

Towards developing and enhancing an eLearning institutional culture in HEIs: The case for Zambia

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Abstract

The study aimed at identifying and highlighting elements deemed helpful in fostering and nurturing of an eLearning culture in the Zambian HEI context. The enquiry was a primarily a thematic qualitative study aimed at eliciting opinions, thoughts, perceptions and inert motivations how an eLearning culture could be cultivated and harnessed in a third world context. A sample of 28 HEA accredited HEIs in Zambia out of a total population of 63 was arrived at using an inclusion and exclusion criteria. The study found that Twenty-five percent of respondents thought sensitization, clear policy direction (11%), online course offering (7%) and other lesser elements. The enquiry concludes that a healthy eLearning culture does not yet exist in most institutions in most Institutions. The study also concludes that key decision makers are key to success. It was evident that digital infrastructure needs complementing with a robustly thriving corporate digital fluency or eCulture. The study recommends deliberate on going ongoing strategic stakeholder sensitization, capacity building, relevant infrastructure investment, dedicated annual budget provision, patron exposure to emerging Educational Technology (Ed Tech), among others.

Keywords: eLearning culture, pedagogy, digital infrastructure, capacity building, stakeholders, Higher Education Institution (HEI), digital fluency, eCulture, culture

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Introduction

A culture is key in every and any context (Espiritu & Budhrani, 2019). An attempt to fit into a given context without acknowledging or knowing the surrounding culture and customs may prove problematic. This proves problematic for several reasons including unintentionally offending resident local natives, arriving at wrong conclusions and erroneous personal value judgements, communicating wrong notions or simply blocking opportunities for further networking. Culture, though fluid and continuously changing, is important to organizational success. To help readers understand what this study was about, it is important to define terms. By 'culture' is meant the way things are done in a given context. This presupposes that individuals in that locality perceive and look at things in a particular light that may not necessarily be the same in the next. For instance, if one hails from an individualistic context, certain attributes mark them including a high self-reference, 'I can do' attitude (or expression), opinionated-ness and in some cases, a high tag on time keeping or individualistic personal decision making. This may suggest self-efficacy, among other traits (Bandura, 1977). Conversely, if one hails from the far east (e.g. Asia) or parts of Africa, they often are community oriented, collaborative, collective and tend to have a 'we' mentality. These find it odd when they encounter an individual that consistently refers to themselves, achievements or self-profile. The reason for this is simple, their world view and therefore culture, is different. For this latter cohort, time is treated differently and so are relationships, which tend to command a higher podium over truth. Political correctness is key, although things are rapidly changing, given growing global shifts towards cultural homogenization and harmonization. It needs to further be said that each institution or family unit has its own unique (sub) culture that then meshes into and blends with the larger culture. To flow and thrive in any setting, an individual needs to possess the 'right culture' to easily wiggle themselves around. Additionally, this culture may easily connect one to a context, individuals thus effortlessly resonating. This culture is easily affirmed and motivates other behaviours. With the advent of Online education, it has been found that for the practice to garner traction and clout, there is need to develop a relevant culture.

While eLearning has been touted as the universal panacea to sort out challenges traditional education has hitherto faced such as limited access to internet by an exploding population, it has been found that having the right digital infrastructure alone does not guarantee success, thriving or continuity of the learning. Dhawan (2020), strongly argued that online learning was the best and probably only safe option during the Covid-19 (i.e. 2020-2021) period but after the crisis, masses likely reverted to the default mode (i.e. F2F). This is concerning. This begs the 'why' question given that on the one hand, online learning was highly recommended but

surprisingly low permanent adoption on the other. An example will do. Sichone (2023) carried out an assessment of post Covid-19 to establish attitudes towards online learning. He found that attitudes and perceptions of eLearning had changed for the better since the pandemic. However, it was found that post Covid-19, most institutions reverted to the default mode (i.e. F2F) despite having heavily invested in relevant digital infrastructure. Sichone (2023) further found that although many verbally vouched for eLearning as a credible alternative learning approach, very few actually voluntarily took the route up. He concluded that in both scenarios, at the root was the lack of an eLearning culture, among other missing ingredients. This study investigated eLearning culture and how best to foster it in a Zambian context. It offered some suggested elements deemed helpful to foster development such as correct fitting iterative 'easy to use' platforms (Himoonga & Phiri 2020). This paper argues that an eLearning culture is non-negotiable and needs to be developed at every entity as a matter of urgency.

Literature Review

For eLearning to succeed, several elements need to be in place, coming together in an interesting mix. There is need for the right digital infrastructure, well trained, digitally fluent, competent and knowledgeable instructors, a cohort of students and learners having access to relevant enabling digital gadgets (e.g. laptops, smart phones, tablets, desk tops etc.) and up to date (state of the art) trending enabling systems. The puzzle is that all these can be in place and yet the whole venture fails. What could be the reason for this? Espiritu and Budhrani (2019) have argued that the missing element could be an eLearning culture. If this culture is absent, the venture may fail for lack of momentum, drive and spirit. These experts opine that culture is what drives the enthusiasm and in many senses, connects and resonates to various stakeholders in a given ecosystem. According to thought leaders like Espiritu and Budhrani (2019), a 'culture' is simply how a given context does things or conducts business. It is the normative way of doing things. This culture may vary in slant from being laid back to being fast and aggressive, contingent on the context. It needs to be further said that an eCulture is one that an entity possesses on how ICT and attendant technologies are perceived, integrated and used. If the organization appreciates, uses and promotes ICTs as normative, it soon becomes evident in how things are done. On the contrary, despite making many boasts of possessing state of the art technologies installed at the institution but hardly used, it may be concluded that an eCulture is absent. An example will do. This researcher worked for World Vision International (Zambia) at one point in his career. The organization was arguably one of the foremost digitized and technologically advanced (and integrated) entities on the Zambian landscape (1998-2014). World Vision, a global development and relief corporation, heavily invested in state of the art technologies for training, communication and ongoing action research. The aim was to eventually cut down on organizational overheads while maximizing efficiency and effectiveness. One of these 'cut down' areas was the reduced need for 'in person' travel to physical meetings right across the country and globe. For some reason, despite all those technologies, the travel costs never significantly dropped (at least at program level). Why? One of the possible reasons is that decision makers did not fully trust that virtual meetings were as effective thus resorting to continued, unabated high cost, in person meetings. Of course, there were health benefits to travel, away from one's work area there by mitigating sedentary life triggered stress but, in another sense, this frequent travel defeated the original cost cutting strategy. It is now many years since this scenario occurred, perhaps dynamics have probably now changed. The question, though that begged answering then was why the persistence on physical travel rather than evidently cost-effective virtual meetings? Responses could vary but looking back, one root cause was the lack of an 'eCulture' or virtual culture apart from reliable connectivity. The U.S Department of Education 2024 report validates this suspicion. Despite access to digital devices, at least two other divides stand in the way of eLearning culture growth: Use and Design.

Once an entity develops and sustains a healthy eCulture, chances are that its citizens naturally, and with the least effort, default to digital systems beyond mere email use, for instance. An eCulture entails all systems integrated, managed, used, structured to foster efficiency and efficacy within the institution or corporate entity. The thinking, aspirations and default way of doing business, even mundane procedures, is directly or indirectly connected to an appropriate enabling digital system. If at an educational institution, for instance, a School Management System (SMS) integrating LMS and other auxiliary but supporting functionalities (like SIS) will be the norm. The primary 'go to' tool for doing work will be a system or other that facilitates work. But an eCulture goes beyond systems. It includes the thoughts, the preferences, the practices, fluency and competencies that thrive in a digital environment (U.S Department of Education, 2024; Park and Kim, 2020; Himoonga & Phiri, 2020; Muleya *et al.*, 2019; Fulgence, 2019; Kotoua, Ilkan & Kilic, 2015; Stoltenkamp & Kasuto, 2009). Corporate citizens support, learn and enthusiastically use available systems to enhance their productivity and efficiency. All this demands time investments, energy, focus, resoluteness, intentionality, ongoing sensitization and capacity building without which the culture will not automatically sprout, 'catch on' or develop. It must be nurtured like a fragile tender plant. Additionally, there is need for strong, aggressive pragmatic strategic leadership supporting eLearning

buttressed by enabling functional specific, clear policies that highlight and support eLearning.

To foster eCulture development, a number of suggestions have been advanced from several quarters including Espiritu and Budhrani (2019) as earlier alluded to. ELearning culture development is not automatic nor will it come easily or fast. It needs careful planning, nurturing, aggressiveness and investing into for it to germinate, grow and thrive. Several suggestions yielded from literature review have been extracted. This paper highlights only a few including sensitizations, training, procuring and providing digital devices (such as smart phones, tablets, desktops [and work stations in labs] or other ‘tools for study & learning), institutions providing infrastructure and the correct technical support. Some other field experts have included acquiring top of the range updatable software as well as ensuring a memorable user experience where platforms (and data) are secure, easy to use or access, among others.

The study explored this enquiry by requesting respondents to list what they thought was lacking and could possibly help enhance the growth and nurturing of an eLearning culture in Zambia. The research was undergirded by Maslow’s hierarchy of needs as a supporting theory. Banda (2014) stated that individuals tended to desire the next higher level needs (in the hierarchy pyramid) once the lower foundational basic needs were fully met. These physiological needs include water, air, shelter, health, sleep etc., among others. If any of these was in short supply or not there, individuals focussed all their survival instincts to acquire them. Only after these were in place would their minds begin to ascend the needs pyramid until self-actualization was achieved. Within and among the higher level needs was education, the perceived door way to a better quality of life. If that was the case, then individuals spared no efforts to acquire an education through whatever viable means, including through eLearning.

Methodology and Data

The study sought to investigate (and assess) eLearning cultures among 28 HEIs in Zambia, drawn from a population of 63 HEA accredited Institutions in Zambia (HEA, 2020). The study was a thematic qualitative enquiry that used open ended questions. The use of an interview guide in this kind of study was best because qualitative studies aim at eliciting hidden motivations, opinions and thoughts of respondents about a given phenomenon. Creswell (2012), Patton (2002) and Berg (2009) opine that qualitative studies are best to establish meaning in the data whose sample need not be large. The sample was arrived at using an inclusion and exclusion criteria where only sites favourably responding to data collection request were included in the study while the rest were left out. At any given site, at least two individuals were purposively selected to respond to study questions thus mitigating bias. The study also consulted 3 independent seasoned experts that served as a triangulation sounding board. This helped mitigate bias. As each discourse took place, data was recorded, stored, reviewed, sorted, themed, analysed (using Word and Excel) and a report generated whose findings are in the ensuing section.

Results and Discussion

An eLearning culture is critical to the success of any given entity, whether learning, teaching or not. Respondents were asked what they thought were some of the best ways to enhance an eLearning culture in their respective institutions or whether, in their opinion, an eCulture existed. Participants gave varying feedback but the following was found: 1. Twenty-five percent of respondents thought ongoing sensitization and capacity building was key for culture transformation followed by policy direction at sixteen percent, upgrading digital infrastructure (11%), frequent online course offering (7%), Educational technology access and free device provision to learners (5%), free Wi Fi provision, reduced internet bundle cost and capacity building at 8%, security and pedagogy changes/improvements (2%). Figure 1 sums up what has been thus far highlighted.

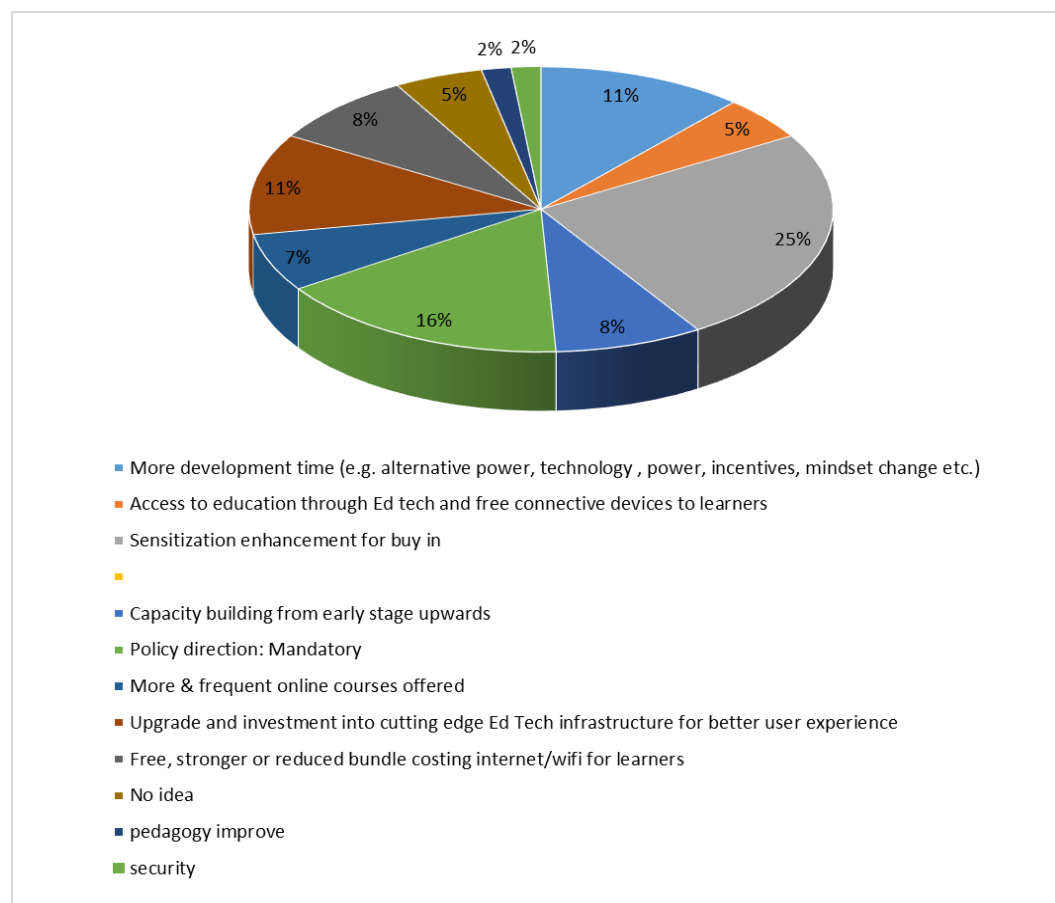


Figure 1: Suggested elements to enhance an eLearning culture. (N=54)
Source: Study data (2023)

As hinted at earlier, an eCulture is essential to eLearning growth and success. In one sense, it is the very breath of eLearning because without it, eLearning will not thrive despite having all the necessary top of the range enabling digital infrastructure, tools etc., among others. Despite initial high enthusiasm or drive, if the users are do not buy in or acquire the requisite digital fluency, chances are that all the fine infrastructure will eventually become a white elephant in time. A case would do. Chew and Chitumbo (2012) write of the University of Zambia where a learning management system had been in place for some time and entire faculties were not aware such a system existed. Even those that knew the system existed did not care to find out or use it. No reason was clearly established why. In another classic case at Mulungushi University, Kunda *et al.* (2018) found that despite free 24/7 internet access (plus LMS) being offered to all stakeholders at the University, most did not use these facilities. Kunda *et al.* (2018) concluded that the problem was beyond access but a cultural issue. To be sustainable then, there is need to breed, nurture and develop an eLearning culture obviously preceded by technological integration with appropriate digital skills (i.e. digital fluency) development (Fulgence, 2019). This contributes to generating a healthy eLearning corporate culture. Several sources consulted in this and other literature reviews suggest that this claim is consistent almost universally; no eCulture, no eLearning growth or thriving. By that token, administrators, staff, designers, planners and instructors need to ensure that a right culture is engendered within a context. This may include elements highlighted in this study such as aggressive ongoing sensitization, exposure to relevant Educational Technology (Ed Tech), stakeholder engagement (and updating), among many others. This takes time, meticulous planning, prudent execution and implementation. In the end, where an eLearning culture has taken root, it becomes second nature, hardly visible and yet normative. Before then, lots of work needs to be done. What does an ideal, robust eLearning culture exactly look like? Just what has been alluded to; normative use of technologies, internalized and exploited as second nature for literally everything at the institution. It is far above the mere occasional use, or blended but maximized for teaching, learning and mundane organizational business. Granted, the degree may not be the same in all areas of the institution but the default choice is digital. This suggests that even far fewer institutions in Zambia may claim to possess an eLearning culture because certain portions of their institutions remain manually generated. If an

eCulture is completely absent, it may suggest a hindrance to eLearning growth, adoption and thriving. Zambia urgently needs to change this picture, exploiting elements earlier alluded to (OECD, 2022; Fluegge, 2021; Espiritu & Budhrani, 2019; Aheto & Cronje, 2018; Bahula 2015). Generally, change is initially loathed and resisted until its intent is made clear. Brown (2016) highlighted similar fears when discussing theological education. That notwithstanding, the eLearning culture flavor developed at an institution needs to be contextually appropriate and in sync with surrounding practice lest it frustrates users. Individualistic systems may push away those thriving in a collective, community culture, hence the need to prudently plan the system (Fluegge, 2021). One expert consulted during data collection claimed that an adopted system reflected a culture, hence the need to craft one best fitting for an institution. Kachaka (interview, Lusaka, 2023) insisted that imposed systems tended to work against a local eLearning culture thus negatively affecting sustainability. This is clearly beyond digital infrastructure but ‘cultural software’ of sorts (Castelo, 2020; Mukosa & Mweemba, 2019; Kunda *et al.*, 2018; Chewe & Chitumbo, 2012; Suhail & Mugisa, 2007).

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study explored possible ways to enhance an eLearning culture in the Zambian context. Based on the findings of this study, it is concluded that an eCulture is critically essential to eLearning success beyond mere provision of requisite digital infrastructure. The study equally concludes that surveyed HEI’s lack corporate eLearning cultures despite claiming to. Independent consultant perspectives helped form this view. The study also concludes that top institutional leadership towards fostering such a culture is critical, given the hierarchical collective culture Zambian HEIs find themselves. Due to different factors, an eLearning culture may or may not take root or effect for various reasons. The study recommends the following: 1. An intentionally planned and well-crafted on-going sensitization, training and capacity building strategy is essential. It would be wise to identify and encourage early adopters. This could be through incentives or support. 2. All new staff, students and Faculty members (i.e. stakeholders) must be thoroughly oriented, inducted to the organizational eCulture and consistently exposed to organizational tools. 3. eLearning should be mainstreamed rather than referred to as a backup or as an optional route. Digital tools should be mundane and maximized. 3. A national or institutional policy mandating use of these tools should be drafted, launched and implemented. Further, at any given site, the institution should consider installing a ‘one stop shop’ easy to use integrated learning system such as an SMS synching into the proposed national backbone by other experts like Kachaka (interview, Lusaka, 2023). 4. Strong organizational leadership supporting eCulture is highly recommended. 5. Dedicated annual budget provision and investment into digital infrastructure demonstrating commitment is expected. 6. Finally, emerging and new updates must be communicated to stakeholders in a timely fashion. This helps corporate growth, knowledge and information dissemination.

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Bio

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