Managing Schools in Post-COVID Era: Implications for Institutional Managers in Nigerian Schools

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Abstract

This paper focused on the role expected of institutional managers in driving the new normal, forced on institutions by the occurrence of COVID-19 that disrupted educational activities and institutional programmes. This resulted in the dual mode of teaching, toward achieving the set goals of education. The paper observed some challenges of the new approach to teaching, to include teachers' poor preparation, inadequate planning, lack of facilities, and financial constraints among others. It suggested exposure of teachers to training, institutional collaboration with online learning technology and service providers, as well as constituting technical committee of experts to ensure flexibility of lessons, in driving the new normal towards the achievement of educational objectives.

Introduction

The outbreak of Corona virus disease of 2019, simply tagged COVID-19 was caused by SARS-COD 2 virus. It was first reported in China with the first case confirmed in Wuhan. Ibitoye (2020) reported that by the middle of April 2020 an estimated one-third of the world population were locked down in their homes. According to John Hopkins University Centre for System Science and Engineering (2020) more than 4.3 million cases of infection was reported in over 212 countries, and more than 292,000 deaths had been recorded as at May, 2020 (Dong et al., 2020). By May 2021, the number of infection world wide was put at over 161 million; while deaths recorded was more than 3.4 million people (CGTV, accessed on 19th May, 2021).

In the wake of the pandemic, economic and other activities were shut down in most parts of the world and governments of countries asked their people to stay in-doors to avoid contacting the disease and to curtail its spread. The Federal Government of Nigeria, in the wake of the pandemic and in collaboration with various State Governments, closed down public institutions - schools, worship centers, sporting centers, among others to curtail people's movements and reduce spread of the deadly disease. This had adverse effects on people's lives and on the economy; children were not spared as they had to stay at home for months, with attendant negative effects on their studies.

The outbreak of the pandemic resulted in the disruption of educational activities, destabilizing institutional programmes. It also resulted in job losses even in the education sector, collapse of businesses, avoidable loss of lives, widespread hunger which aided molestation, especially of the female gender, as well as increased domestic violence in homes and society at large. UNESCO (2020) data revealed that as at May 2020 almost 1.2 billion students and youth around the world were affected by the closure

of schools due to the outbreak of COVID-19.

The effect of the pandemic on institutions were enormous, as precious time were lost, academic and institutional calendar disrupted and had to be adjusted long after (UNESCO, 2020). Some institutional staff were laid off, time for students graduation delayed further, and new entrants into institutions were delayed while others lost admission to institutions. During the lockdown, parents lamented the inability of their wards to focus on studying at home. In institutions where some measures of virtual learning took place, some children missed out due to the financial constraints of parents and lack of appropriate gadgets. Also, many institutions could not take advantage of the online teaching and learning, owing to lack of required facilities and staff inability to use the virtual platform. This is unlike happening in other climes where studies affirmed that with the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and proper approaches, learning were not impaired or diminished by the interruption of face-to-face classes (Furio et al., 2015). Further still, the analysis of a commissioned study by the United States Department of Education which compared virtual learning with face-to-face learning, reported that the mean effect was 24% higher for virtual learning (Means et al., 2012).

Research studies had been conducted on: The effects of the pandemic and the new normal; Adverse consequences of school closures; COVID-19 in real time; Education after COVID-19 crisis-based on ICT tools; Analyzing the impact of COVID-19 on education professionals; Towards a paradigm shift: ICT and neuroeducation as a binomial of action; The new normal: how life has changed due to COVID-19 (Dong et al., 2020; UNESCO, 2020; Naresh, 2020; Espino-Diaz et al.,2020). The effects of the pandemic is evident in the sudden change in education delivery, with an upsurge in online learning with the adoption of educational technology. This paper differs from the earlier ones as it focuses on the role the institutional managers are expected to play, to drive the new normal towards achieving the set goals in educational institutions.

The New Normal

The new normal refers to the enforced shifts in the ways people relate and work with others, requiring that individuals take safety precautions with the use of nose-masks, distancing oneself and higher standards of personal hygiene. News item on daily basis reveals that COVID-19 is still ravaging the world. The World Health Organization (WHO, 2020) stated that COVID-19 pandemic has not ended, stating that everyone is expected to continue practicing protective measures of covering coughs and sneezing into flexed elbows, washing the hands with soap and water regularly or using alcohol-based rub, as well as cleaning hands before and after touching one's face. It further observed that risks are higher in places where the three factors of; crowded places, close contact and confined/enclosed spaces overlap. All these are evident in institutions of learning, especially tertiary institutions. This therefore makes this study of great importance to institutional leaderships, teachers, parents and other stakeholders in the education sector.

The new normal had forced institutions to resort to online teaching and learning, using varying platforms (whatsApp, telegram, zoom, video conferencing and many more) without adequate preparations and proper planning. This made it difficult for teachers, students and the institutions to maximize its benefits for effective delivery of education. This agrees with the opinion of UNESCO (2020) which opined that the

as build their confidence over time. According to Pope (2020) autonomy on time to turn-in assignments and control over schedules, help students' daily routine. He further observed that this will help provide review opportunities for students slowly working towards mastery of course contents. Institutional managers therefore have a duty to work with teachers/instructors on modalities to gradually "key" students into online teaching platform to ensure they maximally benefit from it.

In the new normal where face-to-face learning is combined with online teaching and learning, an important and required tool is the internet service provision, alongside provision of gadgets (computer systems and its accessories, functional Wi-Fi, etc). This becomes necessary because students can only access information when they have gadgets in the form of mobile phones and computer systems, coupled with internet service, to partake in online teaching. Owing to the poverty level of many Nigerians, purchase of data is difficult, making it difficult to access lecture materials and partake in online lessons. This problem must be attended to for enhanced learning as Means, Toyama et al. (2012) reported a higher mean effect of virtual learning when compared with face-to-face learning.

Challenges in the New Normal

The introduction of the dual mode of teaching to overcome any further disruptions in academic activities in the near future and to promote better education delivery, come with varying challenges for all stakeholders including institutional mangers. Some of these include;

i) Financial constraints on the part of parents for the purchase of required gadgets and data for their wards to maximize opportunities available to them to learn; as well as the problem of poor funding for institutions to purchase facilities for the proper delivery of lessons by lecturers in the institutions, and for the provision of uninterrupted and regular internet services.

ii) Teachers' poor preparation and inadequate skills to exploit the use of technology for improved teaching and learning in institutions, for which facilitation and support is required by lecturers through which training and counseling are provided to facilitate adjustment and reduce stress.

iii) Inadequate preparation and planning for online teaching by the institutions, is a major challenge as the new mode of teaching requires adequate planning for proper execution and delivery of effective and functional education.

iv) The promotion of students-centered learning which requires the participation of students themselves through interaction with lecturers, for proper acquisition of knowledge through engagement. Observing that teaching through the use of internet widens the relationship gap between lecturers and students, this becomes a challenge that must be resolved.

v) The need for flexibility in arranging the lecture schedules, activities to be performed, time lines for submission, and the volume of information to be delivered in any particular session. This is important owing to the fact that some students will just be learning via the online means for the first time, and will require time to adjust to its requirements, including responding to exercises to be performed and submitted online.

Implications for Institutional Managers

The essence of educational provision is to equip beneficiaries with knowledge and skills to fit into and contribute to societal development. This requires exposing learners to contents in varying fields, and demanding from them a demonstration of mastery of content and to exhibit appropriate skills. The duty of institutional managers is to ensure proper delivery of contents by teachers through the provision of conducive atmosphere for teaching and learning. To this end and for effective teaching and learning in the Post-COVID era, institutional managers are required to do the following:

1. **Proper planning of course contents**; Institutional managers must understand what students require to be taught and the appropriate means to ensuring proper delivery, to promote acquisition of knowledge by students. This requires them to ensure proper and adequate planning of contents with the teachers, ICT experts, curriculum planners and even institutional counselors on the best modalities at ensuring effective delivery of subject contents. They have a duty to brainstorm with others within the system on the best approach at ensuring that students maximally learn, map out convenient platforms to be used, length of time for content delivery and students response time on tasks set out in their activity portion.
2. **Teacher Training**; Observing that many institutions were not adequately prepared for the online teaching, as many teachers were ill-equipped to use online facilities on virtual platforms and only had limited exposure to teach virtually. Teachers, therefore, need to be trained on and exposed to the varying platform usage that will meet institutional needs at engaging the students maximally.
3. **Monitoring Teaching and Learning**; There is need for institutional managers to put in place appropriate mechanisms for monitoring teaching and learning in schools. This will afford them the opportunity to detect problem areas, difficulties being encountered and to adequately proffer solutions in good time. When done, it will aid effectiveness in the use of virtual platforms for teaching and learning. There is need for feedback on students progress, challenges they face, teacher related challenges, etc for prompt action at addressing it and making teaching and learning more meaningful and effective.
4. **Provision of Appropriate Facilities**; Many institutions were not prepared for online delivery of lessons before the lockdown of schools; while many lacked appropriate facilities for the task. This was a great challenge to institutional managers who had to quickly commence some measure of virtual teaching in institutions, when the lockdown became prolonged, to ensure that some measure of activities were going on. In the light of this, institutional managers need to invest in new technology and ensure the provision of appropriate facilities, to enable teaching and learning beyond the face-to-face contact in classrooms. In addition to the provision of facilities, so that indigent students who cannot afford the purchase of computers or mobile phones that are internet compliant are taken care of, institutions must increase their internet bandwidth for effective online learning operations. This is important as poor internet connectivity and slow service provisions will frustrate users and make the new teaching/learning approach difficult to operate.
5. **Provision of Functional Security**; Institutional managers need to put in place functional security units to ensure the safety of gadgets and equipment provided for use in their institutions. The facilities should be protected from being vandalized by its users including students, while ensuring proper maintenance of the facilities/equipment for

pandemic forced immediate transfer of learning to online modalities, without authentic planning and modification of curriculum design to adapt it to the online mode.

Espino-Diaz, et al (2020), opined that nations are faced with a change in education paradigm in which online teaching through ICT has become a necessity, to continue with students learning process. According to the researchers, this has manifested the need to train teachers in the use of the different technological tools, to adapt to different elements of curriculum to the new context. Further in their study, they wondered about the preparation of schools in facing the required changes towards virtual teaching. The focus of the paper therefore is to consider challenges posed by the introduction of the new mode of teaching, for institutional managers, and recommend ways to ensure proper education delivery. According to Miralles-Martinez et al.(2014), change to online modality presents three gaps, which are: access gap to connection and technology devices; use gap on time of use and quality; and gap in teacher skills, resource availability and adaptation of online platforms to support teaching. These gaps are widely manifest in Nigeria. To ensure effective learning in schools, it must be properly addressed otherwise activities will just be mere window dressing that will not assist in knowledge dissemination.

In the new normal, students are required to learn in diverse ways, with face-to-face teaching combined with online teaching/learning.Yet many students from poor homes cannot afford to own a mobile device or computer, while some others have difficulties with the purchase of data for online learning. Except these group of students are provided with the necessary tools for learning, equalizing access to education will be a mirage, even though stated in the National Policy on Education (FGN, 2014) and this will negatively affect the much desired national development.

The new normal in educational institutions is expected to promote teacher/students connection, as posting lecture materials alone can engender a dis-connect of students with teachers, at a time we seek to promote effective learning through learner-centred teaching and learning. Some contents of lectures may seem abstract for some students for which they require explanations and real life examples to aid mastery. When this is missing, learning is hampered. Sometimes the teacher's gesticulations and posture in explaining concepts aid better understanding of facts by students. According to Pope (2020), there is need to prioritize human connections and relationship between teachers and students, to determine how students are coping with their studies. The care and concerns shown to the students will lead to more engagement with learning.

There has also been increase in teachers' stress levels, with respect to the new requirements on their job and their lack of adequate knowledge in the use of online teaching facilities. This is not good for the system. Among the gaps identified by Miralles-Martinez et al. (2014) is that of teacher skills, resource availability and adaptation of online platforms to support teaching. Except this is properly addressed, the switch to online teaching and learning may not yield the desired results, it therefore requires institutional managers to act on the matter.

If the best outcome is to be obtained from the new normal, there is a need to build flexibility into institutional activities as it relates to; time-tabling, scheduling of lectures, timing of students submission of assignments, write-ups and responses to class activities. This will aid better adjustment of students who are not used to the mode of learning before now, and will help them master the operations of online learning as well

long periods of usage. This will save institutions the cost of replacement and major repairs that may have huge financial implications, which may sometimes be difficult to provide.

6. **Availability of Internet Service**; In this part of the world, service provision can constitute a big problem with regards to availability of data and internet service. Sometimes, the means to obtain data both for staff and students may constitute a problem, with regards to the financial burden; while unreliable internet access, when available, is an issue. This requires institutional managers to collaborate with service providers through appropriate government agencies to lower tariffs on data and shore up services. The adequacy of internet services will promote effective delivery of online instructions.

7. **Flexibility of Instructional Programmes**; Institutional programmes need to be made flexible with respect to timing of activities (Institutional calendar); course time-tabling; students response time with respect to submission of due papers, assignments and activities at the end of learning units. This becomes necessary with regards to connectivity issues, internet fluctuations and volume of task required of students, beyond the face-to-face interactions.

8. **Improving Teacher/Students Connectivity**; Teacher/students connectivity needs be promoted by institutional managers as online learning contributes to the interaction gap between them. Institutions will require to map out plans to ensure teachers relate with their students, beyond the class work, in order to embrace occasional close contact; while observing COVID-19 rule of social distancing. It is highly essential for teachers to be vigilant and proactive with the detection of students absenteeism during online teaching. If this trend is allowed to permeate the system of online teaching, the whole exercise will appear to be "white-elephant". It would also have debilitating effects on the students. The disciplinary measures for the errant students should be spelt out and promptly enforced. This will make students sit up, give them a sense of belonging, avail them opportunities to air their frustrations and challenges being faced. When these are properly attended to, online teaching and learning will be improved upon.

9. **Reduction in Teachers' Stress levels**; Institutional managers have a duty to protect the health of staff for maximum output. In this wise they need to improve health facilities on campuses, as the change from face-to-face classroom teaching to online teaching has been identified to increase teachers' stress levels (Espino-Diaz et al., 2020). Institutional managers therefore need to ensure staff are exposed to regular health check-ups, listening to health talks by professionals and ensure the provision of counselling sessions for those requiring it. This will go a long way to mitigate health challenges of lecturers and instructors, keeping them fit and healthy to effectively carry out their duties.

10. **Income Generation**; Managers have additional duty to device other ways of generating more income, realizing that more funding is required to ensure effective delivery of teaching and learning, via the online mode. Money will also be required to provide facilities, equipment, as well as for maintenance and safe keeping of the facilities. There will be need to improve the institutional bandwidth for faster internet connections for the use of teachers and students.

11. **Finally:** Institutional managers must monitor adherence to safety precautions by members of the institutional community at ensuring compliance with laid down instructions at overcoming the spread of the disease. This according to health experts

involves self protection through constant use of face-masks, social distancing and regular washing of hands with soap or rubbing with alcohol-based rubs. In addition, institutional managers must enforce the avoidance of crowded gatherings, limiting time in enclosed places, regular disinfection of surfaces and encouraging proper ventilation in all buildings. This will require pasting notices in strategic places, producing bulletins and newsletters to educate the institutional community; and demanding that institutional staff enforce the compliance whenever and wherever staff and students gather in large number.

Suggestions for Improvement

The following suggestions are made to help institutional managers to properly address the issues earlier raised:

1. Managers must provide teachers and instructors the opportunities to critically consider curriculum contents and ensuring structural changes in lesson contents, to focus on essential parts. This will not only reduce the volume of content but will sharpen focus on most important facts.
2. Exposure of teachers to online teaching can be done in partnership with organizations promoting virtual and online learning instructional modes, supported by service providers who should be approached to assist, as a form of their corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities.
3. Institutional managers must have a robust plan to monitor online activities to detect problems and difficulties with the actors in the system, and cooperatively address the issues, to overcome the challenges.
4. They need to collaborate with organizations in the online learning technology to work out a financial plan to defray cost of purchased gadgets over a period of time. They also need to collaborate with the Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC), Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO's), and philanthropists for financial assistance or for the provision of required facilities. They can also contact their bankers for support in the provision of the facilities for the new mode of teaching.
5. Institutional managers must task the security unit of the institutions on proper safe keeping of equipment and ensure vigilance by institutional community members.
6. To ensure reliable and constant internet access, institutional managers can approach their bankers, service providers, NGO's and other individuals for assistance toward making data available at more affordable rates for staff and students.
7. Institutional managers need to constitute appropriate technical committees of experts in ICT and the related fields, to ensure flexibility of lesson contents, in order to ease the pressure of stress off staff and students.
8. They need to encourage small group discussions, where students have face-to-face interaction with their teachers, while adhering to COVID-19 precautions. They must ensure that limited time is used in enclosed places, while proper ventilation must be enforced.
9. Institutional health facilities must be improved upon, made adequate, and staff must be exposed to regular health talks and check-ups by professionals; while adequate drugs be made available in the health centers.
10. Managers must challenge institutional members on innovative ways of income

generation to bring out the ingenuity of staff and shore up institutions generated revenue (IGR). The managers must also be more prudent in their expenses and block leakages in the system.

The fight against COVID-19 is not yet over as new strands of the virus are being detected and there is the need to ensure continuous and improved teaching and learning in spite of this, in the institutions.

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