

# Planning, Development, and Challenges in Implementing Online Courses at The Gambia College – A Case Study

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## ABSTRACT

Integrating online learning into tertiary and higher education institutions has become increasingly essential, particularly in response to global shifts in educational delivery. The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 underscored the urgent need for institutions, especially in The Gambia, to adopt e-learning as an alternative to traditional face-to-face education. Even though The Gambia College did not do much then, it is now taking significant steps in this direction, developing and implementing online courses to enhance access to education.

This case study examines the planning, development, and challenges of implementing online courses at The Gambia College. It explores the strategic framework adopted, including curriculum adaptation, faculty training, formulating an Open and Distance Learning (ODL) policy and strategy plan, and investments in technological infrastructure. The paper outlines the key developmental phases, which include course design, platform selection, training, and engagement strategies for staff and students.

Additionally, the study identifies challenges faced by academic staff, students, and administrative support staff, ranging from digital literacy gaps and resistance to change to inadequate internet connectivity and financial constraints. The paper concludes with lessons learned and recommendations for overcoming these challenges and optimising the integration of digital learning in higher education, particularly in The Gambia.

## INTRODUCTION

Integrating online learning into tertiary and higher education became increasingly vital during the COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic served as a wake-up call for many institutions, including those in The Gambia, but also exposed the weaknesses of traditional face-to-face instruction and underscored the need for digital alternatives. While immediate responses in The Gambia were limited due to infrastructural and capacity constraints, the experience highlighted a clear gap and opportunity in the educational system.

In the broader African context, the adoption of online learning has progressed gradually, though hampered by challenges such as inadequate digital infrastructure, limited internet access, low digital literacy, and financial limitations (World Bank, 2020). Nevertheless, across the continent, institutions are increasingly embracing digital transformation as part of long-term educational reform strategies.

The Gambia College, vital for training teachers, health workers, and agricultural professionals, initially depended on face-to-face instruction. In the early 2000s, it embraced Distance Education to increase the number of qualified teachers through printed modules, allowing student teachers to study independently and submit assignments. This blended approach combined face-to-face sessions with distance learning, enabling the College to expand its student intake and address the significant demand for qualified teachers. However, after successfully training enough teachers, the College reviewed and transitioned its distance education programme to full-time face-to-face training, reflecting changing educational needs.

In recent years, particularly after the COVID-19 pandemic, the Gambia College has taken deliberate steps toward integrating online learning into its teaching and learning activities. This activity includes formulating an Open and Distance Learning (ODL) policy and strategy, adapting the online delivery curriculum, building faculty and staff

capacity, and investing in digital platforms and infrastructure. The Commonwealth of Learning supported these activities, providing financial and technical support.

This case study examines The Gambia College's journey from planning and development to implementation of online courses. It highlights the strategies adopted, the institutional commitment involved, and the challenges encountered. In doing so, it contributes to the growing discourse on online learning in low-resource contexts. It offers insights for institutions seeking similar transitions in and outside the Gambia.

To guide this investigation, the study is structured around the following research questions:

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What institutional strategies and planning mechanisms were employed in developing and implementing online learning at The Gambia College?
2. How do students and lecturers perceive and experience the effectiveness of the newly introduced online learning platform?
3. What key challenges emerged during the implementation of online learning, and what measures were taken by the institution to address them?
4. What lessons can be drawn from this implementation, and what recommendations can be made to support the scaling of online learning in low-resource contexts such as The Gambia?

## RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The study aims to:

1. Examine the strategic planning processes and institutional preparedness underpinning the implementation of online learning at The Gambia College.
2. Analyse the development of online courses, focusing on platform selection, staff capacity-building and instructional design.
3. Evaluate students' and lecturers' experiences and perceptions regarding the functionality, accessibility, and pedagogical value of the online learning environment.
4. Identify the significant challenges and barriers encountered during the implementation phase and assess the effectiveness of institutional responses.
5. Extract key lessons learned and formulate evidence-based recommendations to inform future digital learning initiatives in similarly constrained educational contexts.

## PURPOSE AND SCOPE

The primary purpose of this paper is to examine the process of introducing and implementing online Learning at The Gambia College as a case study within the broader context of digital transformation in higher education. The study aims to document and analyse the institutional strategies, developmental stages, and challenges in transitioning from a traditional, face-to-face mode of instruction to a more flexible, technology-enabled learning environment.

The paper also explores the planning and design of online courses, formulating an Open and Distance Learning (ODL) policy and strategic framework, faculty and staff training initiatives, and selecting and deploying appropriate technological platforms. It also assesses engagement strategies developed to support academic and administrative stakeholders during the transition.

The scope of the study includes a critical analysis of the challenges encountered by the institution, such as limited digital infrastructure, low levels of digital literacy, resistance to pedagogical change, and financial constraints, as well as how these were navigated or remain ongoing concerns. By highlighting these realities, the paper seeks to draw attention to the practical considerations and contextual factors that influence the implementation of online

learning in low-resource environments. It also provides actionable insights and lessons learned to inform policy formulation, institutional planning, and future innovations in online education in The Gambia and similar settings.

## METHODOLOGY

The study provides a detailed analysis and interpretation of findings based on responses from students and lecturers. Data was collected using survey questionnaires supplemented with open-ended questions to enrich the understanding of certain opinions and enable more comprehensive conclusions. Quantitative responses were processed using Excel, while qualitative data underwent thematic analysis involving coding and categorisation to identify patterns.

Respondents were divided into two cohorts: Cohort A included 339 students, though not all completed every question due to optionality based on preceding responses. At the same time, Cohort B consisted of 15 lecturers who contributed insights from an instructional perspective. The study employed a case study design, a method well-suited for gathering detailed data and insights on specific events that influence behaviours and responses (Yin, 2018). The abrupt transition to online learning created a need for innovative approaches, affecting students' adaptability and lecturers' course delivery methods.

Students and staff were given access to fill out online evaluation questionnaires to capture staff and students' perceptions of online learning's effectiveness and document the challenges encountered during implementation. Observations during training sessions, course development, and supplementary reports added depth to the analysis.

Creswell and Creswell (2017) highlight the importance of survey questionnaires in capturing first-hand information about personal experiences, perceptions, and challenges. This study utilised a five-point Likert scale questionnaire to assess two key areas: (a) participants' perceptions of the effectiveness of online learning and (b) challenges related to accessing and utilising online educational resources.

The research focused on students newly introduced to Online Learning and lecturers directly involved in course development and delivery. Rather than attempting to generalise findings, the study prioritised understanding participants' experiences and their adaptations to online learning environments (Yin, 2018). The insights gained were instrumental in enhancing The Gambia College's online learning practices, improving their implementation and overall effectiveness.

This paper benefited from using Generative AI (ChatGPT and Grammarly) for editorial support. Specifically, it was used to assist with summarising, restructuring, and improving the clarity and coherence of the text. No AI tools were used for data collection, generation, or analysis.

## THE EVOLUTION OF TEACHER EDUCATION AT THE GAMBIA COLLEGE: A FOCUS ON ACCESS, QUALITY, AND REFORM

The Gambia College has historically served as the country's primary institution for training teachers at the nursery, lower basic (primary), and upper basic (junior secondary) school levels. Before establishing the University of The Gambia in 1999, teachers for senior secondary schools were trained mainly at universities outside the country. This reliance on foreign-trained personnel contributed to a significant presence of expatriate and contract teachers within the education system. At one point, over 70% of teachers in senior secondary schools were non-Gambian (Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education [MoBSE], 2005).

To combat a severe shortage of trained teachers, especially at the Lower Basic School level, the Gambia College launched an intensive teacher training initiative in the late 1990s, supported by the World Bank and the Ministry of Education—the initiative aimed to increase access to teacher education and enhance teaching quality, focusing on rural areas.

A key development was introducing a distance education programme catering to untrained in-service teachers and those interested in becoming teachers. The first year included face-to-face instruction, while the subsequent years utilised distance learning, allowing student-teachers to work in schools while continuing their education remotely. This model significantly filled teaching gaps and contributed to training most Lower Basic School teachers in the country from 1999 to 2017.

Between 2012 and 2015, a significant curriculum review of the Primary Teacher and Higher Teachers' Certificate programmes was carried out to align them with current pedagogical standards and national development goals. Reforms included updated curricula, shortened programme durations, and the introduction of a Higher Certificate in Primary Education, which elevated qualification requirements for primary teachers. These changes underscored the effectiveness of flexible training methods, like distance education, in enhancing teacher quality in resource-limited contexts.

### INSTITUTIONAL READINESS AND POLICY DEVELOPMENT FOR ONLINE AND DISTANCE LEARNING AT THE GAMBIA COLLEGE

The Gambia College had previously engaged in distance education, but these efforts were uncoordinated and lacked a guiding framework. Recognising the need for a structured approach, the institution developed an Open and Distance Learning (ODL) policy and strategic plan, supported by a consultant. The aim was to guide staff in creating and implementing ODL strategies. While there was enthusiasm for the initiative, institutional readiness was limited due to staff inexperience in policy development and digital pedagogy, a common challenge in emerging higher education systems (Jung, 2005).

The consultant conducted training sessions and workshops for academic and administrative staff to address these gaps, raising awareness of ODL principles and policy implementation. Additionally, stakeholders, including teaching staff, administrative personnel, and external partners, were involved in the policy development process, fostering a sense of ownership. After the policy was finalised, training sessions on the Moodle Learning Management System (LMS) were conducted to equip ICT personnel and select academic staff for online course design and support.

The most challenging phase of the ODL process was developing online courses. Lecturers were tasked with creating content for traditional courses; however, this phase faced delays as some staff were hesitant in the absence of the consultant. This prolonged timeline led to inconsistent quality and a labour-intensive review process. A second training phase with a resident consultant improved staff participation and increased course development, but challenges remained with course uploads.

Despite these obstacles, the College committed to launching online courses. By January 2025, 20 courses were successfully uploaded to Moodle, ready for student registration. While some staff voiced concerns about the premature launch and students faced affordability issues, enrolment indicated a growing acceptance of digital learning within the College (Unwin et al., 2010).

**Table 1: Sociodemographic Information of Student Respondents**

<b>Programme</b>			
	Advanced Diploma Secondary	172	52.1
	Advanced Diploma Primary (In-service)	12	3.6
	Advanced Diploma Primary (Pre-service)	114	34.5
	Advanced Diploma ECD	32	9.7
<b>Year in Programme of Study</b>			
	1	52	15.3
	2	143	42.2
	3	144	42.5

Source: Google survey (2025)

## FINDINGS

The findings of this study explore the experiences of both students and lecturers in navigating and engaging with the online learning platform. A structured, closed, open-ended questionnaire gathered responses from 339 students and 15 lecturers. Quantitative data was processed using Excel, while qualitative responses were thematically analysed to extract recurring issues and insights. The analysis is divided into two groups: Cohort A, representing the students, and Cohort B, representing the lecturers. This section focuses on the responses of Cohort A, highlighting key themes that emerged from the data.

Most student respondents were female, accounting for 56.3% of the total, and most were enrolled in the Advanced Diploma Secondary programme. Regarding academic progression, most students were in their second or third year of study, suggesting a respondent base with substantial exposure to the institutional academic environment.

When accessing the online platform, just over two-thirds (67.5%) of students reported being able to enrol in their desired online courses successfully. However, a notable 32.5% encountered difficulties. These challenges were primarily attributed to technical barriers, such as insufficient digital literacy, login issues, and poor network connectivity. These early access hurdles significantly shaped students' initial perceptions of the platform.

**Table 2** illustrates the extent of these initial technical challenges, showing that more than half (54.8%) of students experienced technical issues during their first week of online learning.

**Table 2: Did you encounter any technical issues with the platform during the first week?**

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	182	54.8
No	150	45.2

Source: Google survey (2025)

The usability of the platform emerged as another critical issue. Approximately one-third of the respondents found the platform 'very difficult' to navigate. Students cited unclear instructions and persistent technical problems as significant deterrents. More than half of the respondents (54.8%) reported facing technical issues during their first week using the platform, setting a discouraging tone for their online learning journey.

Support mechanisms, or the lack thereof, further compounded these challenges. **Table 3** presents students' responses on whether they received sufficient support when starting online courses.

**Table 3: Have you received adequate support to start your online courses?**

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	165	48.2
No	177	51.8

Source: Google survey (2025)

Support mechanisms, or the lack thereof, further compounded these challenges. A slight majority of students (51.8%) felt they did not receive adequate support when starting their online courses. Experiences with the support team and instructors were mixed, while some students acknowledged responsiveness, a considerable number expressed dissatisfaction with delays or a complete lack of feedback.

Despite the setbacks, students acknowledged certain benefits of the online learning approach, especially the flexibility and time-saving aspects. However, many were dissatisfied with the overall learning experience. Complaints ranged from limited interactivity and vague communication to an overwhelming workload. The

structure and content of courses were also called into question, with several students stating that the materials did not meet their expectations or were too demanding given the course pacing.

In reflecting on their experiences, students offered suggestions to improve the platform. These included expanding internet access, especially for students in rural areas, introducing mandatory orientation sessions for first-time users, and improving the overall platform interface. More transparent instructor communication, a more manageable workload, and opportunities for live, interactive sessions were among the most frequently mentioned improvements.

Turning to Cohort B, the study gathered responses from 15 lecturers across various academic ranks and programmes to evaluate their experiences with the newly implemented online platform. **Table 4** provides a summary of the sociodemographic profile of these respondents.

**Table 4. Sociodemographic Information of Student Respondents**

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	9	60
Female	6	40
<b>Status</b>		
Senior Lecturer	4	26.7
Lecturer	8	53.3
Assistant Lecturer	3	20
<b>Programme taught online</b>		
Advanced Diploma Secondary	6	40
Advanced Diploma Primary In-service	5	33.3
Advanced Diploma Primary Pre-service	4	26.7
Advanced Diploma in Early Childhood Development	0	0

Source: Google survey (2025)

As shown in the table, 60% of respondents were male and 40% female, with 53.3% serving as lecturers, 26.7% as senior lecturers, and 20% as assistant lecturers. Most participants were engaged in teaching the Advanced Diploma Secondary (40%) and Primary In-service (33.3%) programmes.

Most lecturers (60%) had prior experience with online teaching. When asked to assess their experience teaching on the platform, 73.3% rated it as ‘Good,’ 20% described it as ‘Very Good,’ and only one reported it as ‘Somewhat Poor.’ Moodle, the platform in use, was widely regarded as user-friendly; all respondents found it easy to navigate, with 46.7% rating it ‘Very Easy’ and 53.3% as ‘Somewhat Easy.’

The platform's most appreciated features included course content upload, assignment submission, and online assessments. While discussion forums, student performance tracking, and report generation were recognised as beneficial, they were less prominently used, indicating potential areas for enhancement.

Lecturers identified key challenges faced by students, notably internet connectivity issues (27.3%), difficulty using Moodle (21.2%), and lack of access to digital devices and data (combined 33.3%). These barriers contributed to limited engagement, with 60% of lecturers describing student participation as ‘Neutral’ and only a tiny minority (6.7%) viewing it as ‘Very Active.’

To promote participation, lecturers employed methods such as discussion forums (25%), messaging reminders (19.4%), and interactive quizzes (16.7%). WhatsApp and live sessions were moderately used, while online orientation was less frequent.

Regarding assessment, most lecturers (86.7%) found the platform ‘Somewhat Effective’ in evaluating students’ knowledge and skills. The most common assessment tools were online quizzes and discussion participation (23.1% each), followed by essays, group projects, and active interaction on the platform.

Lecturers highlighted the main advantages of online teaching at The Gambia College, which include increased flexibility, reduced pressure on physical infrastructure, inclusivity, and access to marginalised groups. However, key challenges remained: unequal access to digital tools, inconsistent internet connectivity, limited technical support, low staff commitment, and insufficient training.

For improved sustainability and effectiveness of the platform, lecturers recommended increased sensitisation for staff and students, formal recognition of staff contributions to Online Learning, investment in technical and physical infrastructure, expansion to other programmes, integration of plagiarism detection tools, and continuous capacity-building initiatives.

## CHALLENGES ENCOUNTERED

The implementation of online courses at The Gambia College faced multiple challenges. The digital literacy gap was a significant issue affecting students and staff, with one in five lecturers lacking basic digital skills. This required extensive training, which delayed course development.

Resistance to change also emerged, as some staff doubted the feasibility of online learning due to poor internet infrastructure, while many students preferred traditional classes. The College made online course registration mandatory to encourage participation, though some students registered late despite reminders.

Financial incentives were lacking, leading to decreased motivation among staff who sought compensation for course development. Additionally, time constraints stretched the initial three-week project into nine months, creating stress for facilitators and participants. Lastly, technological limitations and slow internet speeds in The Gambia further hindered access and engagement, complicating the transition to online learning.

The Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991) provides a valuable lens for understanding these challenges. Attitudes, perceived behavioural control, and subjective norms influenced how staff and students approached online learning. Positive personal experiences encouraged acceptance, aligning with Mishra et al. (2020), who noted favourable attitudes toward technology-enhanced adoption.

However, usability issues and insufficient training weakened students' confidence, echoing Venkatesh et al.'s (2003) findings on the impact of ease of use. Social expectations and institutional support played a role, but poor connectivity and device access made individual attitudes and perceived control more decisive.

Evaluation findings revealed technical problems, limited internet, and inadequate training, but highlighted benefits. Students appreciated the flexibility, improved research skills, and independence that online learning fostered.

## LESSONS LEARNED AND KEY INSIGHTS

One of the most critical lessons from implementing online learning at The Gambia College was that neither staff nor students felt ready for the transition. Success depended less on complete preparedness and more on leadership, commitment, and belief in the initiative's potential (Bates, 2015). Capacity building was essential; all categories of staff, academic, technical, and administrative, required training, emphasising inclusive capacity development (Anderson, 2008).

Selecting the right platform was another key decision. Moodle proved most suitable for The Gambia College due to its open-source nature, adaptability, and ease of use in low-resource settings (Dougiamas & Taylor, 2003). The training process also revealed the need for flexibility in time allocation, as participants had varying levels of ICT competence.

Infrastructure challenges, volatile internet, and electricity significantly affected progress. Such barriers, common in low-income countries, threaten the sustainability of online learning (Unwin et al., 2010). Institutional policies and strategic planning played a crucial role, providing direction and accountability (Bozkurt et al., 2020).

The dedicated staff made a significant difference, fostering a collaborative environment vital to the programme's success. Ongoing communication and clear policies linking incentives to tasks proved essential. Finally, robust technology infrastructure is indispensable for ensuring long-term success (Latchem, 2014).

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The Gambia College aims to transition into a more robust online learning environment by adopting a strategic, multi-faceted approach guided by the Theory of Planned Behaviour. Key recommendations include:

**Enhancing Digital Infrastructure:** Reliable campus-wide internet access is essential for all students, particularly those in underserved rural areas. Strategic partnerships with telecommunications providers could offer subsidised data packages and affordable digital devices.

**Building Capacity and Professional Development:** To effectively manage the shift to online learning, continuing, tailored ICT training is vital for academic, administrative, and technical staff. Digital pedagogy should be integrated into professional development and supported by peer-mentorship schemes for those less familiar with technology.

**Improving User Support:** Establishing a dedicated helpdesk and peer-support teams will provide real-time assistance to users facing challenges. Mandatory orientation programs for students and lecturers should be implemented to enhance familiarity with online platforms and boost digital confidence.

**Incentivising Participation:** Recognising and rewarding the efforts required for quality online course design and delivery is crucial. Clear policies on remuneration, workload compensation, recognition, and award systems can motivate staff and encourage innovative teaching practices.

**Promoting Student Engagement:** Online courses should incorporate interactive features like multimedia content and live sessions to foster engagement and community. Regular reviews of course materials are also necessary to maintain relevance and manage workload.

**Aligning Policy with Strategy:** The College's Open and Distance Learning (ODL) policy must regularly reflect technological advancements and stakeholder feedback. The online learning strategy should align with broader institutional goals, especially concerning quality assurance and accreditation.

**Monitoring and Evaluation:** A robust framework is essential for monitoring and evaluating online learning initiatives. Collecting data on learner outcomes, user satisfaction, and platform performance will help the College refine its online education strategy.

**Integrating Behavioural Insights:** By improving usability, enhancing training, strengthening communication, and providing affordable resources, the College can positively influence user attitudes and intentions towards adopting online learning, which is crucial for the success of digital education.

## CONCLUSION:

The journey toward implementing online learning at The Gambia College has been challenging and illuminating. The Gambia College made significant strides—from developing an Open and Distance Learning (ODL) policy to piloting its first suite of online courses using Moodle.

The case study revealed that while institutional commitment and strategic planning laid a strong foundation, the initiative's success depended heavily on human factors such as staff motivation, digital literacy, and student engagement. Notably, capacity-building, leadership commitment, and effective communication were critical enablers, while infrastructural deficiencies, resistance to change, and lack of financial incentives posed persistent barriers.

Despite the numerous obstacles from poor connectivity and low digital readiness to uneven staff participation, implementing 20 online courses marks a significant achievement. Students' feedback reflected the potential and pitfalls of digital learning in a low-resource context. Flexibility, convenience, and improved research skills emerged as positives, while usability issues and limited support diminished the experience for many.

The implementation process illuminated a key lesson: Success in digital transformation does not demand perfection but a willingness to adapt, a strong institutional vision, and continuous investment in people and infrastructure. As The Gambia College moves forward, this pioneering effort provides a valuable blueprint for other institutions in similar contexts aiming to embrace the future of education.

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