indicated that online education will facilitate effective university education in the post-COVID-19 era. Similarly, online education will ensure uninterrupted university education in the case of a future pandemic. The respondents agreed that online education is a panacea to academic disruption during the pandemic in Nigeria, if only the government and relevant stakeholders ensure that the facilities required for smooth operation of online education are made available. The following are some quotes from respondents: “Online education will be the solution for a possible future pandemic. It won’t affect education much because students will connect to class from home (Student 4, Dept. of Psychology).”

To me online education should be running concurrent with physical education. We didn’t anticipate COVID-19. If sophisticated equipment is provided for online education, it will prevent university academic shutdown during any future pandemic. Apart from pandemic, online education will make education more effective. Students will be able to do their assignment and assessment online. This way, online education will play a major role in the future of education in Nigeria (Lecturer 4, Dept. of Social Work).

Yes, online education will foster uninterrupted university education in a future pandemic, provided that the equipment is available and there is adequate remuneration for staff. If all conditions are met, online education will be beautiful for growth in Nigeria. Even if there is a pandemic in the future, if the university shuts down physically, the virtual learning will continue. Anywhere you are, you can connect to classes (Lecturer 1, Dept. of Geography).

Challenges and obstacles of online education in Nigerian Universities during COVID-19 pandemic:

Some challenges militate against the availability and utilization of online education by Nigerian universities during the COVID-19 pandemic and post-COVID-19 era.
The respondents identified the hindrances as a lack of internet access and power supply. They also identified poverty: it was revealed that 95% of the students do not have access to a good laptop, and 85% of the students who have Android phones do not have access to an affordable internet data connection. The networks from Nigerian network providers (MTN, Airtel, Glo and Etisalat) were abysmally poor, thus, hindering engagement with online education. It was also revealed that the lecturers were poorly motivated, their salaries were not paid when due, and they were poorly remunerated. The following are some direct quotes from respondents:

One of them in Nigeria is poverty, not all the students can afford Laptop or a good android phone. It is a very big challenge. Even most of us that are income earners do not even have a good Laptop to engage in this online education. Another challenge is network problem, we are in Nigeria where anything goes. Last time I had Virtual International Conference. I was here fighting with my network while the conference was going on, before I could connect, they have already finished the conference. I missed the conference, so network connection is a big problem here (Lecturer 2, Dept. of Social Work).

Solutions to the challenges of online education in Nigerian Universities
This section offers solutions to the challenges that deter universities’ online education in the post-COVID-19 era. In the IDI sessions, the respondents proffered the following solutions to the hindrances of online education in Nigerian universities: A sufficient government budgetary allocation should be made to universities to enable the acquisition of necessary equipment for online education. The students should be given more access to laptops, android phones, constant power supplies and internet access. The price of data from network providers should be subsidized to enable students to afford it. The lecturers should be adequately remunerated so as to motivate them to give their best towards the effectiveness of online education in Nigerian universities. The respondents revealed that there should be provisions for grants for lecturers and scholarships for students to enable them to be equipped for the task of online education, thus:

Provision of reliable internet services, let there be constant network. The cost of the internet should be reduced. You know online classes are more costly, so if the costs are reduced it will help poor students to get along. Also, there should be sensitization of the students to accept online education (Student 5, Dept. of Psychology).

Make sure that there is an uninterrupted power supply. Make sure that the ICT equipment are available and functional. Also, ensure that lecturers’ welfare packages are provided for them. Make sure that the students are also remunerated. I know some countries where the government pays their citizens to go to school. Students should be provided with Laptop, smart phones and strong network connection because the poor students cannot afford it (Lecturer 1, Dept. of Geography).

The role of social workers in facilitating the availability and adoption of online education in Nigerian Universities
This section examines the roles of school social workers in facilitating the availability and adoption of online education in Nigerian universities. An in-depth interview with school social workers revealed that school social workers have a vital role to play in ensuring the effectiveness of online education in Nigerian universities. One of the major roles is influencing policy formulation and adjustment that will engineer effective online education. School social workers also play the role of advocates by speaking on behalf of students and lecturers to stakeholders and demanding the provision of equipment such as laptops, smart phones and efficient internet connections and constant power supply that will facilitate online education in Nigerian universities. They also play the role of brokers by linking lecturers and students
to resource systems that will provide them with the necessary equipment for online education. School social workers also ensure inclusiveness in the online education process so that the physically challenged will not be disenfranchised in the online education process. They also influence lecturers and students to embrace and adopt the new normal of online education. This is largely because people resist innovations and want things done the old way.

Some of the direct quote from the respondent are as follows:

The role we play is enlightenment. We create awareness about online education using social media. We broaden people’s knowledge about it. We also play the role of advocacy. As social workers, we speak on behalf of the students or the need for the government to provide strong and affordable internet connection that will enhance task accomplishment such as assignment and exams. Social workers should also work on policies and policy adjustments that will aid effective online education in our universities (Student social worker 1).

We should ensure that the poor and physically challenged are not left out in the planning, innovation and adaptation of online education. There are poor people who cannot afford to buy laptop or even a smartphone. It is our responsibility to engage state an none state actors to provide the needed technological infrastructure for the student, most especially the indigent students (Student social worker 2).

Discussion
This article was designed to investigate the prospect of online education as drivers of effective, uninterrupted university education in the post-COVID-19 era. First, the study discovered that there was lack of availability and utilization of online education among Nigerian universities during the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, the foregoing, academic progress was adversely affected. Students went home during university closures and were unable to continue their academic activities. Universities in developed countries and a few in developing countries, on the other hand, were able to continue with their academic activities virtually despite the pandemic because they were prepared for online education. The foregoing corresponded with the study Ajibo (2020) the study revealed that during the COVID-19 pandemic, academic activities in Nigerian universities were abruptly brought to a halt because of the pandemic and lack facilities and arrangements for online education. Similarly, except for private universities, the majority of higher institutions in Nigeria did not implement any e-learning platform for use prior to and during the COVID-19 lockdown (Ogunji et al., 2022).

The study further revealed that while Nigerian government-owned universities were ill-equipped and ill-prepared to engage in online education during the COVID-19 pandemic, private-owned universities took a bold step and engaged their staff and students in online education to ensure continuation of academic activities amidst the pandemic lockdown. A study by Ojo et al. (2021) provides evidence of the utilization of online education by private owned universities in Kwara State, Nigeria. However, the study revealed that the level of utilization of online education by these private universities was low (40.7%) as opposed to high (8.1%). In addition, there was high level of lack of concentration during online education classes, as more than half of the students who participated in online education during the pandemic indicated high level of distraction during the online class because they were at home and had other distractions associated with home activities (Adetona and Ogunyemi, 2021).

Second, the study revealed that online education will prevent university academic shutdown in the case of a pandemic or epidemic in the post-COVID-19 era. Online education will enable students to stay connected to their academic activities even if there is a pandemic in the future. There will not be an interrupted academic session because students and
lecturers will be able to hold classes and write exams virtually. During the pandemic, some universities and nations across the globe that were proactive in adopting online education had fewer challenges with academic disruption. Ogunji et al. (2022) in a quantitative study acknowledged that online education readiness will overcome the usual disruption of school activities during emergencies and ensure a sustainable post-COVID-19 era in university education. World Health Organization [WHO] (2020) emphasized the imperative of effective online education for a smooth and uninterrupted university education in the post-COVID-19 era.

Third, the study revealed that a significant number of factors posed severe obstacles to the availability and utilization of online education in Nigerian universities. Some of which are an unstable power supply, lack of access to laptops and smart phones, a reliable and affordable internet connection and the poor remuneration of academic staff at the universities. The foregoing corresponds with the findings of Ogunji et al. (2022) inadequate capability, inadequate logistics and a lack of fundamental resources prevent Nigerian tertiary institutions from adopting and implementing e-learning effectively. Ogolodom et al. (2022) in a quantitative study evaluated the experiences of nursing and radiography undergraduate students with online learning in Nigerian universities during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study discovered that the following challenges militated against the availability and use of online education among the students: lack of access to computer devices, lack of mobile data, unstable internet access, financial constraints, a lack of technical know-how and poor communication with lecturers and peers.

Fourth, solutions to the challenges of online education in Nigerian universities were identified during and after COVID-19. Some of the solutions are sustained student and staff access to laptops, smart phones, reliable internet connections and a constant power supply. Universities’ academic staff should be motivated through adequate remuneration. Grants and scholarships for the acquisition of online education tools and gadgets should be made unavailable to academic staff and students, respectively. Obododike and Okekeokosisi (2020) opined that the major solution to the challenges of online education in Nigerian educational system during COVID-19 pandemic was provision of stable internet access and computer devices.

Fifth, school social workers were identified as key stakeholders in facilitating the availability and utilization of online education in Nigerian universities among staff and students. School social workers’ roles include advocacy, in this role, they speak to relevant authorities about the provision of gadgets and equipment necessary for effective online education. They influence policy formulation and modification that will bring about effective online education in Nigerian universities. They also ensure inclusivity in the availability and use of online education, ensuring that disabled people are not marginalized or disenfranchised in the process. As brokers, they also link staff and students to resource systems in the form of government and non-government organizations that will provide them with the necessary tools for smooth engagement in online education.

Conclusion
There was absolute academic disruption in the Nigerian universities during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially among government-owned universities, largely because online education was not functional in those academic institutions. There was a remarkable difference in experience with universities that embraced online education prior to the pandemic, most especially among the private universities. The uniqueness of the study from others is that it clearly established that online education is the major driver of effective and uninterrupted university education in Nigeria in the post-COVID-19 era. In an event of future epidemic or pandemic that will necessitate lockdown, university academic activities will not
come to a hurt because students, lecturers and all the stakeholders in the University education system will be able to hold classes and other academic activities virtually through online learning tools. There were a number of obstacles to online education during COVID-19 and the post-COVID-19 era. Among them are a lack of laptops and smartphones, a lack of stable and reliable internet services, poverty and technical know-how. School social workers play a crucial role in facilitating the availability and utilization of online education. Among the pertinent roles are advocacy, facilitator, broker, etc. The study recommends adequate remuneration for university staff as a form of motivation for engagement in online education. A special policy should be formulated by the government in collaboration with school social workers to ensure the implementation of the principles that guide online education in tertiary institutions. The government should provide reliable and stable internet access, laptops and smart phones for the students, to enable them to engage in online education without hitches.

Managerial implication of the study

(1) The study provided evidence of university academic disruption during the COVID-19 pandemic: The sad incidence is an “eye opener” to the government and all the stakeholders in the university education system about the need for a paradigm shift to prevent further occurrences of university education academic short down at the face of an epidemic/pandemic.

(2) The study revealed that online education will facilitate effective and uninterrupted university education in Nigeria in the post-COVID-19 era: This underscores the fact that policies, plans and programs should be channelled towards providing the enabling environment for online education to thrive in the university education system. This is pertinent because online education stands out as the instrument that will drive effective and uninterrupted university education in the post-COVID-19 era. Online education is found to be the panacea for university education disruption in a future epidemic or pandemic; hence, all the necessary resources and technological facilities for a successful transition from the traditional face-to-face education pedagogy to online education should be a major concern and priority to the government and all the stakeholders in Nigerian university education.

(3) Challenges such as lack of access to laptop, smartphone, reliable internet services and unstable power supply were the major obstacles to an effective transition from the face-to-face traditional education pedagogy to online education in the Nigerian university education system in the post-COVID-19 era: This implies that there should be an improved government budgetary allocation to address the aforementioned challenges, lack of facilities and technological infrastructure, which have hindered a successful transition from traditional education’s face-to-face pedagogy to the new normal of online education. In addition, there should be an improvement in lecturers’ salaries and earned allowances. The incentives should also be paid timely, as this serves as a motivation mechanism to create an enabling environment for lecturers to properly engage in online education and also transfer the knowledge to the students.

(4) The study provided evidence of poor knowledge of ICT among the lecturers: This further underscores that staff training and workshops on ICT compliance should be invested in to equip the lecturers to be internet and ICT savvy. This is very necessary because one cannot give what he or she does not have. Also, special care should be taken to train the students to embrace and become acquainted with the online education tools in the post-COVID-19 era.
Inclusivity of indigent and disabled students were identified as a major concern: Facilities that empower online education are most times expensive and cannot be afforded by indigent students. Hence, special funds such as scholarships targeted at indigent students will enable them to be mainstreamed in online education and not left out. Similarly, special attention should be given to disabled students so as to carry them along in the online education dispensation. Special technologies such as software reading aids, hearing aids and others should be made available to the disabled students.

The role of school social workers: One of the major roles of school social workers is influencing policy formulation and adjustment that will engineer effective online education. School social workers also play the role of advocates by speaking on behalf of students and lecturers to stakeholders and demanding the provision of equipment such as laptops, smart phones, efficient internet connections and constant power supplies that will facilitate online education in Nigerian universities. They also play the role of brokers by linking lecturers and students to resource systems that will provide them with the necessary equipment for online education. School social workers also ensure inclusiveness in the online education process so that the physically challenged will not be disenfranchised in the online education process. They also influence lecturers and students to embrace and adopt the new normal of online education.

References


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