

INTEGRATION OF ONLINE EDUCATION IN RURAL ZIMBABWEAN SECONDARY SCHOOLS: STRATEGIC PATHWAYS UNDER EDUCATION 5.0

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ABSTRACT

The integration of online education has become central to educational reform agendas worldwide, particularly in advancing equity and access in underserved contexts. In Zimbabwe, the Education 5.0 policy framework emphasizes technology-driven learning, innovation, and community engagement as pathways to producing skills-oriented graduates. However, the practical implementation of online education in rural secondary schools remains uneven and underexplored. This study investigates strategic pathways for integrating online education in rural Zimbabwean secondary schools, using selected schools in Mashonaland West Province as case studies. Guided by a pragmatic research philosophy, the study employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods design, combining questionnaire surveys and semi-structured interviews with students, teachers, and headmasters. Structural equation modelling (SEM) was used as the primary analytical technique to examine relationships among technological infrastructure, teacher readiness and digital competency, educational policy effectiveness, and student engagement with online learning platforms. Findings reveal that none of the examined institutional factors had a statistically significant direct effect on student engagement. However, motivation and content relevance emerged as significant drivers of engagement, while policy clarity and curriculum alignment were key components of perceived policy effectiveness. A significant covariance between infrastructural adequacy and policy effectiveness suggests the need for coordinated implementation. The study concludes that while Education 5.0 provides a progressive policy foundation, sustainable integration of online education in rural contexts requires context-sensitive, learner-centred strategies that align infrastructure provision, teacher capacity development, culturally relevant content, and actionable policies. Practical recommendations are offered to support scalable and sustainable online education in rural Zimbabwe.

Keywords: Education 5.0; Online Education; Rural Secondary Schools; Structural Equation Modelling; Zimbabwe