Transition to Virtual Graduation: Experiences of 2021 University Graduates in Zimbabwe

by Namatirai Chikusvura
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Namatirai Chikusvura¹ | Sesilani Nkomo² | Lwazi Sibanda³

¹Department of Science, Mathematics and Technology Education, National University of Science and Technology, Bulawayo, Zimbabwe

²nchikusvura@um.tz.com
³sesilani.nkomo@nust.ac.zw

Corresponding E-mail:
lwazi.sibanda@nust.ac.zw

ABSTRACT
The research sought to investigate graduates' experiences with the shift to virtual graduation. The interpretive paradigm used in this study aided the current researchers in maintaining the integrity of the phenomenon being investigated, which comprehends the experiences of graduates on various platforms used at graduation. Qualitative method was utilized. The research included thirty randomly chosen graduates from three different institutions. Data was gathered using a semi-structured questionnaire. According to the report, institutions focused more on physical ceremony arrangements, despite the fact that the majority of students participated digitally. The study also found that other graduates enjoyed the graduation because they attended physical virtual graduation events planned by student representatives and held at various locations. Graduates, on the other hand, were financially burdened since they had to invest additional graduation expenditures in order to attend these physical virtual graduation festivities. The study concluded that the effectiveness of various virtual graduation formats as measured by participant satisfaction, ease of access, ability to optimize social presence, and engagement was not achieved. In this aspect, the survey indicated that colleges prioritized actual graduation ceremonies over virtual ceremonies. The research suggests that colleges collaborate with various event planners to supply and host their grads, allowing all graduates to experience a feeling of connection and success.

KEYWORDS
transition, virtual graduation, experiences, graduates

INTRODUCTION
National catastrophes are typically unanticipated; they cause many changes in the day-to-day operations of society, including the education sector, which cannot be discussed without discussing education. The Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) epidemic ruined what was
formerly the most memorable day in the lives of many university graduates. Graduation ceremonies bring in a new chapter in the life of a graduate after lengthy years of education. Students looked forward to graduation ceremonies because it gave them the opportunity to go across the dais with pride after completing their academic journey. Parents and well-wishers are not left out of the festivities that precede such rituals, as they may all join alongside family members and friends.

Most graduation ceremonies are now virtual, as opposed to before the COVID-19 epidemic. Although virtual graduation is a new trend in Zimbabwe's education industry, students have diverse perspectives on these virtual celebrations. Different graduates' perspectives are also impacted by their experiences. Technology is an area that is easily taken for granted when it is woven into everyday life, but for many, it is not widely utilized owing to a lack of financial resources to acquire access (Gilbert, 2015).

According to Rono and Kung'u (2020), universities were ordered to cancel or stop graduation ceremonies, resulting in the shift to online graduations. Many higher education institutions around the world, particularly in Africa, were unprepared to make this transition, which has instead posed significant challenges, such as digital fluency of their faculty and students, having appropriate devices, internet connectivity, and, in many cases, power connectivity (Rono & Kung'u, 2020). (Association of African Universities, 2020).

Unlike in Africa, students at Florida International University in the United States of America (USA) utilize social media for nearly everything. Students today live in a digital world (Thirunarayanan, 2017). According to Thirunarayanan (2017), one benefit of a digital reunion is that former overseas students may meet and party with their peers at least once a year. All they need is internet connectivity and a browser with the necessary plug-ins.

It seems that the world is entering a new period of development in academia and higher education that will produce a generation of institutions known as 'online and digital universities' (Strielkowski, 2020). According to Strielkowski (2020), the coronavirus pandemic of 2019 served as a catalyst to assist everyone better comprehend that all aspects of higher education, such as online dissertation defenses, online entrance and final tests, are as excellent as those done 'in real life.' According to Strielkowski (2020), if exams and dissertation defenses can be completed online, so can graduations. Virtual graduation has proven to be a holy grail of sorts for many institutions, critically important to student experience but elusive in form and difficult to achieve (Waldner, McDaniel & Esteves, 2019). Many higher education institutions now provide online events to students; some of these events are also broadcast live to empower remote and distant learning students (Bao, 2020). However, according to Bao (2020), being completely online requires extensive planning and investment from all industries.

The education sector, particularly higher education, is not immune to the effects of COVID-19, which has resulted in a slew of modifications and regulations implemented by administrators of such institutions (Adelowotan, 2021). Efforts have been put in place to control the transmission of the virus by avoiding huge gatherings therefore the switch to virtual graduation. In Zimbabwe, most scholars have focused on e-learning. Mbengo (2014) discovered that, while e-learning is still in its infancy in Zimbabwe, the government has made significant efforts to ensure the implementation of information and communication technology in higher education.
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