



Compulsory e-learning in Namibia's public schools: A commendable idea marred by the digital divide?

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INTRODUCTION

Like much of the rest of the world, Namibia too came under a total economic and social shutdown, due to the global COVID-19 pandemic. A national state of emergency was declared, and the nation joined the rest of the world in a sit and wait-it-out situation.

With this situation, citizens experienced a sheer dilemma in every area of life – at a personal level, economic and survival matters, as well as their health and the education of their children.

The effects of COVID-19 were felt the most at the industrial and informal sector levels, where many were forced to close operations, leaving thousands without the security of a job and unexpected disruptions to livelihoods.

From the flourishing sectors such as agriculture to mining, fisheries to tourism, health to education, all had to shut down. Namibia had suspended operations and joined the rest of the world in a wait-and-see approach.

Two weeks into the national shutdown, the government, through the Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture (MoEAC), in an effort to salvage the educational calendar year and potentially avoid a setback of at least a year or two, called for the implementation of virtual learning in all Namibian public schools, for the duration of the lockdown and beyond.¹

The directive was that schools would reopen on 20 April 2020, but that no learners would return to school premises, hence the implementation of elearning, where lessons were to be conducted via televisions, radios, print media as well as mobile phones.

¹ Shikololo, A. (2020, 15 April). Ministry of Education establishes e-learning in schools. *New Era*. <https://new-eralive.na/posts/ministry-of-education-establishes-e-learning-in-schools>

Though the directive was vague and with no clear guidelines, a national committee was convened in the Khomas region to come up with ideas on how teaching and learning would take place as an interim solution, until a point where learners and teachers could resume physical contact throughout the country.

Cracks within the education system would soon be exposed by COVID-19, and the detrimental effects they pose to the right to development and access to knowledge, as set out in Principle 7 of the African Declaration on Internet Rights and Freedoms,² would become apparent.

E-LEARNING IN A LOW-TECH ENVIRONMENT

The Namibian education system is especially fragile. After 30 years of independence, a journey littered with experimenting with different educational systems, the country had just begun implementing a new national system.

This new system had recently been reviewed and accepted to meet the needs of the country and position the educational system towards meeting global trends. Most importantly, the new system was adopted with the hope of turning around the dismal performances of previous systems, which left thousands of young people out of the educational system altogether, resulting in a staggering youth unemployment rate of 49%.

Being unemployed and without a chance to pursue tertiary education means the inability to self-develop, but also, the community and nation would miss out on access to further knowledge and the income gains these would eventually bring about. This view was supported by Mulama and Nambinga who reported that youth unemployment in the country appears to be on the rise. The two researchers had noted that "high rates of youth unemployment represent both widespread personal misfortune for individuals and a lost opportunity for critical national and global economic development."³

The picture of education in Namibia looks as follows: the country has about 30,000 teachers in formal schooling and a population of 800,000 pupils who are teaching and learning in just over 1,900 schools countrywide. A compulsory education system has been free from primary to secondary school for the last five years now and the free education policy has earned former President Hifikepunye Pohamba a Mo Ibrahim Award for making it an implementation priority during his term of office. Though it has been faced with a number of challenges, there have been benefits too, such as a higher enrolment rates as well as allowing pregnant learners to attend school and allowing them back to continue with studies when they feel safe to do so.

In the higher education segment, there are 16 institutions of higher learning, both private and public. There are also 86 Technical and Vocational

2 <https://africaninternetrights.org/articles>

3 Mulama, L, & Nambinga, V. (2017). *Namibia's Untapped Resource: Analysing Youth Unemployment*. National Planning Commission. <https://www.npc.gov.na/download/pbriefs/Analysing-Youth-Unemployment.pdf>

Education and Training (TVET) institutions, both public and private. Roughly 67,000 youths are enrolled in universities, while 35,000 are enrolled in TVETs.

In exploring the challenges of the sector in relation to e-learning, it is important to present the picture of technological advancement and most importantly the issue of internet connectivity nationally.

The Ministry of Education, in a circular that made the rounds on social media, indicated that telecommunication infrastructure remained the biggest challenge, with 32% of schools (614) currently having no access to telecommunications. The ministry also noted that 32% of students in the higher education sector had no access to computers or data. The national internet penetration rate is 31%.

While it is plausible that throughout the pandemic, the government acted trying to ensure progress in the education sector, the hasty introduction of e-learning had possibly disadvantaged those without connectivity, consigning them to a future without knowledge and little hope of development.

This has been worsened by a lack of realistic planning that consequently resulted in a situation where there is no progress with a governance framework that clearly articulates the importance of the internet in education and the lives of its people, such as:

- A working information and communications technology (ICT) policy in the education sector.
- A strategic national ICT policy that is inclusive of all aspects of ICT.
- Implementation of a Broadband Policy and a Communication Act which are pro-people.
- A regulatory environment that prioritises access to the internet ahead of licensing fees.
- Government, industry and regulatory sectors which value access to the internet to fully operationalise the Universal Access and Service Fund.

With these challenges in mind, it is clear that free education and e-learning are interdependent and only possible with the required connectivity and ICT infrastructure in place. As set out in the African Declaration on Internet Rights and Freedoms, the internet is vital for giving everyone the right to development and access to knowledge⁴ – especially in unprecedented times such as those presented by COVID-19.

4 Principle 7 of the African Declaration.

PROBLEMS WITH INTERNET ACCESS, AFFORDABILITY AND INFRASTRUCTURE

Thanks to COVID-19, the Namibian education sector was forced into a position that it never even imagined. While this is not just unique to Namibia, the situation presented by the pandemic has probably brought some good and bad.

The good is that it disrupted the everyday dealings of the education system and also unsettled the bureaucracy that sometimes seemed detached from the realities of the education system, such as the fact that not all government schools have access to ICTs. Another good stemming from the COVID-19 situation is that it directed attention to what is important and has been overlooked for so long, namely e-education. While this is positive, the flipside is that there are chronic issues related to ICT access, technological infrastructure and internet affordability in the country.

The Ministry of Education could, however, be lauded for its honesty in highlighting challenges as follows:

- Access to ICT infrastructure and capacity of teachers and learners to access e-learning is limited to predominantly urban schools.
- Public higher education institutions have basic e-learning infrastructure in place, although bandwidth and student capacity to access teaching and learning might be a challenge.
- Private higher education institutions lack infrastructure and capacity to migrate programmes to online learning.
- 28,133 students at higher education institutions do not have access to laptops or tablets and are affected by the cost of data packages.
- E-learning for TVETs is not a plausible option due to the practical nature of training (70% practical and 30% theory); however, e-learning is being explored as an option for education and training delivery of theory in the medium to long term.
- The cost implications associated with providing equitable access to all learners are high (a survey and costing are still to be done).⁵

Given these self-defined categories of challenges, it would, perhaps, make it easier to categorise them into three areas which are key in determining the success of e-education and demonstrate its reliance on ICTs and the internet.

⁵ Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture MoEAC. (2020). *Draft Calendar, April 2020*.

ACCESS

Due to a dominance of urban connectivity and a digital divide that for years has been giving urban areas an advantage, rural schools generally are left in the dark by e-education. This challenge is confirmed by the Inclusive Internet Index, which in 2019 reported that only 29.5% of households in Namibia use the internet.⁶ With less than 30% of households using the internet, this translates into about 70% to 90% of learners and students with limited or no access to education for the duration of the school closure due to COVID-19. Confirming this, Minister of Education Anna Nghipondoka revealed that only 13,000 learners were able to access the ministry's e-learning platforms during the national lockdown. "This is less than 2% of the total population of 804,000 pupils in state and private schools in the country," she said.⁷

Other proposed means of providing e-education and distance education through traditional media such as radio, television and newspapers also pose further challenges for rural communities. For instance, the usage of radio in an everyday rural household is usually confined to on-the-hour listening to news, given the cost of batteries and availability in certain areas.

This puts learners in rural areas at a further disadvantage, because, unlike at schools where a learner has access to a book and a teacher, at home radios belong to parents or guardians who may prioritise their own access, in addition to factors such as breakage, reception problems and battery costs. A 2019 study published by the Institute for Public Policy Research on media and digital challenges⁸ revealed that only 11.8% of Namibian households had a TV set. Given the fact that TV sets are largely electricity operated, the lack of electricity in rural areas further marginalises school communities in rural areas. While many newspapers in Namibia have terminated operations or gone digital, those still operating usually reach remote areas three days to a week later.

Albertina Isaias, a pre-primary teacher at Oshitudha Combined School in the Omusati region, confirmed that at school level, they were hesitant in "sending school materials home" because care is generally lacking, as most children live with elderly grandparents. These guardians in many cases have a low level of literacy and are unable to pay close attention to school work.

Isaias further noted that a proposed alternative of sending video/audio recordings of teachers to parents and guardians via platforms such as WhatsApp is completely futile because "data prices are too high" and "smartphone devices are completely useless in rural areas," as these use 3G or 4G signals, which are generally not available in wider rural areas. At the same time, the cost of these

6 Smit, E. (2019, 5 March). Namibia's internet costs are too high. *Namibian Sun*. <https://www.namibiansun.com/news/namibias-internet-costs-are-too-high2019-03-05>

7 Bayer, R., & Nembwaya, H. (2020, 24 April). The glaring digital divide ... two worlds of e-learning. *The Namibian*. <https://www.namibian.com.na/200377/archive-read/The-glaring-digital-divide--two-worlds-of-e-learning>

8 Remmert, D. (2019). *Namibia's Media: Facing the Digital Challenge*. Institute for Public Policy Research. https://ippr.org.na/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Media_Report-small.pdf

smartphone devices is quite high and they need to be constantly charged with electricity, which is a luxury in many rural communities.⁹

Further concerns of teachers were captured by Paheja Siririka in an article in the newspaper *New Era*: "It has been a roller-coaster in the world of academics since the ministry decided schools resume as planned but via e-learning platforms. The worries were mostly centered on those students and parents who do not have access to the requisite means."¹⁰

In this article, Siririka captured various teachers' sentiments. "Our kids cannot do anything in class without first explaining the work in a vernacular; they are still going to fail. Maybe other students across the country can manage but ours need us, and being physically present is more crucial for them," said one teacher.

Another teacher cited lack of technology usage as a barrier to effectively conduct e-learning, and was quoted as saying, "I don't think I am ready. In as much as I am well equipped, I know how to operate all the gadgets, but my main concern is the recipients of this work mode; my learners are not ready and these are the most important custodians."

It is clear that e-learning and distance learning are futile for many rural learners, with only a 2% success rate.¹¹ This is supported by the secretary general of the Teachers Union of Namibia (TUN), Mahongora Kavihuhua, who condemned the implementation of e-learning, saying the system is not inclusive and many learners and teachers are going to be left out, since not all of them have access to electricity, gadgets or the internet.¹² He was quoted as saying, "As a union, we are repeating that the introduction of elearning is premature and not a solution to the problem. E-learning is a good thing but it should have been implemented years ago for every teacher and learner to be conversant with the system."

His sentiments are backed up by the unwillingness of teachers and school management, driven by fear and worry, leading to absenteeism and a slow pace of uptake of e-learning while reportedly causing animosity in some districts.¹³

Access to e-learning as well as distance education in higher education is at least available to a certain degree. However, the government has confirmed that exactly 28,133 students at higher education institutions have no access to laptops or tablets and are affected by the cost of data packages too. In trying to remedy this situation, the government, in the heat of COVID-19, hastily committed NAD 9 million (USD 541,000) to boost e-learning.¹⁴

9 Interview with Albertina Isaias, May 2020.

10 Siririka, P. (2020, 22 April). Teachers worry about e-learning efficacy. *New Era*. <https://neweralive.na/posts/teachers-worry-about-e-learning-efficacy>

11 Bayer, R., & Nembwaya, H. (2020, 24 April). Op. cit.

12 NAMPA. (2020, 24 June). TUN slams principals for permitting schooling amidst challenges. *NBC*. <https://www.nbc.na/news/tun-slams-principals-permitting-schooling-amidst-challenges.33284>

13 Jason, L. (2020, 15 June). Education inspector, principals cross swords. *New Era*. <https://neweralive.na/posts/education-inspector-principals-cross-swords>

14 Ngutjinazo, O. (2020, 18 June). Ministry to boost e-learning. *The Namibian*. <https://www.namibian.com.na/91965/read/Ministry-to-boost-e-learning>

Some tertiary institutions have gone to the extent of negotiating with telecommunications companies to acquire data devices and packages for students. While the student financial assistance fund made efforts to avail extra funding for its recipients to acquire technological equipment,¹⁵ these efforts could not fully salvage the situation, as many students still had no access to laptops to properly engage with course content. Additionally, the negotiated data usage has also been a headache for certain students, as it is largely inaccessible due to data not being loaded on time or not at all, rendering this exercise as mere tokenism. The issue of data packages and availability will be dealt with in more detail under infrastructural analysis below.

AFFORDABILITY

The cost of data, as reflected on above, is a core determining factor for the success of e-learning and distance education during COVID-19.

In 2018, *The Patriot* reported that Namibia ranked as one of the top 10 countries globally with the highest costs of data, and that Namibians continue to decry the cost of accessing the internet.¹⁶ This survey of 196 countries found that many of the world's poorest consumers are being forced to pay sky-high costs for fixed broadband services, especially in sub-Saharan Africa.

According to the 2019 Affordability Index of the Alliance for Affordable Internet (A4AI), the cost of one gigabyte of internet data in Namibia is USD 8.45.¹⁷ This translates into about 150 Namibian Dollars (NAD). However, for a week of meaningful connectivity, inclusive of online engagement and learning, on average a student household would need more than that.

A National Labour Force Survey conducted during October 2014 indicated that the average monthly household income in Namibia then was NAD 6,626. If we are to imagine accessing at least four gigabytes or more data per month per household, data would cost at least 10% of household income.

With data seemingly this unaffordable, and public libraries and multipurpose centres closed during COVID-19, this means even students who had access to laptops, phones and gadgets could face further challenges in accessing e-learning to its fullest extent. As a result, the majority of students would not be able to complete course assignments and cover all course content, leading to potential failure and possible repetition of courses, perhaps setting students back by a year or more. It may be for such reasons that the second national and largest university has given students an option to cancel their studies for the first semester of 2020.¹⁸

15 Kandovazu, E. (2020, 8 April). NSFAF to pay 10k per student to tackle e-learning. *Informante*. <https://informante.web.na/nsfaf-to-pay-10k-per-student-to-tackle-e-learning>

16 The Patriot. (2018, 5 May). Namibia amongst most expensive globally for day. *The Patriot*. <https://thepatriot.com.na/index.php/2018/05/05/namibia-amongst-most-expensive-globally-for-data>

17 https://a4ai.org/affordability-report/data/?_year=2019&indicator=INDEX&country=NAM

18 <https://twitter.com/NUSTFM/status/1277859900710965249>

INFRASTRUCTURE

The Ministry of Education and Culture, on behalf of the government, had explicitly made it clear that “access to ICT infrastructure and capacity of teachers and learners to use e-learning is limited to predominantly urban schools.” This has placed students in rural areas at a disadvantage,¹⁹ for instance, because ICT infrastructure depends on electricity and 346 schools (18% of schools nationally)²⁰ are without electricity and therefore without e-learning.

The government further noted that “public higher education institutions have basic e-learning infrastructure in place although bandwidth and student capacity to access teaching and learning might be a challenge.” This concern has been consistently reflected in student complaints on accessing the Moodle platform, a virtual learning management system used by universities to deliver e-education. For instance, at the University of Namibia (UNAM), where e-learning has been in place for about two years prior, the platform capacity became totally overwhelmed during the COVID-19 shutdown, to a point where it was consistently inaccessible for prolonged periods of time.²¹

While UNAM’s director of online and distance learning has confirmed readiness to kickstart e-learning amidst the highlighted challenges,²² the second main university, the Namibia University of Science and Technology (NUST), was not able to begin immediately, as its elearning platforms were not fully in place. It was perhaps for this reason that the latter offered students a choice to cancel the semester as referred to above. Despite having reported readiness, the challenges in higher education were confirmed through a ministerial document that highlighted that “private higher education institutions lack infrastructure and capacity to migrate programmes to online learning” and that “e-learning for TVETs is not a plausible option due to the practical nature of training (70% practical and 30 % theory).” Consequently, the two main universities have cancelled semester examinations.²³

E-educational infrastructure aside, ICT and connectivity infrastructure became a real challenge during COVID-19. With more people staying at home during lockdown, this meant driving data usage to towers in residential areas. This has led to user frustration as they became unable to use their data in residential areas because telcos prioritise their services in industrial and business areas. Many students, too, especially those in urban areas, could hardly

19 Nakale, A. (2020, 15 April). 32% of public schools not equipped for online learning. *New Era*. <https://neweralive.na/posts/32-of-public-schools-not-equipped-for-online-learning>

20 MoEAC. (2020). Op. cit.

21 Siririka, P. (2020, 15 April). Students weigh in on e-learning. *New Era*. <https://neweralive.na/posts/students-weigh-in-on-e-learning>

22 Nakale, A. (2020, 8 April). Universities ready for e-learning. *New Era*. <https://neweralive.na/posts/universities-ready-for-e-learning>

23 Likela, S. (2020, 6 May). Unam, Nust suspend June exams. *The Namibian*. <https://www.namibian.com.na/200684/archive-read/Unam-Nust-suspend-June-exams>

access e-learning platforms as ICT tower capacities became overwhelmed and upgrades during the first stage of lockdown proved impossible.

For mobile connectivity, Namibia is only 39% covered by 4G (the highest generation of internet connectivity available in the country), according to the Inclusive Internet Index of 2019.²⁴ The Index further indicates that 3G is only available in 53% of the country, while 2G is available in 100%. This brings about some challenges, including that not many students and teachers are able to do much via WhatsApp platforms as an alternative form of learning, especially for video/audio conferencing or file sharing.

Broadband infrastructure remains a dream in Namibia. With a broadband policy only recently unveiled and broadband coverage still very low, institutions of higher education and schools that are connected could not meaningfully make any impact during COVID-19, as the lockdown meant everybody is working and studying at home. At household level, only 2.53% are covered by fixed-line broadband, according to the Inclusive Internet Index.²⁵

CONCLUSION

The challenges posed by COVID-19 regarding e-education during this time are many. The infrastructure problems cause e-learning in Namibian schools to fail, while posing serious challenges to Namibian learners, denying them access to knowledge and education as well as a chance to develop themselves and contribute to the development of Namibia in the long run. These challenges have been confirmed by parents, teachers, teacher unions²⁶ and the student union.²⁷

To make it worse, the infrastructural realities discriminate against communities faced with high poverty levels and where internet access is only a dream.

To fully embrace and benefit from the internet, Namibia has to be more deliberate in providing a quality e-learning services. This needs to be supported by timely policies, accompanied by budget allocations and clear guidelines and investment in ICT infrastructure.

While implementation of e-learning countrywide was driven by the COVID-19 emergency, it showed serious discriminatory elements to those not connected to and unable to afford the internet, and interfered with the right to development and access to knowledge, a principle set out in the African Declaration on Internet Rights and Freedoms.²⁸

While the free education policy in Namibia should be commended, the COVID-19 scenario exposed that without tangible ICT policies and infrastructure

24 <https://theinclusiveinternet.eiu.com/explore/countries/NA>

25 Ibid.

26 Rasmeni, M. (2020, 19 June). Suspend face to face classes for 14 days - NANTU. *Namibia Economist*. <https://economist.com.na/53763/health/suspend-face-to-face-classes-for-14-days-nantu>

27 Cloete, L. (2020, 16 April). Nanso in //Kharas wants suspension of online Unam classes. *The Namibian*. <https://www.namibian.com.na/200157/archive-read/Nanso-in-Kharas-wants-suspension-of-online-Unam-classes>

28 <https://africaninternetrights.org/about>

in place and a lack of implementation of the Universal Access and Service Funds, many schools remain left out and learners are disadvantaged.

Namibia's willingness to work with stakeholders and development partners during the COVID-19 pandemic to publish school materials for students who have internet access is also commendable and is a basis for an even further drive to use the internet for general development.

The executive director of the Ministry of Education's acknowledgement of the challenges regarding e-learning is also laudable. It shows that there is hope to turn the situation around, acknowledges that individuals and communities have the right to development and that the internet has a vital role to play in the full realisation of nationally and internationally agreed sustainable development goals.

Internet access is a vital tool for giving everyone the means to participate in development processes. For this reason it is important for Namibia to acknowledge and comply with the Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information in Africa, as adopted by the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights in November 2019.²⁹

Principle 37.2 of the Declaration should be prioritised by the Namibian government: "States shall recognise that universal, equitable, affordable and meaningful access to the internet is necessary for the realisation of freedom of expression, access to information and the exercise of other human rights."

Namibia should also work to improve "information and communication technology and internet infrastructure for universal coverage" as stated in 37.3.b of the Declaration; as well as "promoting local access initiatives such as community networks for enabling the increased connection of marginalised, unserved or underserved communities" (37.3.d); and "facilitating digital literacy skills for inclusive and autonomous use" (37.3.e).

Finally, to ensure successful implementation of e-services such as e-learning, as covered in this article, Namibia should implement Principle 43.1 of the Declaration, to "adopt legislative, administrative, judicial and other measures to give effect to this Declaration and facilitate its dissemination."



← Afraid that teachers would be receiving pay for no work, teachers like Ester Kadhila (seen here) returned to schools to plan how classes will be conducted when they eventually open, but mostly spend their time folding study materials that come as newspaper inserts. Source: Nashilongo Gervasius

29 <https://www.achpr.org/presspublic/publication?id=80>