

Research Article

COVID-19 Pandemic and the Current Challenges of the Angolan Higher Education System

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has precipitated an unprecedented shift towards distance and online learning (DOL) globally, including in Angola, where the transition has revealed numerous challenges and uncertainties, especially within higher education. This paper delves into the historical context of DOL in America, Europe, and Africa, highlighting the diverse experiences and lessons learned in these regions. The emphasis is on the necessity of a well-planned, strategic approach to DOL implementation, tailored to the unique context of each region. In Angola, the Ministry of Education has initiated discussions around DOL, but the transition has been fraught with issues such as inadequate digital infrastructure, limited internet access, and a lack of training and support for both educators and students. This paper argues for a phased implementation strategy for DOL in Angola, incorporating comprehensive market research, meticulous project planning, and clearly defined deliverables. It also stresses the critical importance of involving all stakeholders, including government bodies, educational institutions, and private sector partners, to ensure the sustainability and success of DOL initiatives. By addressing these challenges and adopting a structured, inclusive approach, Angola has the potential to develop a more resilient and effective online education system. The paper concludes by outlining the steps necessary to overcome existing barriers and create a supportive environment for digital learning, ultimately aiming to enhance educational access and quality in the country.

Keywords

Distance and Online Learning (DOL), Higher Education, Implementation Challenges, Angola, Strategic Approach

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 is impacting the world. However the degree of the impact is far from being proportional to every state in the world, mainly to what science and technology are concerned. Great deal toward the dominance of the pandemic is coming from medical scientists and from quantitative statistics. Those countries that have potentiated their education and health systems have at least more tools to fight against the pandemic and by this time education is not stagnated.

The pandemic of COVID-19 lockdowns is moving many in-person activities online across the world and the use of the distance and online learning (DOL) is quickly escalating at least in Angola. As the state of emergence and now calamity are determined and several restrictions are being applied, including in general system of education, only in higher education instructions seem to be ambiguous and not unanimous. To be more specific, while public higher education institutions remain static, students in many, if not in all,

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private higher education institutions, are being required to pay the March and April fees, under an unclear justification to this unfair act supported by some quite lousy argument that ODL is taking place. Is that really the case? If so, how robust is that in Angola, seen that at least most of private higher education institutions are adopting? What can we learn from history of online higher education? What ways should be adopted towards a robust online system of higher education? These are some of the questions we debate in this position paper. To attain such a desideratum, a brief overview of DOL in America, Europe and Africa are presented. Then, from a more contextualized landscape, a recent history of DOL in Angola is provided, followed by some best practices towards a more robust DOL in Angola.

2. DOL in America

The article should be written in English. An article should be between DOL is not a new concept in America. In 1873 the first official correspondence education program, called the “Society to Encourage Home Studies”, was established in Boston, Massachusetts by Ana Eliot Ticknor. The late 1900s, the concept of DOL first came into practice in the mid 19th century when the U.S. Postal Service was developed [4]. The notion of reliable, long-distance correspondence led to the development and implementation of what were called commercial ‘correspondence colleges’, where instructional materials would be distributed through the postal service between students and teachers [3]. Today, DOL programs have become more sophisticated and accessible due to the proliferation of the web and digital technology. As Elite institutions continue the competition among them, none opts solely to one model of offering courses [3]. They either blend or concurrently offer totally separate courses, traditional and online and distance learning, both legitimized by the superintended organs, students and the market at large [3].

3. DOL in Europe

Online and Distance Learning is also not a new phenomenon in Europe [7]. Holmberg [7], observes that organized ODL in the form of correspondence instruction, was in large scale promoted by private universities and can (...) be dated back to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, although letter writing for the purpose of teaching is probably as old as the art of writing itself. Furthermore, Moore [10], observed that the history of DOL in Europe, was somehow marked with the establishment of the British Open University in United Kingdom in 1969, which would be considered the pivotal institute for distance and online learning courses across the Europe and the world, being supported by the International Centre for Distance Learning. Today, the scenario is not far from the American context.

4. DOL in Africa

Africa in this scenario of distance and online learning is not left behind, if we consider that the University of South Africa, with which Angola could have learned, today known as one of the world's open distance learning mega colleges, became a champion and innovator of distance learning when it reshaped its mission and focus in 1946 [8, 9]. After many years, in 2004, All-Africa Ministries met in a conference to discuss among various issues the Open Learning and Distance Education [5, 9]. While few countries attempted to give a follow up on the issue, including, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Kenya, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe [5], others including Angola relegated it opting to traditional courses [8].

5. DOL in Angola

Despite many *illegal* initiatives of implementing DOL and the *marginalized* debate, among few specialists, only early 2020 that the Angolan ministry of education, the ministry of higher education and ultimately the national chamber, started discussing the issue more seriously. This debate took a national dimension and was substantiated firstly, by the massive desertion of students chiefly during the mandatory schooling under the demand of cultural factors, concurred with the need for more production of those (teachers) who serve the public services and at the same time want to further their studies without abdicating from their work places. Secondly and perhaps more technical reason for the debate, was that most of the active workforce are considered millennial—those that are keen to technology, and believed to concoct their work plus their studies. Today, not only the debate becomes hotter due to the pandemic of coronavirus, but it is accompanied by a less thought implementation, harming almost all stakeholders, I mean, students, teachers, staff, administrators, parents, and ministry, mainly at private sector.

Students—perhaps the most penalized, not all students have access to the Internet, although they are considered millennial. Even those who can afford Internet, will sometime, purposefully, stagnate and pretend they have difficulties in accessing the platforms and or confused with the orientations of the ministry. All this simply because they did not have enough training and motivation to manage the various platforms in use, added that help is never sufficient for them. At the end of the day, students appear frustrated by not having their needs fully satisfied and on the other hand being charged the respective fines. Among the several questions that arise by now, the following are the most referred: is it worthy paying for a service that was not fulfilled? How are we going to be accessed? How serious is this process? why are not students being trained to use the platforms?

Teachers—they are being called to fulfill a task without having enough training and much support, just like students. On the one way, they are limited to receive top-down orientations from administrators and on the other hand they are

forced to promote creative lessons for students. Teachers themselves also ask: who is paying the Internet? What if we do not have proper technology? Who is transferring the syllabus and contents online? How is it—the all process being supervised? Will we be paid? What about the criteria to be used for assessment?

Staff— most of the times they pass on information to teachers that they themselves do not master. Put it otherwise, the all process is also new to them. And because of the confinement they are also working from their homes, sometimes they are unable to promptly respond to students and teachers, leaving most of the question to them asked, hanging in the air. Their frustration include contacting most, if not all students and teachers in a record time,

Administrators—principals, deans and directors seem also confused because many may not know the difference between a site, a link and a platform. While some may be spending big amount of money trying to afford the best for their units, others care very little with the manner through which students are getting and answering the material. The platforms used to interact with students vary from Telephone, Facebook, Whatsap, Zoom, to Google Classroom, to mention but a few. No institution is using those highly robust platforms: Blackboard or Moodle, as these are costly. Although they assume that with these services students should pay their fees at the end of the month, they evidence a great deal of uncertainty. Firstly Administrators hardly answer who and how are these services going to be supervised. They advocate that they watch every movement or that coordinators are monitoring teachers' activities, but suddenly they request the numbers of hours and assiduity of students from teachers. Any attentive teacher would read between-line and wonder how it is possible; Secondly, they seem not to be aware of the path all movement is going. Now that teachers are doing things their way, due to lack of training, most of the institutions appear with some in-service training, which is at first not bad at all. However, after the training, which involves many components, they advocate that only video classes will be remunerated, disregarding all additional tasks involved; Thirdly, because many institutions are doing the DOL in the vacuum, it is hard even for administrators to preview the future of DOL.

Parents— with the number of dismissals increasing as days go by, parents are being confronted not only with the basic necessities of their families, but with the fees to be paid at their children's colleges. In the midst of this dilemma, parents refuse paying the fees, vindicating that their children are not being treated they way they should.

The Ministry—repeating the same mistake committed in the beginning of 2020, when universities attempted to increase the fees, the Ministry remains passive, throwing it to the open debate between universities, students and parents, for then reactively demand for solutions. This is true as few days ago the Ministry oriented that ALL assessment done via ODL is not worthy for summative ends. This positions confuses even more what is taking place. First of all, students are

becoming more irregular attending classes and teachers are demotivated as almost they have done is reduced to formative assessment, secondly, teachers wonder how effectively this (formative) assessment is going to be operationalized. Not less important, is the ministry implying that formative assessment is diminished before summative assessment or are they recognizing that way DOL is being handled is far from baring fruits? What is certain is that more rooms for discussions are being open as the uncertainty continues.

6. Towards a Robust ODL

It is my position that an ODL should not be implemented the way it is being. It should however, follow the phases of any project. Following [6], a project phase is a collection of project activities, usually resulting in the creation of a major deliverable. And it seems quite impossible to complete all these activities at once, or in a relatively short period of time without experience the chaos. Greer [6], suggests five phases that can yield to the major deliverable: determine the need and feasibility; create project plan; create product specifications; create prototype product and test and implement.

Phase I: Determine Need and Feasibility—in this phase project managers and application specialists across the country should get together not only to discuss, but also to make sure there is a need in the market. In this phase, a clear distinction between marketing and market research will have to be made [4]. For Bates & Poole [4], one should not simply publicize or sell a non-finished product—marketing, however, market research involves finding out whether there is a market or demand for a course. Having this type of information will allow promoters to be proactive and aware of what [2] at least calls as two market factors. The first factor is related with *commoditization*—lack of significant differentiation in the perception of customers. More market research will give promoters a better perspective on where they stand with future students. Research in this phase will also give the opportunity to evaluate the needs of the customers (student and faculty) while setting realistic targets for the curriculum, a chance to examine the possible implementation issues, and evaluate the business opportunities.

The *second* factor refers to the tendency of the clientele. Adkins [2], states, “The online population in the higher education segment is growing at a rapid rate” (p. 8), and there is a need to address this student explosion. But before that it seems crucial to make sure that the program is what the student population is seeking. Without research all this is not possible. In addition, research will give us the opportunity to evaluate the needs of the customer (student and faculty), setting realistic targets for the curriculum, a chance to examine the possible implementation issues, and evaluate our business opportunities with this program.

If brought to our context, specialists are not taken into account, rather, they are mere spectators watching a number of surprises. However, this pandemic should teach us that when

an issue is national, then taskforces including all specialists from this mother land regardless of any creed or political affiliation to sit and debate, research until an eclectic solution is reached. These debates and researches should include, but not limited:

- 1) Goal definition
- 2) Concept definition
- 3) Needs analysis
- 4) Market analysis
- 5) Strategy definition
- 6) Preliminary benefit/cost analysis
- 7) Preparation of project charter
- 8) Review and approval of project charter

This phase should culminate with a clear and formal approval of the project concept or a *go/no go* decision.

Phase II: Create Project Plan— the planning of a project is always crucial because projects are of a finite duration and sometimes use unique work processes. The plan facilitates any outsiders to criticize it and shape it with the purpose of development. Furthermore, plans help administrators to be accountable to the stakeholders. Here we can grasp another lesson from the pandemic. During these days we constantly see the commission of ministries being accountable to the society, reporting the development of their work. This exercise may appear boring and abnormal for some, but this is a mere exercise of democratic institutions and should be disseminated to all sectors of society. During this phase, activities should include:

Create a formal planning document to be used for:

- 1) Linking project activities to express needs and feasibility studies (i.e., tying the plan to the outputs of phase I: Determine Need and Feasibility;
- 2) Providing a written record assumptions regarding deliverables, work processes, resources required and others;
- 3) Documenting detailed analysis of project requirements by creating network diagrams, schedule, budget and other planning artifacts;
- 4) Facilitate communication among stakeholders;
- 5) Providing a written record of agreed-upon scope, costs and schedule;
- 6) Take note of critiques from stakeholders.
- 7) Getting the project plan approved by the Ministry and others stakeholders before project work begins.

Phase III- Create Deliverables Specifications— this is the phase where application specialists clearly describe in substantial detail the deliverables to be created or adhered, example: LMS; LCMS or both? Drawing the difference between LMS and CMS. [1] in the podcast, observes that the former can be seen as an umbrella program that allows you to track learning across many, many courses, many, many students or learners or employees. As for the latter serves for designing instructional websites that aren't really part of that large a training endeavor or maybe they're not critical training in that sense as far as the company's concerned or the organization's

concerned. [1] stresses that the blend of these two,—LMS and CMS is what can be LCMSs— Learning Content Management Systems, where you not only can design the course like a course management system, but it automatically reports and is connected to all the other training that goes on in that organization.

It is not very easy to find the costs of this product. However, it may vary from client to client. Among others, the vendors include: Pearson eCollege <http://www.ecollege.com/>; Plato Learning (Plato Learning, Inc.) <http://www.plato.com/>; Bluedrop CoursePark <http://www.bluedrop.com/> and <http://www.coursepark.com/>; Strategic Management Group Inc. <http://www.smginc.com/>; and Thirdforce <http://www.thirdforce.com/>.

Phase IV- Create Deliverables —once deliverables specifications are created and approved, it is now time for the most time-consuming and resource-intense phase, this of creating deliverables. In a more in-depth analysis specialists will seek answers to the following questions:

Who will conduct interviews to specialists for the production of a video or podcast? Is the platform going to be synchronous, asynchronous or mixed? Who and how to upload syllabus in electronic versions? Who and how transcripts are going to be produced and uploaded? Which online libraries are going to be part of the platform and how? Who is going to design the assessment criteria and how are the assessment criteria going to be uploaded? What and how document verification is going to be uploaded? How webinars will be programmed? Whose voice is going to be used for tutorials and how are they going to be uploaded? What additional material can be provided to students, i.e., cassettes, videos printed material?

Only after obtaining answers from these and perhaps other questions that we will be able to proceed with informed decisions regarding DOL. Until then is it still time to reverse the course of the things.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the adoption of distance and online learning (DOL) in Angola's higher education sector, mirroring global trends. However, the transition has been fraught with challenges, including infrastructural limitations, inadequate training, and unclear policies. Drawing lessons from historical experiences in America, Europe, and Africa, it is evident that a strategic and phased approach is essential for successful DOL implementation. Stakeholder involvement, thorough market research, and meticulous planning are paramount to address the complexities of this transition. By overcoming these obstacles and prioritizing the needs of students, teachers, administrators, and parents, Angola can harness the potential of DOL to create a more inclusive and resilient higher education system. Moving forward, sustained efforts and collaboration among all stakeholders will be crucial to navigate the evolving

landscape of online learning and ensure equitable access to quality education for all.

Abbreviations

DOL	Distance and Online Learning
LCMSs	Learning Content Management Systems
LMS	Learning Management System
CMS	Content Management System
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019

Author Contributions

Tomás de Aquino Caluyua Yambi is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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