

An evaluation of perception shifts on eLearning with in HEI ecosystem in Zambia (2019-2023)

Billy C Sichone*
Central Africa Baptist University
*bsichone@cabuniversity.com

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Abstract

The study compared perceptions on eLearning before and after Covid-19 pandemic outbreak. It also aimed at identifying what contemporary perceptions were held about eLearning in post pandemic Zambia. The enquiry used a thematic qualitative study via open ended questions interview guides (exploiting in-person interviews) administered at the 28 sampled HEIs around Zambia during a five-month period. The study found that the majority (84%) of respondents supported eLearning after the pandemic compared to 30% prior to. The study also found that 4% were negative towards eLearning after Covid-19 outbreak compared to 26% before the said pandemic. In general, a positive perception shift occurred after Covid-19 epoch about eLearning. The study concludes that perceptions need to be meticulously managed and intentional efforts need to be made to build positive perceptions using different means including intentional ongoing sensitization of stakeholders. The study recommends that 1. Intentional on-going sensitizations be conducted 2.. Perceptions need to be meticulously managed at all times.

Keywords: Perception, eLearning, education, rigor, Higher Education Institution (HEI), ePedagogy
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Introduction

Perceptions likely affect decision making (Amadou, 2006). They colour how one views something, affect attitude and probably influence their disposition or reaction towards something (McDonald, 2011). Although objectivity premised on facts is the desired goal of the scientific method, subtly perceptions sometimes find their way into interpretation of reality (Popper, 2002). Several researchers, including McDonald (2011), argue that perception is a complex compounded concept and thus ought to be meticulously managed so that it does not unduly adversely affect decision making. Though it might have a legitimate role in life, its place must be carefully regulated.

Can perceptions be mitigated or avoided? If so how? This study does not delve into those areas but focuses on how or what people think about eLearning. It is fair to claim that online education has received different interpretations and value judgements over the years (Pelletier *et al.*, 2023; Nitza & Roman, 2022; Bouchrika, 2022; Mpungose, 2020; Hong *et al.*, 2020; Auma & Achieng, 2020; Winslow & Allen, 2020; Gallagher 2019; Bukaliya & Mubika, 2014). From a remote, insignificant and relatively neglected discussion point, it has over the years emerged to be a major discourse point, at times even attempting to become main stream, in some limited contexts (OECD, 2022; The World Bank, 2020). In the developed richer northern context, its presence has been relatively longer and integrated in the way daily mundane business is done. This has not been so in poorer contexts like Zambia, where the very concept has largely hitherto been unknown (Chewe & Chitumbo, 2012).

The 2020 Covid-19 pandemic changed everything (The World Bank, 2020; Mpungose, 2020). The pandemic's advent brought with it, forced changes on how education is done with permanent effects, in some cases (Tadesse & Muluye, 2020). While the developed north easily transitioned to eLearning, places like Zambia grappled with the very idea, not to mention resources need and lack. The disruptive epoch demanded that all parties across the world engage in this 'eLearning global experiment' with or without infrastructure, resources or skills (Sichone, 2023). Apart from the resource lack, conceptual ideas and frameworks around eLearning were lacking at nearly all levels. But the problem ran deeper: People had different perceptions, understandings and attitudes towards the seemingly novel online learning. Though most people were likely ignorant of eLearning at the time, given the yawning digital divide, those with a faint idea and experience of online learning were either welcoming or harboured deep reservations against it, for various reasons (US Department of Education, 2024; Pelletier *et al.*, 2023; Mukosa & Mweemba, 2019).

ELearning now has a place in the public sphere and will most likely permanently stay. What form it will take is unknown but one thing is clear, it is here to stay, so some experts claim (Sichone, 2023). How this will be sustained equally is veiled into the future. Some indicators however, could help predict eLearning's future: the general perceptions that a critical mass have about it. If more affirm, support and voluntarily vouch for it, chances are high that its demand and longevity is likely assured. If the reverse is true, eLearning's growth may be impeded.

The word 'perception' is variously defined. For instance, Amadou (2006), engaged in a relatively extensive study where this researcher sought to explore, describe and define what the word meant or intended. He traces thoughts from philosophers like Hume and Merleau-Ponty demonstrating that various expressions and emphasis of perceptions exist. Amadou (2006), suggests that perception is connected to communication where information and stimuli are received by the brain, evaluated, interpreted and either accepted or rejected contingent on what grids one is using. This study identified what the perceptions were before and after the momentous global pandemic episode. Another, Mcdonald (2011: 4), simply defines perception as "...the way one sees the world." This enquiry describes 'perception' as the view, interpretation, attitude or disposition an individual has over something, in this case, eLearning. Participants in the HEI academic ecosystem were engaged to find out what they thought about eLearning in the two periods. Perception is often measured using the Likert scale though this study did not use it (Israel *et al.*, 1994; Sato, 2009). A positive perception towards eLearning is desirable. The study addresses one key element essential to fostering eLearning growth, perception. It is important to know what the contextual current perceptions of eLearning are in order to correctly respond and plan. Changes need to be noted and, where possible, measured. To arrive at whether perceptions had altered or what perceptions existed, a study was needed, which gap this research filled. The study's major objective was to establish what perceptions about eLearning existed before and after Covid-19 outbreak. A secondary objective was to suggest ways to further strengthen positive perceptions for eLearning growth. This enquiry is significant in various ways. First, it provides the needed empirical base line data that decision makers and planners might need. Second, it shows that perceptual changes do happen and never static (Mcdonald, 2011). Situations and occurrences trigger dynamics. Third, it offers basis for the argument for consistent, intentional sensitization of all stakeholders if perceptions are to change.

Literature Review

One of the central elements to online education growth in any given setting that needs to be right is perception. The right perception opens or closes prospects for the growth and development of something (Amadou, 2006; Robertson [GS], 2020). If perceptions are right, good and positive, then probability of adoption, support and growth is likely higher because high goodwill breeds continuity and expansion. If the perception is negative, then stagnation, negative growth, limited expansion or support should be expected. Simply described, perception has to do with the view, interpretation or lenses through which something is contrived or looked at (Kotoua *et al.*, 2015; Mcdonald, 2011). These lenses tend to shape, influence and, in a sense, determine the next step the decision maker will take, whether to support or withhold support and, in some extreme cases, suppress an idea (Nitza & Roman, 2022; Bouchrika, 2022; Hong *et al.*, 2020; Bukaliya & Mubika, 2014; Oglivie, 2009). Although subjective in nature and often subtly hidden from the person in question, perception is a potent force triggering other reactions into the future. According to Mcdonald (2011) and Amadou (2006), perception should not be underrated or ignored, although it may not entirely be accurate in all cases.

Given its fragile and delicate nature, this commodity called 'perception' needs to be nurtured with meticulous care because if not undergirded or fed with the correct facts, may incline toward wrong ideas. The best way to ensure objectivity or alter perception is to supply the right objective empirical irrefutable facts. To further buttress these facts, it may be prudent, in some cases, that subjects needing assurance for perceived ideas potentially challenging previously held dogmas are pacified. ELearning has suffered from a negative perception in several contexts before it is progressively accepted as authentic and right alternative to traditionally well-known pedagogical standards (Bukaliya & Mubika, 2014; Ehlers, 2011). Its image has suffered at the hands of several missing or comparatively weak elements that feature strongly in traditional modes of learning like rigor, interaction, immediacy and community, real-time feedback, personal support, assessment, among others (Pelletier *et al.*, 2023; Nitza & Roman, 2022; Bouchrika, 2022; Mpungose, 2020; Hong *et al.*, 2020; Auma & Achieng, 2020; Winslow & Allen, 2020; Gallagher, 2019; Bukaliya & Mubika, 2014). Traditional learning makes much of these ensuring that measurable strict time frames, schedules and standards are strictly adhered to before certifying a given credential as meeting acceptable standards. The trouble is, given the altered dynamics in cyber learning, some of these historically mandatory elements are absent in online learning or, at least, found in a modified form. To compound this problem is the fact that often, early forms of online learning in any given context often start from a point of imitating existing traditional pedagogical approaches rather than starting on a

distinct clean slate because the dynamics between the two modes are different, despite sharing the same learning outcomes. In Zambia, for instance, online learning almost mirrored F2F 100% in 2020 but as things settled, modifications were made to what was at play hoping to replicate the exact feel and approach in the physical class room. Where this failed, dissatisfaction resulted but, as more realised, pedagogical and content packaging progressively changed. Currently, Zambia is still at that fluid stage but a realization has occurred where course designers and teachers have increasingly acknowledged that progressive on-going improvements should occur. The fact still remains though; many still want to exactly mirror F2F but this will not do. For perceptions to alter, it is argued that expectations, approaches and clear standards must be realistically set. Further, designers must ensure that first time user experience is as ambient as possible (Sichone, 2023; OECD, 2022; Aheto & Cronje, 2018). Additionally, institutions must ensure they proactively expose stakeholders to intentions, plans, benefits and how a given approach will work. This probably forestalls phobia and mitigates cognitive dissonance push back from users. Aheto and Cronje (2018) or OECD (2022) found that adding an element of fun, intrigue, support or simplicity in the system tended to make users engaged, especially those that had high self-efficacy (OECD, 2022). This study argues that perception is a fragile commodity needing careful handling. It must be treated as a sensitive tender plant nurtured and fertilized by correct facts with copious measures of exposure for primary stakeholders.

The study explored this perception evaluation relying on a Maslow's hierarchy of needs that states that if the immediate lower needs are met, the mind casts its eye on the perceived next higher level need (Banda, 2014). This theory's logical argument goes something like this: if a person has all the basic survival needs met such as air, health, security, food, accommodation etc., their desires turn to the next level needs like esteem, love, acceptance and so on, until an individual achieves self-actualization. It may be argued that all these next level needs and desires hinge on perceived needs. If perception is positive, then the mind gravitates towards that thing (OECD, 2022; Aheto & Cronje, 2018). The reverse likely equally holds true.

Methodology and Data

This study was qualitative in nature and used a phenomenological approach where data was collected over a 5 month period. It was part of a larger study that covered several aspects related to eLearning. According to Patton (2002), qualitative studies are best placed to elicit qualitative responses which reveal inherent opinions, motivations and reasons why respondents do what they do. The sample was drawn from individuals directly connected to HEIs and had been at the institution for at least two years at data collection time. A minimum of two was sufficient with a student being a must. Table 1 shows the categories included from within the University.

Table 1 Break down of study respondents at HEI

Category	#
Administrator	1
Faculty member	1
Student	1
Total	3

Source: Study data (2023)

This study needed to find out how participants perceived eLearning in their context. Further, Patton (2002), argues that in such a study, a small sample is acceptable since the researcher seeks in-depth data about the phenomenon. To that end, out of a total population of 63 HEA accredited HEIs in Zambia, this study visited 28 Universities making up the sample. These institutions were selected using an inclusion and exclusion criteria where only those that approved were included. At each site at least two individuals were purposively selected to give the required responses relevant to the study. This approach ensured objectivity in the process, thus mitigating bias.

In-person interviews were conducted while using open ended question interview guides. The researcher recorded the discourses, transcribed, reviewed, coded data using a thematic approach and interpreted before generating a report. The results are presented in the ensuing section.

Results and Discussion

The study evaluated perception changes in the period 2019 (pre-covid-19) and 2023 (Post Covid-19) to establish what the perceptions were in relation to eLearning in Zambia among HEI study participants. This period enabled the perceptual comparisons between the period before and after the pandemic. Respondents were asked questions about their disposition about eLearning before and after the pandemic struck. The findings are expressed in Figures 1 and 2 in this section.

Pre-Covid-19 pandemic eLearning perceptions

The study yielded several responses about participants' view of eLearning before Covid-19 (Figure 1). The study found that twenty-six percent of respondents had been deeply averse and dismissive of eLearning prior to Covid-19, another twenty-six percent had either never heard of eLearning or thought it was impossible in contemporary Zambia, thirty percent claimed that they had been at home with eLearning all along, ten percent had a low regard for eLearning, two percent were uncomfortable with the low quality in eLearning while six percent were indifferent whether eLearning was used or not.

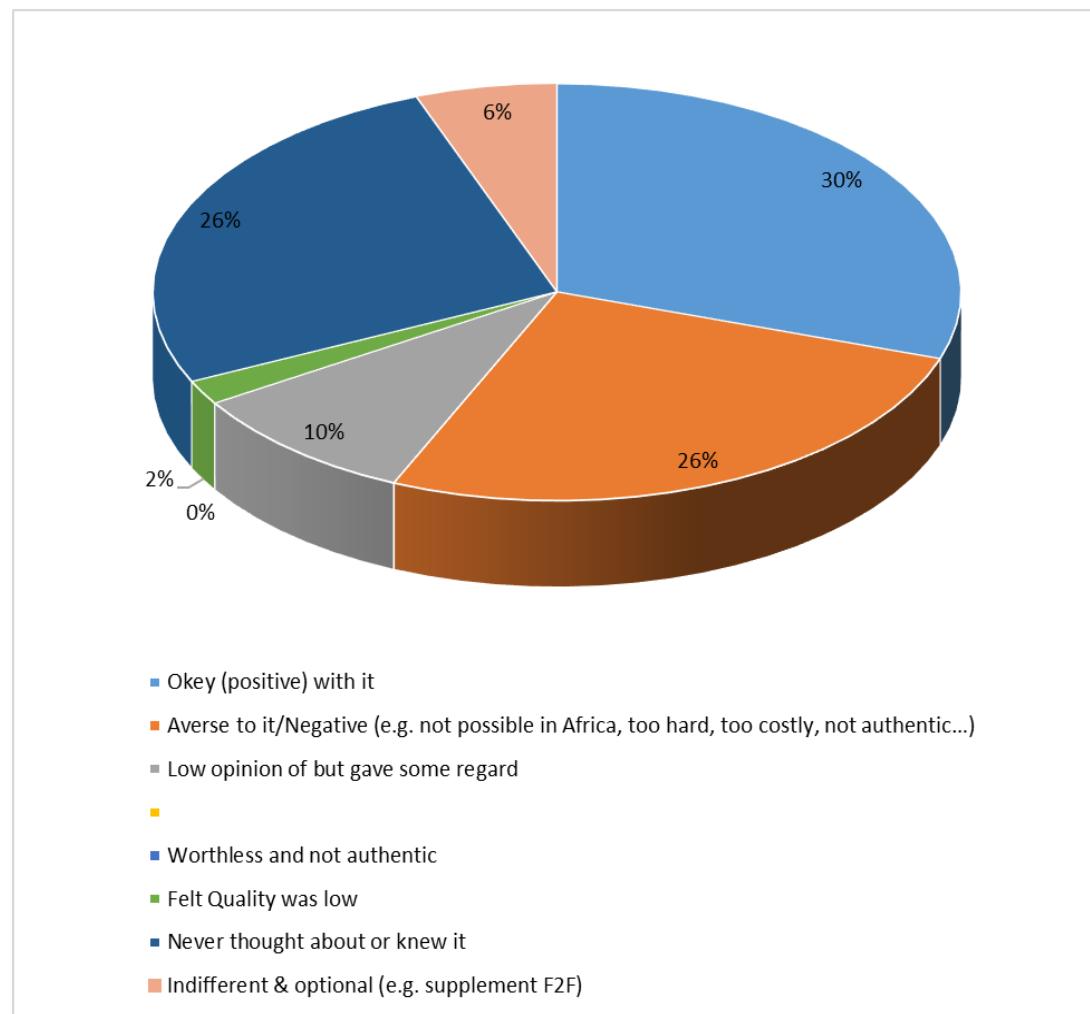


Figure 1: participant perception of eLearning mode before Covid-19 period. (N=53)

Source: Study data (2023)

Perception has a great impact on how well something is received or attention given. It sets the foundation for acceptance or rejection (OECD, 2022; Aheto & Cronje, 2018). Perception affects adoption and application of any suggested model. It equally plays a part in decision making, especially if desired outcomes are not efficiently achieved. Before the Covid-19 pandemic, eLearning was hardly in public discourses (i.e. in Zambia) nor was it ever imagined as an alternative to standard accepted approaches to teaching and learning (Maloney, 2023; Moloi & Mhlanga, 2021; Robertson, 2020; The World Bank, 2020; Bukaliya & Mubika, 2014; Chewa & Chitumbo, 2012). At best, it was considered a remote back up but never main stream. Various reasons could be adduced including ones this study highlighted. It found that while some did not know about its existence, others knew but for some reason were deeply averse to its use (Krone, 2020; Aheto & Cronje, 2018). Others opined that it was perceived to be elitist, too advanced for contemporary Zambia. If a negative perception of eLearning is not changed, eLearning potentially remains a 'by the side' issue, only reverted to in crisis moments (Maloney, 2023; Telmesani, 2010; Adams, DeFleur & Heald, 2007). It was not any better for potential employers, gate keepers or some seasoned academics. Some, in this latter group, had strong cognitive dissonance issues with eLearning

(Kayombo & Mwiinga, 2021; Robertson, 2020). If, however, perception becomes positive and favorable, there is a greater chance that eLearning may be mainstreamed, become normative and sustained.

Post Covid-19 eLearning perceptions

Covid-19 struck in late 2019 and by March 2020, its alarming impact had spread right across the world resulting in rapid closures of educational institutions around the world (The World Bank, 2020). A new mode was turned to as the panacea: eLearning. The study asked respondents to state their perceptions of eLearning post Covid-19. They were also asked whether their perceptions of eLearning had changed after interacting with mediated teaching and learning. Participants gave varying responses as captured in Figure 2. The study found that most (84%) respondents were at home with and felt eLearning was necessary, 4% had no opinion about eLearning, 4% changed their minds towards a negative posture while 8% retained their original perceptions they had held about eLearning before Covid-19 struck.

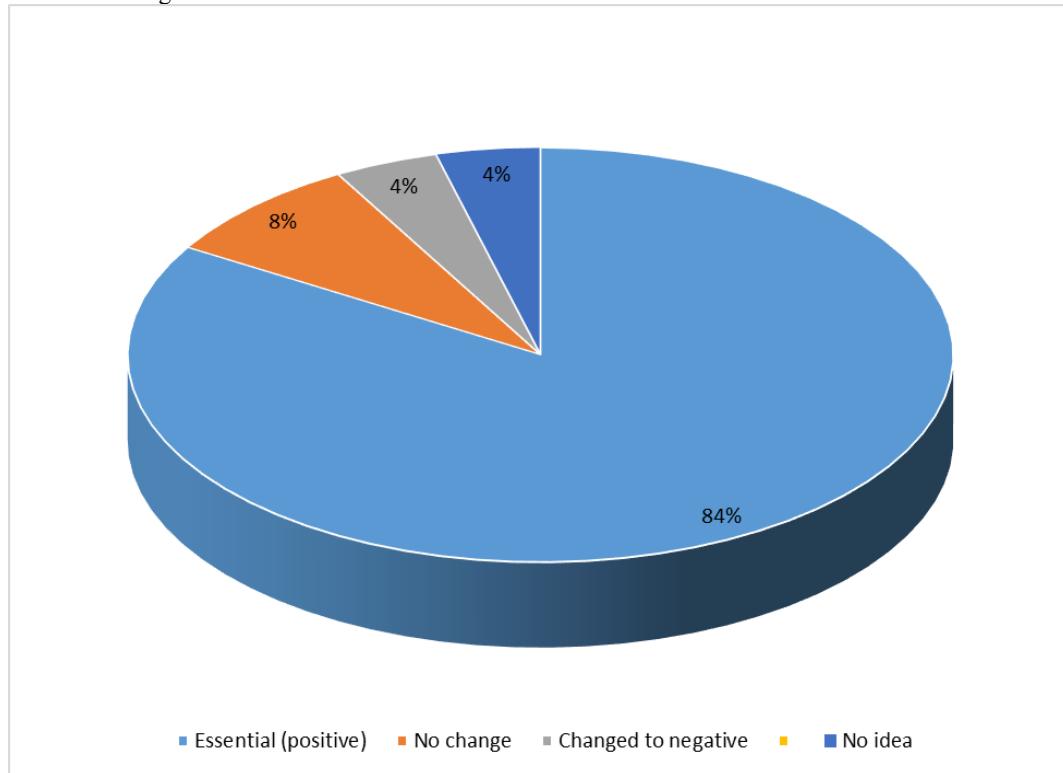


Figure 2: participant perception of eLearning mode Post Covid-19 period. (N=49).

Source: Study data (2023)

Perceptions are never static, they change with time and exposure as new facts become available (McDonald, 2011; Amadou, 2006). This is what possibly happened after individuals were exposed to educational technologies, had hands-on experience and tested for themselves. If their perceptions become positive, there is a greater chance that eLearning may one day be adopted and thrive. If, however, a critical mass develops a negative perception, eLearning future becomes bleak. In this study, a large percentage of users are now positive about eLearning evidenced by the 84% approval perception as compared to 30% before Covid-19 pandemic. This suggests a more than 50% shift, of course bearing in mind the 4% whose perception had changed to negative. Any degree of positive shift towards eLearning support is good because it suggests that eLearning may be supported and even mainstreamed in a given context. In this case, a majority presently look favorably towards eLearning than before. It may safely be stated, in sync with Sichone (PhD Thesis 2023), that “the pandemic forced eLearning into the lime light, center stage in the education industry (Maloney, 2023; Moloi & Mhlanga, 2021; The World Bank, 2020)”. Prior to the pandemic nearly as many had negative views about eLearning (26%) but this has changed suggesting that eLearning is increasingly becoming accepted in the Zambian context, although the notion of ‘acceptance’ is another whole discussion altogether. One thing is sure, more people are sensitized about what eLearning is and its potential benefits which are best expressed by Mukosa and Mweemba (2019: 5), who rightly opine about the Zambian scenario:

“eLearning is a sleeping giant in the delivery of education in Zambia and if the government can invest more in

ICT infrastructure then the education sector can use this opportunity to extend their services to places that they might not have a physical presence, especially in the rural areas.”

As Sichone (2023:245) has rightly observed, in relation to Mukosa and Mweemba’ s assertion that “This is both a projection and an expression of a positive attitude towards eLearning.”

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study compared perceptions before and after Covid-19 epoch when the entire world was forced into some kind of eLearning experimentation. Based on the data from this enquiry, the study concludes that perception affects uptake and adoption of eLearning. It also concludes that knowledge of prevailing perceptions helps in intervention planning. After 2020, perceptions in Zambia changed for positive compared to before 2020. Perception likely affects acceptance and probably influences potential gate keeper decision making. The study further concludes that exposure, sensitization and hands on experience does possibly influence in perception alteration, given the first-hand experience of the user. Additionally, the study concludes that continuous ongoing sensitization, exposure and familiarization of primary stakeholders and potential decision makers to these educational technologies may help change perceptions for the growth or diminishing of eLearning. The study recommends that planned intentional continuous ongoing but planned sensitization be undertaken. This exposes stakeholders and also mitigate phobias or wrong perceptions. The study further recommends that institutions set aside intentional strategic resources (for competitive advantage) and activities aimed at updating stakeholders in the educational ecosystem about developments and benefits of eLearning. Finally, the enquiry recommends ongoing stakeholder sensitization for institutional and contextual buy in. This should contribute towards building and nurturing an eLearning culture advocated for by both Espiritu and Budhrani (2019) and the 2024 U.S Department of Education report.

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Bio

Dr. Billy C Sichone serves as Deputy Vice Chancellor for Research and Graduate studies at Central Africa Baptist University. He holds several doctorates including a PhD in Online Education and has been in Academia for over a decade after a near two decade experience in the Development Industry. He is also author of several books and paper on Research, Apologetics and Business.