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"Another Year Lost?": A Novel Approach to the Online Learning in Ghana

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Although the COVID-19 primarily threatened global health, it adversely affected diverse aspects of human life. One major spillover effect of the COVID-19 pandemic is the disruption in the status quo of education delivery. The pre-pandemic mode of delivery in Ghana was mostly onsite, where students and teachers have physical interactions in constructed lecture halls. The emergent nature of the COVID-19 crisis caused a paradigm shift in higher education (HE) institutions in Ghana. The lockdown measures and social distancing norms forced universities to adopt online learning. However, the transition from the traditional face-to-face (F2F) instruction to online learning has not been smooth (Aboagye, 2020; Adarkwah, 2020). Over a year after its discovery, many institutions in Sub-Saharan Africa are still struggling to ensure progressive and lifelong education. The paper narrates the plight of tertiary students who experienced the online learning in Ghana and propose innovative ways to continue the online learning in Ghana in this pandemic era where the educational careers of most students are in jeopardy. Statistical report indicates that over 91% of the world's student population across 188 countries were fatally affected (UNESCO, 2020).

The National Union of Ghana Students (NUGS) lamented on the online learning in Ghana and referred to it as a "challenge-ridden" online learning. Qualitative data gathered from fifteen (15) buttressed this claim of the NUGS who called for a halt in the online instruction in Ghana (Anyorigya, 2020). The major challenges of the students included; high cost internet data bundles, poor internet connectivity, glitches in the online platform, inadequate electric power supply, lack of technical know-how on using the online platform, and limited ICT infrastructure/tools. The unique challenges affected some of the interviewed students' ability to upload assignments and complete class quizzes on time. Although students considered the adoption of the online modality of instruction as the best way to continue education in this

COVID-19 era, they reached a consensus that the online instruction was ineffective. Some of the students termed the learning experience in 2020 as a "year lost" in the context of education. The inequalities in the online instruction as a result of the COVID-19 crisis is a threat to the Sustainable Development Goal Four (4) and No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). Hence, the challenges to the online learning need to be mitigated using novel, innovative, and cost-effective methods which address the frugal needs of students in Ghana.

Table 1 Qualitative data on the effectiveness and barriers of the online learning in Ghana

One best and non-expensive way to curb the difficulties of the online learning is the adoption of mobile technologies for education delivery. A large body of research have underscored mobile technologies as a cheap way for both offline and online instruction, and more robust in terms of internet connectivity than conventional desktops and laptops (Curum & Khedo, 2021; France, Lee, Maclachlan, & McPhee, 2020). Kim & Padilla (2020) specifically recommends the use of handheld mobile devices with its affordances for education delivery in this pandemic era. Its omnipresent features allow learners to study at anywhere and at anytime. Additionally, e-learning centers can be constructed by various HE institutions to charge minimum fee from students willing to use the limited ICT infrastructures in the schools to engage in the online learning. Because initial fees from students normally goes to other sectors for developmental projects, money generated from the e-learning centers would be only meant for managing and sustainable the e-learning platform. Such money would not be allocated to other departments of the university. Also, it behoves on policymakers in education to construct more ICT facilities at the schools and distribute ICT gadgets (e.g. cellphones and tablets customized for e-learning) to students at a subsidized cost/no fee. This could help replace the "one laptop, one student" policy which failed to achieve its intended goal (Education Sector Performance Report, 2012). Again, educators need to adopt motivational strategies to promote the effectiveness of the online learning. Educators can liaise with internet service providers in the country such as MTN and Vodaphone to provide students with subsidized/free WIFI and data bundles at a high bandwidth only for learning purposes. Teachers can be given incentives to boost their morale to spend extra hours with students and dedicate more efforts towards the instruction. Moreover, school administrators must hire technical experts in e-learning to manage the learning management systems (LMS) to address all future glitches. Frequent supervision and evaluation of the online learning experience will inform instructors the effectiveness of the online modality of instruction. Furthermore, a blended approach can be adopted by institutions with limited physical space such that students who are geographically distant have the online learning, and those near/on campus have onsite instruction while maintaining the health protocols advocated by the World Health Organization. (WHO, 2020). Another way to solve problems with electricity is the usage of solar panels. Finally, to foster

e-learning acceptance by faculty staff and students, school leaders can boost their self-efficacy by using gamification approaches and collaborative e-learning.

Online learning has become a necessity with the surprised emergence of the COVID-19. In a positive vein, it will help with the massification of online learning which has been previously met with resistance in many universities in Ghana and peer countries. However, an academic year/semester might be "lost" (rendered futile) if the challenges arising from the adoption of online learning are not addressed. I passionately plea with educators and policymakers in education to address these contextual factors affecting the smooth delivery of instruction. The digital divide if not solved, will result in inequalities in education in this digital age where many institutions are adopting digital technologies in education to boost their economy.