

Prospects and Challenges of the WFH practices: A case of Zimbabwe Open University

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper was to come up with the prospects and challenges that came up because of the Work From Home (WFH) that was adopted by the institutions of higher and tertiary education in Zimbabwe. WFH practices came up because of the restrictions that were imposed because of COVID- 19 pandemic. The study was done upon the Zimbabwe Open University(ZOU) academic employees. The study made use of the mixed methods methodology. This methodology enabled the researcher to expose both the qualitative and the quantitative aspects of the WFH practices in terms of its use and impact upon service delivery. This study made use of the Explanatory Sequential Research Design. This research design required that quantitative data be collected and analysed followed by qualitative data collection and analysis. Thus, the researcher had to explain the quantitative data through the qualitative data. Purposive sampling was utilised to enable the selection of participants with required information. The target population were the Lecturers in Zimbabwe. Purposively chosen were the 80 Zimbabwe Open University lecturers on the WFH programme. The questionnaires were distributed online using the ZOU groups staff emails. The quantitative data was collected using questionnaires. The participants included some qualitative data on the open-ended questions upon the questionnaires. The quantitative data was collected in tables and clustered column charts were obtained from the collected data. The qualitative data was synchronised with the quantitative data and comments were produced on the prospects and challenges of the WFH practices. The findings of the study: educators need funding for procurement of best network services & ICT infrastructure, lecturers lack data bundles, there is poor internet connectivity in Zimbabwe. Lecturers on WFH are happy with the new normal (WFH). Lastly the WFH practices improve the service delivery of institutions of learning.

Key Words: Work From Home practices, COVID-19, internet connectivity, remote working, Employee self Service (ESS).

1.0 Introduction

It is imperative to recall that COVID-19 resulted in a dire need for implementing the work from home system (WFH) given that the physical working environment was no longer favourable. This is in synch with Marcus (2022), who postulated that with the advent of COVID- 19, there came a need to shift operations to remote work. This way of operating

was seen to reduce the costs of the unproductive commuting (Marcus, 2022). There was need to separate the human resources totally to avoid employees infecting each other. This posed a lot of unique obstacles to the business environment. The WFH system is interchangeably referred to as the remote working system and it came up with a new business environment. This new environment was associated with virtual interactions of the employees spreading further to family members and pets while operating from their homes (Ralph et al, 2020). This scenario, whereby employees operate at the comfort of their homes ought to be assessed to come up with the prospects and challenges that are linked to it.

Mubika (2021) carried out a study where an exploration of the challenges and opportunities of work from home (WFH) in Zimbabwean organisations. The key objective was to make an evaluation of the challenges and opportunities of the home-based working scenario. The study employed a qualitative approach. Mabika(2021) discovered that the work from home scenario created more challenges for the work environment than the normal scenario.

Another study was carried out by Gatsi, Devi and Devi (2021), who discovered that WFH has lots of challenges in third world countries due to socio economic constraints which are a barrier to acquisition of the requisite devices and internet facilities. Gatsi et al(2021) specifically concentrated upon the challenges that women face while on the WFH schemes in Zimbabwe's Harare firms. The observation was that WFH schemes are not suitable for women since they tend to overwhelm them with extra work given that they have some house chores to attend to. This study exposed a need for researchers to partake further research on WFH on a gender basis.

According to Maurizio (2021) WFH was termed teleworking and in Caribbean it was associated with challenges that included challenges of dealing with working hours, overtime pay, reimbursement of expenses, provision of equipment, health, and safety requirements, as well as data protection and security. More so employees that were engaged in professional jobs were more likely to engage in the WFH schemes than the contrary. This scenario simulates the current study given that only the academic staff members were chosen for the pilot programme of working from home.

Mazikana (2021) carried out a study on Zimbabwe organisations where he discovered that most workers in the organisations operated from home, but they had not been accorded adequate training to make use of the new work from home system. For some employees, the MiFi devices that they were given had connectivity challenges causing poor reception. Mazikana (2021) noted challenges that included distractions, communication challenges causing loss of focus, lack of motivation and time management. According to Gupta and

Ashok (2016), MiFi is a mobile router cum access point device aimed at providing LTE connectivity to devices supporting only the WLAN. Thus, it acts as a bridge between LTE and WiFi which is simply a mobile router with display. The MiFi allows an individual to connect his or her notebook, tablet, laptop, desktop and any other smart phones with WiFi connectivity (Gupta & Ashok, 2016). The benefits of WFH include saving time from commuting to work which is stressful (Mazikana, 2021).

The above background agitated the researchers to want partaking this study and come up with the paper titled '**Prospects and challenges of the WFH practices: A case of Zimbabwe Open University Lecturers**'. This is hoped to come up with a road map of how best the remote working practice should be done especially for the academics in Zimbabwe.

1.1 Literature Review

Work from home (WFH) was defined as a scenario whereby firms or institutions try to reduce costs through employing remote workers. This way of employing ensures that firms employ globally, hence bringing talent to the firm (Coffey & Wolf, 2018).

1.1.1 Working from home constraints

Basing on a study by Mazikana (2021), WFH practice was defined by Johnson (2017) as a scenario whereupon an employee partakes the essential responsibilities of his or her job while remaining at home and utilising information and communications technology (ICT). According to Okemba (2018), a study was carried out in Japan where WFH was referred to as teleworking and the employees that engaged in it faced some challenges that included non-conducive conditions at home, lack of ICT devices and low experience among employees.

First and foremost, it is imperative to clarify the key terms, work from home and remote working. These terms though used interchangeably, they differ. Remote work entails the employee will be operating at a place other than the employer's place which includes the home and several other places. On the other hand, work from home requires that the employee operate solely at his or her home premises (Marcus, (2022)). In this paper these terms shall be used interchangeably though.

In Zimbabwe the WFH system was agitated by the advent of COVID-19 which saw most firms and institutions of Higher and tertiary learning embarking upon this system. This was

meant to reduce physical contact amongst co-workers and even amongst employees and stakeholders. This later became a blessing to most firms which saw WFH as a new normal with a handful of benefits. According to Iwu, Okeke-Uzodike, Anwana, Iwu and Esambe (2022) very little literature exists upon the WFH experiences of academics pertaining to challenges and ways to improve their work from home satisfaction. This study was carried out upon South African University academics. This has triggered a need to partake this study which shall mainly focus upon the Zimbabwe Open University academics who were chosen for the work from home programme. The challenges presented by remote working include career stagnancy, isolation, micromanagement, technological difficulties, poor internet connectivity, distractions from childcare responsibilities at home, and a lack of accountability.

Cliffe Dekker Hofmeyer(2022) posited that remote working has risks associated with it which included some workers getting access to sensitive organisational information while using networks which are not safe. They alluded that employees make use of personal devices for organisational purposes, breached health and safety measures and they had inadequate supervision and performance monitoring. The challenges of the work from home system were retarded career development, isolation of employees, hassles with ICT devices, and low internet signal strength (Cliffe Dekker Hofmeyer, 2022).

Remote workers lack an opportunity to interact with co-workers socially. Thus Coffey & Wolf, 2018), cited Berkman and Syne (1979) posited that social interaction is essential since it keeps the employees healthy. Therefore, according to Coffey and Wolf (2018) working from home causes employees to lack moments of in-person, face-to-face unstructured time with their peers. Thus, the employees lack affiliation to their peer members. Coffey and Wolf (2018) realised that employees who are physically visible to management meet the needs of what is termed visibility. They realised that employees operating remotely were not offered equal opportunities pertaining to career advancement opportunities and major projects as compared to their co-workers. According to Coffey and Wolf (2018), project managers would favour onsite members basing on their proximity and day to day familiarity. This becomes a great challenge to those operating remotely.

Coffey and Wolf (2018) noted that remote working resulted in marginalisation of the employees operating from home. This resulted from the fact that occasionally the remote workers would be excluded from ad hoc conversations that take place outside of scheduled meetings. Coffey and Wolf(2018) posited that excluding employees of the team from impromptu meetings results in the team getting accustomed to the remote members

not being around.

According to Hertel, Konradt and Orlikowski (2007) as cited by Coffey and Wolf (2018) remote work management is challenging since there is a challenge of managing direct control over work which requires managers to adopt delegative management principles. This means that remote team members are expected to fulfil these delegated management functions (Coffey & Wolf, 2018).

Ugwuanyi, Okeke and Shawe (2021) carried out a study in South Africa which revealed that most academics were prepared to embrace remote teaching and they suffered a lot of challenges on the course of executing their remote work duties. They further alluded that poor network connections and lack of data by both tutors and learners impacted negatively upon the virtualised teaching and learning.

A study was carried out by (Gatsi et al., 2021), who discovered that WFH was a challenge to the women in Harare, Zimbabwe since they failed to concentrate while at home due to the need to attend to the needs at home. Issues such as the need to attend to visitors and the house chores were cited as being more crucial to women than the job requirements.

1.2 Research questions?

- i) What challenges face the WFH lecturers?
- ii) What are the prospects of the WFH practice to university?
- iii) How best can the WFH be implemented?

1.3 Methodology

The study was grounded upon the mixed methods methodology. According to Christopher (2017), the mixed methods methodology enables the researcher to expose both the qualitative and the quantitative aspects of a phenomenon. Hence this methodology was used to enable the researcher to clearly show the benefits and challenges of the WFH through gathering and analysing both numerical and non-numerical data from the university employees. This study made use of the Explanatory Sequential Research Design. According to Creswell and Plano Clark, (2018), this research design required that quantitative data be collected and analysed followed by qualitative data collection and analysis. Thus, the

researcher had to explain the quantitative data through the qualitative data. Purposive sampling was utilised to enable the selection of participants with required information.

The target population were the employees and stakeholders at one of the universities in Zimbabwe. The Zimbabwe Open university was purposively chosen since there were lecturers who were on the WFH contracts. This was however initiated with the advent of COVID- 19. As part of the target population were the 80 lecturers on the WFH programme AND 5 administration staff members.

1.4 Results and discussions

The quantitative data was tabulated and put in clustered column charts while the qualitative data was thematically discussed.

1.4.1 Quantitative data

Numerical data was gathered, tabulated, and clustered charts were then drafted.

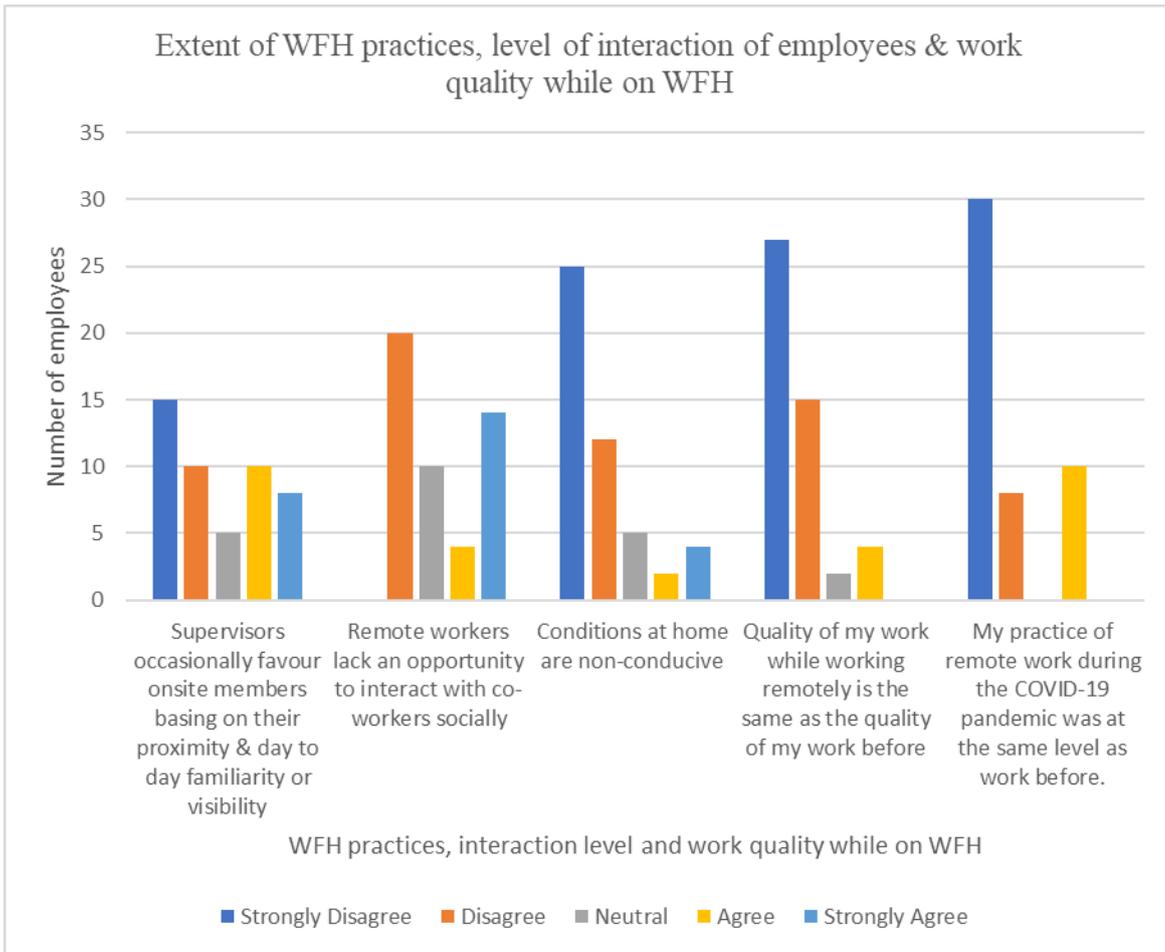


Figure 1.0 Extent of WFH practices, level of interaction of employees & work quality while on WFH

Source: Primary Data

About 52% of the respondents were of the notion that there was no favouring of onsite members by supervisors. Thus, the supervisors felt the supervisors did not favour basing on proximity and day to day familiarity of the members. This is in contrast with the assertion by Coffey and Wolf (2018) who postulated that management tend to favour the onsite employees. About 38% respondents felt there was a bit of favouring of onsite members. Only 10% respondents were indifferent.

Forty two percent (42%) respondents did not agree that remote workers lack an opportunity

to interact with co-workers socially. About 21% were indifferent. On the other hand, 47% respondents sincerely felt remote workers lack an opportunity to interact with co-workers.

About 77% respondents were of the notion that conditions at home were conducive for the WFH practice. Ten percent (10%) respondents were indifferent on this aspect while 13% felt the conditions at home were non- conducive.

About 88% respondents felt the quality of work while on remote work was not the same as that on physical work practice. Only 45 respondents were indifferent. About 8% said the quality of work differs.

Seventy nine percent (79%) respondents were of the notion that the work practice during COVID- 19 era differed from the practice before COVID- 19 era.

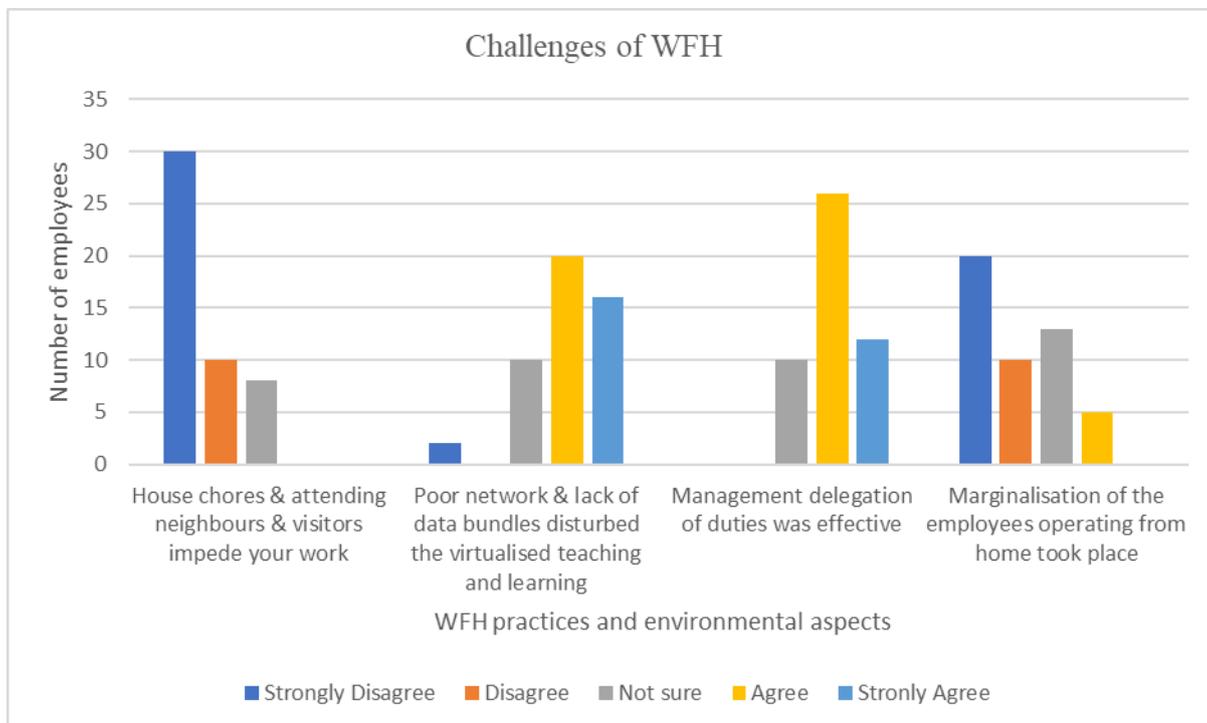


Figure 1.1 Challenges encountered by Lecturers while on WFH

Source: Primary Data

Figure 1.1 shows the extent of challenges that were encountered by the lecturers while on WFH. Thus, 63% of the respondents strongly disagreed that they were disturbed by

engaging in house chores. Thirty percent (30%) of the respondents disagreed that they were disturbed by engaging in house chores. On the other hand, 17% of them were indifferent since they said they were not sure of what to say. The results clearly show that the employees on WFH were not meaningfully disturbed by house chores. This is in contrast with Okemba (2018), who carried out a study in Japan and gathered that employees who were on WFH reiterated that the home environment was non-conducive for working.

Basing of the results on figure 1.1, about 75% of the people that responded to the questions were of the notion that poor internet network connectivity and lack of data bundles seriously disturbed the virtualised teaching and learning process. Only 4% strongly felt that network and lack of data bundles were not disturbing the educators on the virtualised learning and teaching activities. Amongst the respondents, only 21% seemed to be indifferent when it comes to the idea that poor network connectivity and lack of data bundles affected the academic activities negatively. This was in synch with Ugwuanyi, Okeke and Shawe (2021) who carried out a study in South Africa and gathered that most academics, despite being prepared to embrace the remote working practice encountered challenges such as poor network connectivity and lack of data bundles for internet.

About 79% respondents were of the notion that management delegation of duties was effective during the WFH era. On the other hand, only 21% respondents were indifferent.

About 63% of the respondents were of the notion that there was no marginalisation of the employees operating from home. This is in contrast with Coffey and Wolf (2018) who purports that WFH resulted in marginalisation of employees who are on the WFH programme. Only 10% were of the contrary while 27% were indifferent.

Qualitative Data

Data gathered from the open ended questions was utilised to provide non numerical data.

Challenges and benefits of WFH to the lecturers

The researchers analysed the responses into several themes. The themes were gathered from the quantitative data gathered. Hence themes such as Internet Network Connectivity, Social interaction of employees, ICT gadgets, comparison of the work practice(WFH versus normal workplace operation) and marginalisation of employees.

Respondent A was of the notion that in some cases Infrastructure affected online delivery. Thus, bad network and electricity load shedding impacted negatively upon the WFH system. He however mentioned that he had no challenges since he installed the requisite infrastructure and had to say this:

‘In my individual capacity, I have not faced challenges as such because I was prepared for this arrangement. I have solar power and unlimited Wi-Fi at my home, I also have an office. Maybe what I can consider as a challenge is the fact that we are providing the community with water from our borehole as a community service and sometimes there tends to be high human movement which is a potential source for distractions. Otherwise so far so good. However, on the capacity of the faculty and department, there has been slow acceptance of the concept as supervisors are still suspicious thinking that those working from home could not be working as compared to those who report physically for work. There is need for a paradigm change such that they embrace the concept and adapt to it’.

This concurs with Malven (2015) who conducted a study in the Atlanta, Georgia metropolitan area. Malven (2015) did a study on managers’ perceptions of WFH employees, and the results indicated that managers perceived that teleworkers’ lack of physical presence in the workplace could negatively affect productivity levels.

Respondent B reiterated that network was a big challenge. Thus, for instance he cited that one of the service providers had very bad network which was not strong. This is in synch with Nyika and Motalenyane (2022) who insisted that most of the students (94%) indicated that they had internet connectivity challenges in the tertiary institutions in Zimbabwe during the COVID-19 era.

He also reiterated that another challenge was the occasional calling of the employees, this was worsened in situations where employees were called back to the physical station frequently.

Respondent C reiterated that limited internet bundles and load shedding were key challenges that were troubling the researchers. On the other hand, respondent D mentioned that the high cost of data bundles, unavailability of telephone services and network connectivity challenges are a big problem to the researchers. He also reiterated that the unavailability of co-workers when there is need for urgent communication amongst the team members also causes the flow of activities to be disturbed. The last challenge was lack of functional gadgets for online teaching e.g., laptops, cameras, headphones, and mic etc. This is in line with the findings of Tirivanhu, Mashingaidze and Nyoni (2013) who revealed that limited use of e-learning results from lack of computers and access to internet in offices on their study at the Midlands State University.

Respondent E mentioned that WFH causes lack of physical contact. Physical contact,

according to respondent E is crucial for certain types of work activities. According to respondent E:

‘Some colleagues think it is time off from university responsibilities. Power cuts rendered some unproductive due to conditions beyond their control. Lack of ICT equipment restricted participation by those who might have been interested.’

Respondent C said Universities should be encouraged to buy data bundles for the lecturers and there is need for purchasing of new updated laptops.

Respondent E suggested that in future such programmes like the WFH require that a brief at the beginning of the programme be used to set the record straight for those opting to work from home. The employees are not prepared to read lengthy circulars or memos. Conditions and exceptions could have been specified and colleagues would be free to ask questions to clarify conditions of the programme.

Another respondent reiterated that the University should assist the lecturers towards internet facilities installations at their homes and he cited ZOL as one good example which the lecturers would need to have connected at their places of residence. The member suggested that the funds so utilised can then be deducted from the salaries of the employees. The other challenge that was noted by the same respondent was about the occasional need to request the lecturers on WFH to report for work physically. He therefore recommended that the management should desist from calling back the employees on the WFH scheme but make use of more advanced Human Resources Information Systems. The member advocated for the use of ICT related systems. Thus the respondent surely meant the use of employee self service (ESS). According to Margatama (2017), Employee Self Service entails an application that offers online human resources services and personnel information management. It allows an employee to update their information for and information pertaining to their key result areas (Margatama, 2017).

One of the respondents said the WFH programme improved the management of time for the business. Thus, the employees managed to have ample time to partake their research work. The respondents went on to mention that with WFH, they manage to start work early. Attending work physically causes loss of time through travelling. For those in big cities like Harare, much time is lost on travelling to and from workplaces. More so there is some interference as the worker walks to the workplace. Thus, one might be attracted to incidences that take place as he/she walks to work.

Conclusions

- Bad internet connectivity and electricity load shedding impacted negatively upon the WFH system

- Lack of data bundles seriously disturbed the virtualised teaching and learning process.
- WFH programme improved the management of time for the business.
- Thus, the employees need funding for the internet facilities.
- Lack of ICT equipment restricted participation by those who might have been interested.
- Unavailability of co-workers when there is need for urgent communication amongst the team members also causes the flow of activities to be disturbed.
- Lack of functional gadgets for online teaching e.g., laptops, cameras, headphones, and microphone
- The lecturers on WFH were not marginalised by their supervisors; they were treated fairly being given adequate and just supervision.
- The lecturers are not disturbed by house chores while on WFH.
- Management delegation of duties was effective during the WFH era.
- The conditions at home were conducive for the WFH practice.
- Quality of work while on WFH was not the same as that on physical work practices. There was a remarkable improvement upon work coverage and quality when the WFH practices were implemented. This was because at home the professionals had less interference from their colleagues. More so in cities such as Harare, travelling to and from town is tiresome and time consuming. There is a lot of congestion which eats up upon the researchers' time. This causes most employees to arrive late for work. This is in line with Mazikana (2021) who realised that WFH enabled saving time from the stressful activity of commuting to work.

Generally, this study revealed that WFM scenario has more advantages for the academic staff. It gives them ample time to carry out their research activities. It reduces idle time for the lecturers. Also, at home there are less interferences. This is in line with Mabika(2021) who concluded that the work from home scenario created more challenges for the work environment than the normal scenario. The WFH system simply requires support through the government ensuring provision of ICT infrastructure. More so there is need for the Zimbabwean internet service providers to ensure adequate base stations are availed to enable the improvement of internet connectivity.

Recommendations

- There is need to ensure that the Employees Self System (ESS) is in place. This will enable the WFH lecturers to avoid being required to always need to revert to the hard copy documents.
- The institutions of higher and tertiary education should be provided with adequate ICT infrastructure

- Partnerships between Institutions of learning and Network Service Providers (NSP) are to be implemented. This will enable good business in terms of discounts on purchases of internet backbone infrastructure and services. It will also enable the NSPs to be abreast with the quantity and quality of the bandwidth and strength of the network required by the institutions of learning.
- WFH should be adopted since it is highly beneficial to the Zimbabwean economy. Since learners are taught virtually this enables the Universities and colleges to globally enrol learners, hence gain foreign currency.
- Universities should assist the lecturers towards internet facilities installations at their homes.

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