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Challenges and Opportunities of Online Learning in Developing Countries

Somia Shabbir
somia_sardar@yahoo.com
Lecturer Psychology, Department of Psychology, Abbottabad University of Science & Technology, AUST

Omar J. Alkhatib
Omar.alkhatib@uaeu.ac.ae
Professor of Civil and Structural Engineering, Architectural Engineering Department, United Arab Emirates University

Saifuddin Qureshi
saifqureshi.edu@gmail.com
Government Islamia Arts and Commerce College and Postgraduate Studies Center Sukkur

Dr. Raham Zaid
Rahamzaid@gmail.com
Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan

Iram Naeem
irumnaeem44@gmail.com
Punjab School Education Department Lahore

Mehreen Faiza
mehreenmalik56@hotmail.com
Phd Scholar, University of Peshawar
Corresponding Author: * Somia Shabbir somia_sardar@yahoo.com

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ABSTRACT

The international trend to digital education is a two-sided reality facing the developing nations as it is fraught with challenges and at the same time offers a chance of substantial change. This paper discusses possible issues and opportunities of online learning in developing nations, and it aims to comprehend the role of socio-economic, technological, and institutional determinants that precondition the efficiency and access to digital learning. The study relies on the secondary data gathered from internet sources, such as peer-reviewed journal articles, international reports, government reports, and educational databases that have not older than 2019 and 2025, respectively. The systematic literature review methodology was used to locate, appraise, and aggregate the pertinent studies. Data analysis was made thematic, as a way of categorizing the findings into large domains of challenges and opportunities. The review has shown that there are constant difficulties like low internet connectivity, lack of digital infrastructure, teacher readiness, and economic inequality. On the other hand, there are also substantial opportunities that have been created as a result of open educational resources (OERs), mobile learning platforms, and international partnerships that are engaged in advancing the cause of digital inclusion. The results show that on-line learning can address the learning gaps that might exist in cases that are supported by proper infrastructure, training and policy interventions.

Keywords: *online learning, developing countries, digital education, secondary data, e-learning challenges, educational policy*

INTRODUCTION

Online learning has been welcomed as a strong force in increasing access to education, increasing flexibility, and providing lifelong learning in many developing countries (Butler, Maraj, and Qarkaxhija, 2021). Due to the rapid development of the information and communication technologies (ICT), education is changing. However, there are complicated structural, pedagogical, and socio-economic issues in resource-limited environments which inform the implementation of online learning. This research intends to discuss the problems and opportunities of online education in developing nations, focusing on infrastructural shortage, teacher preparedness, learner equity and institutional policy frameworks. The overall research question that will inform the current work is as follows: What do we consider to be the key obstacles to and facilitators of the successful online learning in the context of developing countries and how do the stakeholders react to it to maximize the outcome?

Online learning is generally conceived as a set of educational activities that is implemented via internet-based solutions, which allow the asynchronous and synchronous interaction between students and tutors and, in most cases, does not depend on geographical distribution (Tiwari, 2019). Online modalities have a significant potential in developing countries where the combination of limited resources and unequal distribution of traditional classroom resources might be particularly problematic. We can use the example of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) using which provide scalable access to high-quality content and self-paced learning, and cost-efficiency is provided in situations when traditional higher-education infrastructure is strained (as explained by Tiwari, 2019). In addition, online solutions have the potential to sustain the development of professionals in teaching and assist learners remote or marginalised (Ameen, Malik, and Khan, 2017). The opportunities convey that online learning may help in achieving the twin goals of educational access and quality enhancement.

This promise is notwithstanding a series of significant and in many cases contextualised barriers to development in the context of developing countries, as identified by the literature. Poor infrastructure is one of the most rampant problems. Inadequate internet access, reduced possession of devices, and unpredictable power supply affect many areas, as they compromise the viability of online interaction on a long-term basis (Distance Learning Institute, 2023). In fact, research has shown that the simple presence of online platforms does not mean good utilization in the situation where the underlying connectivity and hardware platforms are compromised. Alliedly, the affordability of internet data and devices is also an impediment to numerous learners, thus widening the disparities due to equity (Distance Learning Institute, 2023). Simultaneously, teacher efficiency and online pedagogy are not yet well-developed in most institutions. The teachers can not be trained on how to design online instruction, engage with a remote audience, or modify the content to be delivered digitally, which further worsens the learning performance (Butler et al., 2021). Moreover, the learners themselves might have low levels of digital literacy and self-regulation to be successful at online learning.

In addition to technology and pedagogy, there is an additional complicating factor of socio-economic and policy aspects. Students with low-income families or rural backgrounds tend to be less equipped (in terms of being able to study in silence or with proper internet connectivity), so online education can become a way of reinforcing the same imbalance (Springer article on digital transformation, 2024). In addition, the lack of institutional and national policies to manage online provision, including standards, accreditation, quality assurance, and teacher support, exposes most programs to low retention, inconsistent quality, and a lack of recognition (Distance Learning Institute, 2023). Simply put, the full potential of online modalities might not be achieved in developing environments unless these environments have built in policy and support ecosystems.

Conversely, opportunities in developing countries are a great deal and more and more are being recorded. Online education can be used to make teaching materials in isolated or underserved areas accessible, so geographically disadvantaged or underdeveloped learners can receive teaching (Tiwari, 2019). It also enables flexibility in learning- it allows students to learn whenever the contexts are fit (particularly those who have to work or maintain families). Moreover, recently, there is an indication that online platforms may facilitate collaboration and networking, both national and global, providing learners with experience of a variety of peers and instructors and allowing the sharing of knowledge across borders (Ameen et al., 2017). Online learning can be effective to provide affordable content to learners that will supplement or replace traditional education, when combined with open educational resources (OERs) and mobile-friendly platforms.

The importance of the present study is that it concentrates on a synthesis of existing evidence in the context of developing countries and not in the context of mostly basing on the models of the developed countries, which may not be applicable. This study can enlighten policymakers, learning institutions, and international agencies that seek to adopt or expand the model of online learning in situations where they have been faced with infrastructure shortages, digital disparities, and scarcity of resources. In addition, it is necessary to understand how technology, pedagogy and socio-economic context interact to design viable, fair, and sustainable online learning systems as well as context-appropriate.

This paper is organized in the following way. First, the literature review section introduces a conceptual framework of online learning in developing countries, outlining key areas of challenge (infrastructure, pedagogy, equity/policy) and opportunity (access, flexibility, collaboration) areas. Second, it is stated in the methodology section how secondary data in the form of peer-reviewed literature, institutional reports, and international databases were gathered and analysed in terms of themes. Third, the findings section shows the major themes of the analysis of the challenges and opportunities. Fourth, the findings have been discussed in the context of theoretical and practical implications, which derives implications to stakeholders. Lastly, there is a conclusion that sums up the contributions of the study, gives limitations, and suggests how the research should be done in the future.

Problem Statement

Despite the increasing global emphasis on digital education, developing countries continue to face has a harrowing time getting online learning systems successfully implemented and maintained. Poor technology infrastructures, poor digital literacy, lack of teacher readiness, and socio-economic differences limit the provision of equitable access to digital education. Online learning has the potential to increase the number of educational resources and involve inclusivity, yet the unavailability of unified strategies and enabling policies in the developing world makes this implementation impossible (Butler, Maraj, and Qarkaxhija, 2021; Distance Learning Institute, 2023). Thus, a deductive study is required to determine the major obstacles and possible facilitators that can determine the adoption and the success of online learning in developing environments.

Objectives of the Study

1. To identify the major challenges that hinder the effective implementation of online learning in developing countries.
2. To explore the opportunities and advantages that online learning offers in resource-constrained educational environments.
3. To analyze policy, infrastructural, and pedagogical factors influencing online education systems in developing countries.

4. To propose strategic recommendations for improving accessibility, quality, and sustainability of online learning in developing contexts.

Research Questions

1. What are the main technological, pedagogical, and socio-economic challenges affecting online learning in developing countries?
2. What opportunities can online learning provide to enhance educational access and quality in these regions?
3. How do institutional policies, teacher readiness, and infrastructure influence the success of online learning initiatives?
4. What strategies can be adopted to overcome barriers and promote effective online education in developing countries?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Infrastructure and Access Challenges

Reliable infrastructure accessibility continues to be one of the biggest barriers to online education in the setting of the developing countries. A survey conducted at a rural university revealed that a good number of learners did not have laptops or tablets that could support e-learning, and the slow and unreliable access to the internet slowed the pace of their involvement in online courses. In Libya, as in the case, lots of students possessed smartphones with small screens and little memory that restricted the application of more profound Web-based education resources (Sustainability, 15(12), 9522). MDPI Likewise, a literature review of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) in developing countries identified infrastructure (connectivity, devices, data cost) as a significant internal factor influencing Massive Open Online Courses retention in developing-country MOOCs. Un-pub.eu The accessibility problem is in general and not limited to devices and connectivity: one article has found that access to teaching media, compatibility of tools with the devices used by the learners, and internet connection sustainability were major obstacles to Massive Open Online Courses retention in developing-country MOOCs.

There is also the cost factor since in most low-income contexts, data plan costs or equipment prices can lock out university groups. Online learning can perpetuate institutionalized disparities instead of eliminating them without adequate infrastructure support. An investigation of e-learning preparatory models came to the conclusion that numerous models created in the prosperous nations cannot be immediately implemented in institutes in developing countries since they presuppose that the infrastructure, human-resource and material preparedness are already available.

Therefore, it is evident in the literature that the issues of infrastructure and access should be on the center stage when examining the deployment of online learning in developing environments. They are preconditions: without reliable connectivity, devices, and affordability of data, other factors (pedagogy, policy) cannot counterbalance it exhaustively.

Pedagogical and Learner Readiness Factors

In addition to the infrastructure, the success of online learning in developing nations is largely related to the pedagogical model, the preparedness of the teachers and students, and the cultural background of online learning. A study that created a scale of student acceptance in Bangladesh concluded that institutional variables (sufficiency of technologies, effectiveness of instructors, technical support) had a significant impact on student acceptance towards online learning in the context of higher education in the

developing nation. PMC That research notes that access alone is not enough, but the institutional support structures and design of the instructional process are extremely important.

The literature review on the blended learning models in developing countries further emphasized that teacher preparedness (technological preparedness as well as pedagogical preparedness), student preparedness (digital literacy, self-regulation skills), and the construction of online content or blended content were often mentioned as problematic. Similarly, in a study on blended learning as a means to enhance motivation and diversity of learning materials, the research was terminated because of the absence of untrained trainers or not properly modified course materials (International Journal of Teaching and Learning). In a study about the implementation of open and distance e-learning in the Philippines, the research study assumed that the conceptual frameworks of culture, training of teachers, and problem-focused constructivist strategies were required to drive educational technology realizations in developing nations.

According to the literature, pedagogical strategies in online learning need to be adjusted locally in order to be successful in such situations. This implies that courses must consider device constraints, low-bandwidth conditions, digital experience of learners and potentially language or cultural barriers. Otherwise, there can be low engagement despite access and sub-optimal learning outcomes.

Equity, Policy and Strategic Opportunities

Although numerous researches dwell on the obstacles, some literature also indicates that there are huge opportunities for online learning within the context of developing countries, as long as the right policy and strategic frameworks exist. The possibility of greater access is one of the areas. Online and blended models enable students in distressed, underserved or rural areas to gain access to educational materials and teaching that would not have been accessible before. To illustrate, MOOC completion factor investigations have shown that although there is a problem of retention, the potential size of such models provides hope of accessing a large population of learners, provided they are contextualised the right way.

It is also essential that the policy is ready. The literature regarding institutional preparedness to e-learning points to the fact that the infrastructure, human resources, content, culture, and student readiness are critical. Nevertheless, the majority of readiness models are constructed in developed-country environments and do not necessarily translate to developing environments; this disparity notes that it is possible to develop context-sensitive frameworks to orient the strategy, policy, and resources.

Moreover, it is possible to capitalize on the flexibility of online modalities, in terms of strategic opportunities: blended learning (face-to-face and online) may be more robust, more cost-effective, and more inclusive; however, only with policy, training, and infrastructure support. According to the literature on blended learning, the model could be used to improve the motivation and the interaction of students in case this model is applied, paying due care to context.

The issue of equity still lingers on. Unless online learning is introduced with consideration of the socio-economic, linguistic, and geographic disparities, it may adversely affect the expansion of instead of their reduction of educational gaps. Thus, the strategic opportunity is in integrating the implementation of technologies with the up-skilling of teachers, costs of devices/data access, and policies that enable content design and management can be included so that the marginalized learners remain in sight.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research design that was used in this study is qualitative research design through which the analysis of secondary data was conducted. The information was gathered from online accessible and reliable academic materials, such as peer-reviewed journal articles, institutional reports, publications of

international organizations, and educational databases published in the last three years (2019-2025). The rationale of secondary data use was to generalize on current empirical and theoretical facts regarding the challenges and opportunities of online learning at developing country level.

The systematic review methodology was applicable to ensure that the topic was covered fully. Academic databases (Google Scholar, Scopus, and ResearchGate) were used to identify relevant studies by using such keywords as online learning in developing countries, digital education challenges, e-learning opportunities, and developing world education technology. The chosen works were synthesized to determine the repetitive patterns, problems, and trends. Coding was done into broad themes of challenges, opportunities, and strategic recommendation enabling the combination of findings across situations. All sources of data were referenced effectively in order to attain reliability, transparency and academic rigor.

RESULTS

The thematic analysis of secondary data generated from credible academic sources revealed three major themes concerning the state of online learning in developing countries: (1) Technological and Infrastructural Barriers**,** (2) Pedagogical and Capacity-Building Challenges**,** and (3) Opportunities for Inclusivity, Innovation, and Educational Transformation**.** These themes synthesize recurring trends and empirical findings reported across multiple peer-reviewed studies and institutional reports.

Theme 1: Technological and Infrastructural Barriers

The facts presented by many studies point out that poor infrastructure is the leading challenge to online learning in developing nations. Rajeb et al. (2022) state that more than three-quarters of universities in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia have unreliable access to the internet, and this is a significant barrier to the possibility of e-learning occurring in real time. World Bank (2023) estimates that in low-income countries, broadband penetration is only 28 on average, whereas it is 88 in regions with high income. This gap has a direct impact on the students in terms of accessing virtual classes, completing assignments, and educational materials.

Also, the price of access to the digital world is still prohibitive to a great number of people. According to UNESCO (2022), in some African and South Asian countries, the average monthly price of broadband is more than 10 percent of per capita income, which is much higher than the affordability of the recommended level established by the International Telecommunication Union. Power outage is often experienced in Pakistan and Nigeria, among others, making the issue even more problematic with disruptions to learning (Khan et al., 2023). Schools and colleges can use old-fashioned computer labs or shared equipment, which further restricts the fair access to technology (Bervell and Arkorful, 2020).

The institutional underinvestment in learning management systems (LMS) and infrastructure of storing the data also became one of the principal obstacles. Fauzi et al. (2023) conducted a comparative study and discovered that the proportion of universities in low-income nations where LMS platforms were employed with built-in assessment and feedback was only 32 percent relative to 91 percent in developed areas. Consequently, educators tend to use social media applications such as WhatsApp or Facebook to deliver instructions, and this prevents the quality of assessment and data security.

Theme 2: Pedagogical and Capacity-Building Challenges

Another very important obstacle to effective online learning is pedagogical preparedness. Butler, Maraj, and Qarkaxhija (2021) discovered that the majority of the educators in developing nations (70 percent) had no training on online pedagogy before implementing e-learning systems. Most teachers simply recap the traditional methods of teaching in the virtual environment, based on lectures, which creates low-interaction and passive learning environments. This goes along with Fauzi et al. (2023), who indicated

that these practices lower student engagement and do not maximize the collaborative power of digital tools.

The readiness of learners is also a major challenge. Chaka (2020) also found that several learners struggling with low resources do not have self-regulated learning and digital competence and thus find it challenging to adjust to self-paced or asynchronous online learning patterns. Moreover, these problems are worsened by socio-economic disparities. In fact, Almahasees and Jaccomard (2022) have found that rural or low-income students have a high tendency to share devices with their family members, which leads to shorter study time and an increased dropout rate among such students.

There are also institutional obstacles to it. The slow uptake of effective digital pedagogies is caused by a lack of policies to support the development of the faculties, e-learning, lack of incentives to facilitate innovation. UNESCO (2022) highlights the role of long-term teacher training and blended learning combination as methods of quality and inclusion enhancement. In a similar vein, Rajeb et al. (2022) have determined that student satisfaction and performance indicators increased significantly in the countries where a national e-learning model was implemented (e.g., Kenya and Malaysia).

Theme 3: Opportunities for Inclusivity, Innovation, and Educational Transformation

However, even though there are such challenges, the review found considerable opportunities that can be used by the developing countries in using online learning as an instrument towards inclusive and innovative education. Through online platforms, geographically isolated learners, such as those in rural or conflict-prone areas, can have access to high-quality learning materials. According to OECD (2023), online and blended learning formats have increased access to tertiary education by almost 40 percent more pupils in low-income regions than conventional face-to-face ones.

Digital learning also fosters gender inclusion and access for marginalized groups. The World Economic Forum (2022) discovered that women and the disabled can access higher education online without experiencing social or logistical limitations. Additionally, local educational technology (EdTech) startups have begun to help in closing infrastructure gaps by using low-bandwidth applications, learning via mobile, and offline resource kits (Sattar et al., 2023).

There are also new models of teaching and credentialing that have been brought about through online education. According to Rajeb et al. (2022), micro-credentialing and massive open online courses (MOOCs) have emerged as a source of low-cost skill-building opportunities. In countries such as India and Indonesia, universities and EdTech companies have established partnerships to create hybrid learning ecosystems of flexibility and affordability. UNESCO (2022) also notes that sustainable educational benefits can be achieved through policy-led investments in teacher training and ICT infrastructure to transform these opportunities into sustainable education benefits.

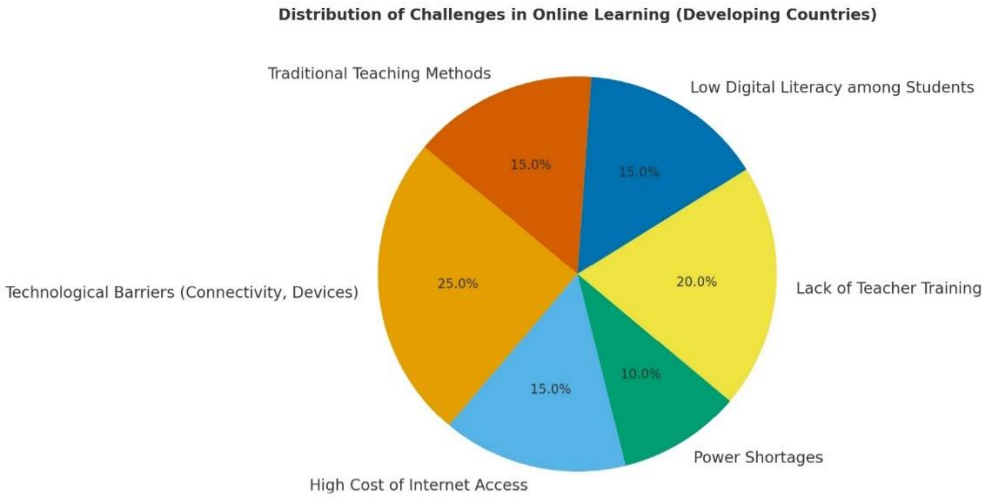

Figure 1:

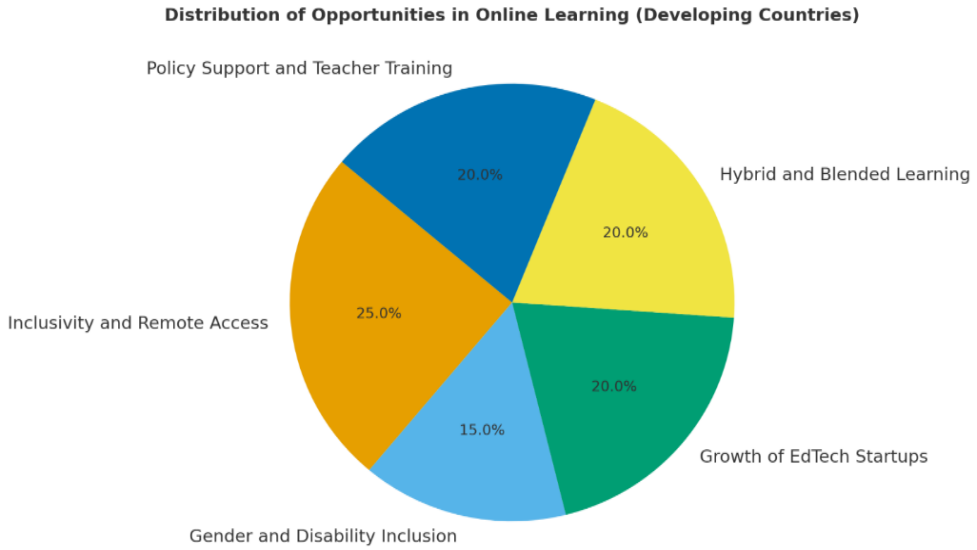

Figure 2:

First Pie Chart: Highlights that technological barriers (25%) and lack of teacher training (20%) are the most significant challenges.

Second Pie Chart: Shows that inclusivity, hybrid learning, and policy support represent the largest opportunities for growth and equity in digital education.

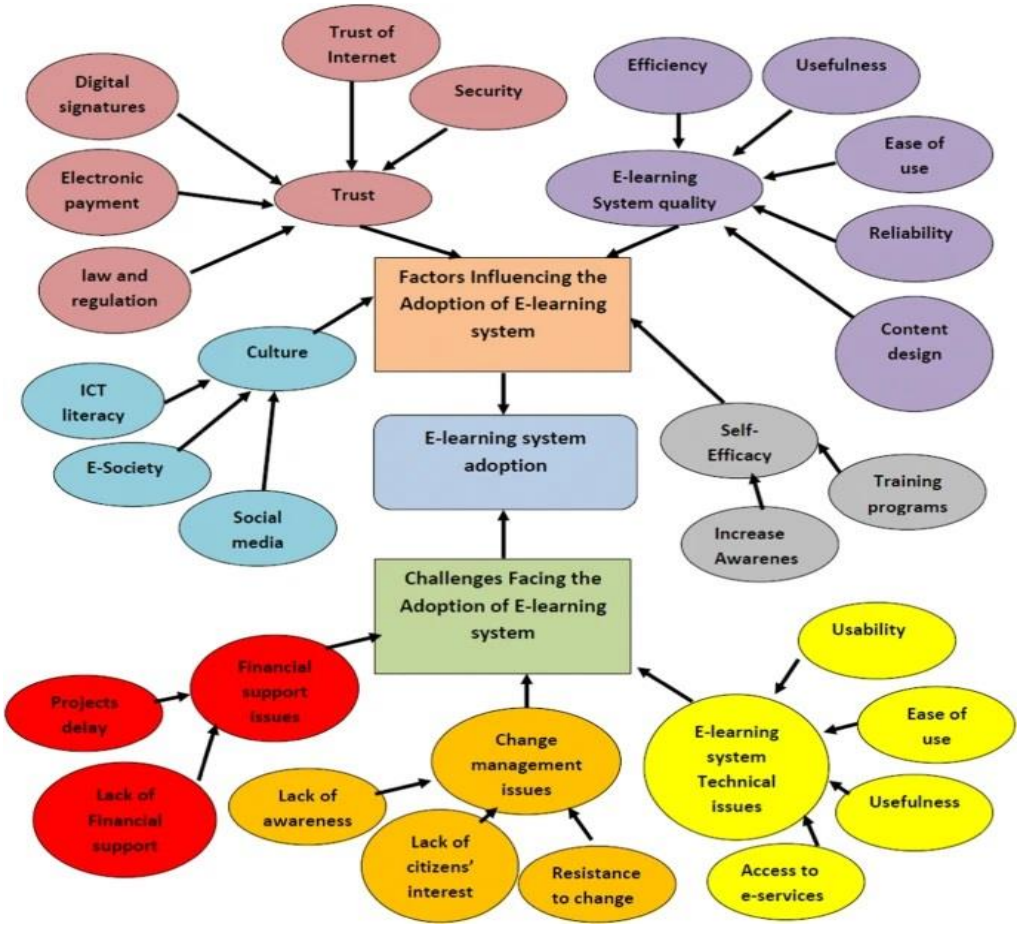

Figure 3: **Factors Influencing and Challenges Facing E-Learning System Adoption**

DISCUSSION

These results of the study demonstrate a complex interaction between the infrastructural limitations, pedagogical preparedness, and contextual openness on the uptake of online learning in the developing world. The thematic analysis highlights the fact that technological and infrastructural obstacles are by far the most widespread ones: unreliable connectivity, lack of devices, and unstable power are the most common impediments to staying digitally committed to learning platforms (Ramani, 2015; Technology-Enhanced Learning in Developing Nations, 2022). Not only do these barriers limit people who have access to online education, but they also affect the quality of interaction in cases where access is taken.

Nevertheless, as the analysis shows, success depends not only on infrastructure. The issues of pedagogy and capacity building are the key elements of the translation of access into meaningful learning outcomes. Considering the example, the research in Bangladesh revealed that institutional determinants (technological adequacy, instructor effectiveness, and access to technical support) were revealed to be significant predictors of student acceptance of online learning systems (Rajeb et al., 2022). The inexperienced and untrained teachers tended to repeat offline face-to-face lectures, which minimized activities and interaction and lowered student engagement (Butler, Maraj, and Qarkaxhija, 2021). On the side of learners, the inability to be digitally literate and self-regulate only increases the difficulty: in a resource-starved setting, students often do not have the privacy, dependable gadgets, or prior exposure to autonomous learning processes via the Internet (Chaka, 2020; Almahasees & Jaccomard, 2022).

Therefore, despite the availability of access, the lack of pedagogical alignment and preparedness can ensure that online learning does not perform quite as expected.

The outcomes, however, indicate a positive aspect; inclusion of education transformation can happen when the right enablers are in place. Also, in resource-limited environments, online learning provides flexibility, scalability, and reach that are otherwise difficult to provide in conventional classroom models. Indicatively speaking, online and blended education platforms have increased tertiary learning access among rural learners in low-income regions by almost 40 percent relative to traditional methods (OECD, 2023). Moreover, digital education is valuable as it helps historically underserved populations (such as women, learners in remote areas, and disabled individuals) to have access to education because physical and logistical obstacles to achieving it are minimized (World Economic Forum, 2022). Mobile-friendly, low-bandwidth design innovations and public-private collaborations in EdTech have led to a proposal that technological limitations can be addressed using context-sensitive ones (Sattar et al., 2023).

Collectively, the results support the finding that successful online learning in the context of developing countries needs a comprehensive solution and not a one-size-fits-all solution. Infrastructure investment is also required; however, it is not enough alone. Much-needed are the teacher training and pedagogical redesign, learner support systems, equitable access policies, and locally adapted content designs. The risk has been posed that online learning interventions will not access target populations or will not achieve as much as they can achieve, thus derailing the aspirations of equity growth, without directly addressing any of these elements (Gulati, 2008; Technology-Enhanced Learning in Developing Nations, 2022).

Politically, it has its consequences. The approach that should be taken by governments and academic institutions is multi-pronged: to make the devices and data accessible and more affordable, governments should implement subsidies; to prepare the infrastructure, human resources, and content, as well as student readiness, governments should develop national e-learning preparation frameworks; to encourage pedagogical innovation, the government should also support it. As an illustration, the access to digital instruction and learner self-regulation skills might be transferred to effective engagement faster with the help of teacher professional development programs. This may require institutions to set blended models as transitional models and take advantage of the benefits of both online and face-to-face interaction to optimise in a context (Fauzi, Mappaita, and Trinova, 2023).

Concerning future research, since descriptive and cross-sectional research dominate the literature base, there is a need to conduct more longitudinal and impact studies in assessing the triggering effect of different combinations of infrastructure, pedagogy, and policy on the occurrence of sustainable online learning results in a given context, with developing countries in mind. Empirical evidence on the impact of social and cultural factors on adoption and retention (language, local attitudes to digital education, and community norms) also has a gap, which is why a promising direction of qualitative research may be identified.

CONCLUSION

The capabilities of online learning to help achieve wider access to and fairness in the education system in developing countries are extensive. However, such a possibility can be achieved only when interventions go beyond the access provision and target several layers of the system - technological, pedagogical, socio-economic, and institutional. It seems these, combined with resulting factors, and not solitary advancement on one side, determine the decisive condition of success.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Governments should invest in affordable internet infrastructure and provide subsidies for students in remote areas to ensure equitable online access.

- Teacher training programs must focus on developing digital pedagogy and classroom management skills for effective online instruction.
- Institutions should adopt blended learning models to balance accessibility with interaction and engagement.
- Public–private partnerships can support the development of localized EdTech tools tailored to linguistic and cultural contexts.
- Continuous evaluation and monitoring systems should be implemented to assess learning outcomes and guide future e-learning policy improvements.

DELIMITATIONS

This study is delimited to the analysis of online learning in developing countries only, excluding developed regions where digital infrastructure is more advanced. The research focuses on secondary data collected from published academic sources between 2019 and 2025, without primary data collection through surveys or interviews. The scope is limited to higher education and institutional-level e-learning adoption, excluding informal or corporate online training programs. Additionally, the study emphasizes technological, pedagogical, and policy-related aspects of online learning while not addressing psychological or health-related impacts on learners.

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