

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

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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 institutions. Learning does not stop when natural disasters like COVID-19 strike; therefore, universities should be aware of their graduates' expectations in the event of an online graduation event, as evidenced by this study.

RESEARCH METHODS

A qualitative research technique was used to investigate students' experiences with various platforms after graduation. Qualitative research provides people a voice and investigates problems that may lie beyond the surface of presented behaviors and activities (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018). According to Hammersley (2013), qualitative research circumstances are viewed via broad lenses that include a focus on the various, overlapping, larger elements that impact on the scenario. It focuses on an individual's lived experiences (Marshall and Rossman, 2016). In this study, the interpretive paradigm was used. The interpretive paradigm aided contemporary researchers in understanding and gaining information about students' experiences on various platforms utilized at graduation.

According to Cohen et al. (2018), an interpretative paradigm is defined by a concern for the person, hence the primary goal of this research was to comprehend the subjective world of graduates' experiences. The research included 30 graduates, including undergraduate and postgraduate students, from three different institutions. Purposive sampling was utilized to pick a sample of 30 individuals, allowing the complete range of topics concerning graduate experiences to be addressed. Data was gathered using a semi-structured questionnaire. The researchers were also mindful of the ethical considerations of informed consent, protection from harm, privacy and secrecy, and honesty when performing this study. G1-30 ciphers were employed to conceal the participants' identities.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Experiences of Graduates on Platforms Used For Virtual Graduation

Different platforms are used when it comes to online learning, some of the platforms are as well used for online meetings and gatherings. Graduates were asked which platforms were available for them to participate during the online graduation. The table below shows different platforms which the graduates were exposed to.

Table 1. Platforms Used by Graduates To Witness Virtual Graduation

| Facebook | Youtube | National television | Zoom | Live streaming | Whats-App | None | Total |
|----------|---------|---------------------|------|----------------|-----------|------|-------|
| 7 | 3 | 4 | 3 | 10 | 1 | 2 | 30 |

From the above figures it is crystal clear that most graduates were live streaming at other different locations in smaller groups following up the graduation proceedings from the main campus. A sum of two graduates indicated that that they were not able to follow any proceedings since they did not have compatible devices and internet to do so.

The participants were asked on their experiences concerning the platforms used on the graduation. The responses were as follows:

G1: I had hoped to attend the ceremony with family members but since this did not happen, the excitement was low, I did not enjoy the ceremony because there were no group photos with colleagues, friends and family members.

G3: It separates colleagues from each other. It seems to be discriminatory because separating classmates who worked together throughout the course on the last day is so disappointing. I believe that the achievement of every member in the group was due to our combined effort, hence we should have celebrated our achievements together.

When asked concerning their satisfaction with the platforms, some of the graduates had the following to say:

G4: I was exposed to the worst experience of my life, after a long time of striving and the university could not come up with the virtual programmes at a student cost, costs at Holiday Inn were high for me and yet the university still required me to pay forty United States dollars for graduation fee. I failed to figure out the essence. I was disheartened honestly to speak.

G6: I was not satisfied as it was more expensive. I paid graduation fee and also paid fees for the venue to attend the virtual graduation.

G2: I was satisfied though not to the extent I expected if we all graduated physically since the methods failed to bring us together at the same venue. Taking into consideration the

virtual graduation was characterised with numerous venues. So it was not that satisfactory.

It can be noted from the participants' responses that universities graduates incurred double expenses as the universities concentrated more on preparing the physical ceremony although majority of the graduates participated virtually at different locations. It was also revealed that graduates attended and witnessed the virtual graduations physically at different locations which was more expensive as they were still expected to pay the university graduation fee.

However other graduates indicated that they had a wonderful experience. These graduates had the following to say:

G16: I had a good experience since as graduates we managed to celebrate our achievements, however the non- physical capping detached the personal satisfying moment associated with physical graduation.

G21: It was a wonderful experience as it felt like we were part of the graduation ceremony although it would be nicer had we been there to witness the graduation.

G30: It was good as it reduced congestion in the midst of COVID-19. It was fun and we celebrated as a group, we also had lunch as a group and also took some photos.

Change comes with different expectations from stakeholders; this is noted as some graduates claimed to have enjoyed the graduation although they wanted the physical experience. Participants also confirmed that they gathered and celebrated in small groups.

How Universities May Minimise Challenges Faced by Students on Virtual Graduations

Planning is of paramount concern when it comes to change in operations in the usual day to day running of any learning institution. Successful transition may be measured by the support that the institution renders to its students. Graduates were also asked on how universities may assist to minimise the challenges they faced. G1, G4, G5, G20 and G26 suggested ways in which universities may assist to minimise challenges faced by students on virtual graduation. Below are some of the responses from the participants:

G4: Those graduating virtually should be exempted from paying graduation fee. If they insist maybe they should make them pay half since they would not be physical. It is understood that graduation fee is for logistics such as food, which they will not have. The students feel financially strained of their hard earned money. Another option is that the university charge the graduation fee then arrange venues and incur all the expenses.

G26: University should reduce graduation fees if it can not arrange virtual graduation for its students so that we are able to meet the cost.

From the above responses, it is worth noting that although students participated using different online platforms, graduates felt financially strained. Graduates revealed that universities should charge different graduation fees for those who will be graduating physically and those who will be attending virtually.

However on the other hand other graduates, G2,G7,G13,G16 were of the view that graduation dates should be staggered per faculty into different dates prior the actual graduation date. One of the participants explicitly responded that:

G18: Graduation should be held per faculty and the overall best students may be capped by the president on the actual graduation date .So graduation can be done prior before the overall graduation.

The responses from participants suggest celebrations to be done in smaller events which involve planning by different university faculties.

Discussion

According to the report, institutions focused more on physical ceremony arrangements, despite the fact that the majority of students participated digitally. It was also highlighted that all graduates paid the same graduation price, despite the fact that some did not attend the actual graduation ceremony. Graduates were financially stretched, however, since they spent additional graduation expenditures in order to attend actual virtual celebrations arranged by student reps and staged at various places. The present study's findings are consistent with Bao's (2020) assertion that becoming totally online requires extensive preparation and investment from all sectors. The above result is also corroborated by Gilbert, 2015 who observed that technology is an area that may be easily taken for granted when it is entwined into everyday life, however for many, technology is not extensively utilized owing to the lack of monetary means to acquire access.

This research revealed that internet connection is limited in most places; so, students organized several venues where they could participate in virtual graduations. This finding is consistent with Rono and Kung'u's (2020) study at United States International University-Africa (USIU-A), which discovered that many higher education institutions around the world, particularly in Africa, were ill-prepared to make this change, which instead posed significant challenges, such as faculty and student digital fluency, having appropriate devices, internet connectivity, and, in many cases, power connectivity. The Association of African Universities (2020) also states that having to study and work in such tough settings has put African university students and staff at a heightened risk of high levels of stress, panic, anxiety, and depression.

Waldner, MacDaniel, and Esteves (2019) concluded that it is theoretically possible to scale up the e-Celebration if certain conditions, such as a faculty or I.T. team with big webinar experience, supportive departmental leadership, and teachers eager to contribute to their burden. 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 2020 became a push factor that may enable everyone better comprehend that all the qualities of higher education such as online defenses, online entry and final examinations are as excellent as those performed 'in real life.'

CONCLUSION

According to the results of this research, institutions prioritized the actual graduation ceremony above the virtual celebration. Because the manner of graduating had no effect on the graduation fees paid by all graduates, graduates were financially burdened. While some graduates were able to celebrate with friends in different locations, others were unable to

do so because they were financially strained due to the fact that they had already paid graduation fees to the universities. The study also concluded that internet connection and power outage are major challenges when it comes to attending online events. This leaves many graduates with unanswered questions about how universities planned to include graduates who will be in different locations with no network.

The other conclusion drawn from this study showed that there is lack of communication reaching out all graduates to participate in virtual graduations. As a result, the success of various virtual graduation formats as measured by participant satisfaction, convenience of access, capacity to optimize social presence, and engagement was not realized. It was also revealed that internet connectivity is poor in some areas, as some graduates were unable to view the virtual graduation ceremony on various platforms such as live streams, facebook, and youtube. Such graduates only received updates from friends via platforms such as whatsapp, which eliminated the feeling of belonging to the university and achievement.

Recommendations

In relation to the conclusions above, the researchers make the following recommendations:

- Universities should engage with different event planners to provide and host their students, this will enable all graduates to feel a sense of belonging and sense of achievement.
- Faculty deans or other administrative leaders should facilitate the graduation proceedings at every location which the university engage to host the graduates.
- Universities should exempt students graduating virtually from paying full graduation fee. If they insist maybe they should make them pay half since they would not be physical.
- Graduation should be staggered into different dates per faculty prior to the actual graduation date where graduates are allowed to attend physically in different groups at the university campus.

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