



Analysing the Digital Divide in Zimbabwe: Exploring the Obstacles and Consequences for Access to Quality Education in Open and Distance e-Learning at Zimbabwe Open University

¹Kurebwa Mercy ²Moyo Annah ¹Lumbe Abigail

¹Zimbabwe Open University

²Midlands State University

Email: kurebwam@zou.ac.zw

Abstract: This study examined the digital divide in Zimbabwe and its impact on accessing quality education through open and distance e-learning (ODEL). Utilising qualitative research methods and a structural inequality theoretical framework, it sought to develop a comprehensive understanding of the challenges Zimbabwean students face in accessing education via digital platforms. Semi-structured interviews with students and lecturers experienced in virtual learning provided insights into their personal experiences, perceptions, and the ramifications of the digital divide. Furthermore, focus group discussions allowed interactive conversations among students, unveiling common concerns and group dynamics related to accessing education in a digital environment. The qualitative data generated were analysed using thematic analysis, which facilitated the identification of key themes, patterns, and barriers that emerged. This analysis deepened the understanding of the various aspects of the digital divide and its implications for equitable access to quality education. The study contributes to the existing knowledge on the digital divide in Zimbabwe and offers practical implications for policymakers, educators, and stakeholders by highlighting the challenges students face in accessing quality education through digital platforms. Moreover, the findings present recommendations for bridging the digital divide to create an inclusive learning environment that ensures equitable access to quality education in Zimbabwean ODeL. Overall, the research aims to provide valuable insights to foster a more equitable educational landscape in an increasingly digital world.

Keywords: Quality Education, Open and Distance e-learning, Students, Open University, Zimbabwe

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1. Introduction

Rapid advancement of information and communication technologies (ICTs) has transformed the global landscape, providing unprecedented opportunities for education and economic development. Technology has become integral to nearly every aspect of our lives. The COVID-19 pandemic that struck the world in 2019 intensified the necessity of incorporating technology into various processes, with education being no exception. Sharma, 2023, concurs saying, the pandemic changed the face of education irrevocably forcing schools to shut

their doors resulting in an overnight shift towards remote learning. As a result, many were forced to abruptly migrate to online learning. While some regions and communities have embraced digital advancements, others continue to lag because of challenges being experienced in the adoption of technology. According to a UNESCO 2021 report, the number of households with Internet access is pegged at 16% in the developing countries versus 66% in developed countries. The Telecommunication Union (ITU) also purports that, only 26% of Africans had access to the internet in 2021 compared to a global average of 52%. These statistics point to an existing challenge in terms of access to