

Aligning Religious Education Learning Environment and Pedagogies to 21st Century Educational Changes in Higher Educational Institutions in Uganda

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Abstract

There has been much debate recently about the status and position of Religious Education (RE) in the school curriculum, mainly considering the government's decision to promote science subjects and technological innovations among learners. Religious Education is a demanding area of pedagogical education, as there is no universal method to systematically insert RE principles in children's education. The pedagogical approach to RE instruction and evaluation requires certain skills from teachers such as adequate training in a recognized institution, the ability to adjust to different changes taking place and situations, a holistic assessment of the student's performance, and involvement of the learners in the learning processes that has the potential to change their way of life. Pedagogical skills are indispensable for the teacher of RE, who must have greater sensitivity and empathy and deep religious convictions reflected in learner's behavior and in their way of relating with them. Unfortunately, the teaching of RE is examination-oriented coupled with cramming of facts that do not develop critical thinking and innovation skills. Changes in higher education teaching focus on the application of technologies in learning, overhauling the traditional curriculum, and producing a learner equipped with 21st-century skills, of which the teaching of RE in secondary schools should be part.

Keywords: Adaption, Religious Education, Environment, Pedagogies Align, and Higher Education

INTRODUCTION

UNESCO (1) reports that globally, over 1.2 billion children are out of school and classrooms due to COVID 19 lockdown and school closure. COVID 19 has dramatically changed education, with the distinctive rise of e-learning, whereby teaching is undertaken remotely and on digital platforms. Yet according to Gonzalo (2), many students lack digital devices, internet connection, insufficient training and preparation resulting in poor user experience and an un conducive learning environment. With this sudden shift away from the classroom in many parts of the world, student trainers have been advised to adopt online learning to reach out to learners who are still in their homes due to school closure but also to blend it with traditional teaching for final students who engage in face-to-face interactions with their teachers to complete their courses.

21st-Century Educational Changes

In this study, The Free Dictionary (3) defines aligning as adjusting into a proper relationship, to adhere to a prescribed course of action. Religious Education is the term given to education concerned with religion. It refers to education provided by an institution, Church, religious organization, for instruction in various religions, faith, or doctrine. It is sometimes referred to as religious studies. Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia (4) defines Religious

Education as the teaching of religious norms, values, and practices. This particular study implies that RE teacher trainers have to adapt RE learning environment and pedagogies to align with current changes in higher education. According to UNESCO (5), Pedagogy is the interaction between teachers, students, and the learning environment, and the learning tasks. It implies that students and teachers relate together as well as the instructional approaches implemented in the classroom. Learning environment refers to the diverse physical locations, contexts, and cultures in which students learn. It refers to the classroom and outdoor environment where learners can optimize the ability to learn. Align means to bring into line or alignment (6), whereas Higher Education means education beyond secondary school level (7).

Religious Education in secondary schools is often regarded as a subject for learners with weak minds and for this reason, many students and even teachers have a negative attitude towards the subject. Besides, RE is an elective subject in the national secondary school curriculum, which makes learners think that RE is an inferior subject for students rejected in sciences and mathematics (8). On the other hand, community members, religious leaders, and teachers argue that RE should be taught as a compulsory subject in a conducive school environment to instill in learners' healthy

relationships, communication, network, collaboration, critical thinking, resilience, and behavioral change. In Norfolk, RE is a subject that has changed a lot in how, why, and what religions or world views should be exposed to the learners to reflect the fundamental changes taking place in the world and how children can study religions in their environment and world views (9).

Changes in the RE curriculum are tailored to learners' backgrounds, school and community experiences. It allows the learners to have informed and respectful conversations about religions and world views enhance their thinking and analytical skills, enable learners to build connections with the world around them, by probing and finding consensus between their views and those with different views, and ask ultimate questions to find the right answers, although no one person might have the answer (10).

In this way teachers have to support learners to ask challenging questions, challenge their ideas, ask them to justify what they think about themselves, their environment and the world, its people, show evidence and observation of their ideas rather than just opinions without basis. Religious Education is reshaping itself to provide knowledge and time for children to reflect on fundamental questions of life and changes taking place in the world.

There have been increased changes in the world, which present new challenges in the higher education system of the teaching-learning process. There has been a growing awareness of the necessity to change and improve pedagogical approaches to enhance the preparation of students for productive functioning in the continually changing and highly demanding environment. These changes that have taken place in education call for teachers to adapt diverse methods of teaching that suit different student characteristics, personalities, cultural backgrounds, and learning abilities. RE learning depends on the pedagogical approaches the teacher applies in the classroom environment. The effectiveness of the pedagogy often depends on the different needs of learners, environmental conditions in the classroom, the capacity of the students to learn, teachers' competencies to execute her duties, and to utilize a range of pedagogical approaches to ensure that learning takes place. Learning is dependent on pedagogical approaches teachers use in the classroom (11). The effectiveness of a pedagogy depends on the teachers' understanding of the diverse needs of the learners, utilizes a range of pedagogical approaches to ensure that learning occurs and the learner's capacity to learn.

UNESCO (1) acknowledges that teacher-centered pedagogy is outdated because it promotes passive learning that is manifested in lecture methods, rote

memorization, and answering in unison or chorus responses. Teacher-centered pedagogy positions the teacher at the center of the learning process and does not allow the learners to ask questions and discuss issues arising from learning. It is criticized because the teacher does not explain and elaborate key ideas but churns out learners with lower-order tasks who are afraid of their teacher. Changes in higher education have put the learner at the center of learning, thus learner-centered pedagogy which promotes active and participatory learning processes enhances students' use of prior knowledge and new experiences to create knowledge.

The teacher facilitates this process but also creates structures that condition learning to take place. To be at pace with changes in higher education, RE teachers need to adopt a divergent teaching approach that is learner-centered, participants in the lessons are active, flexible, and achievements are measured by self-evaluation, engagement in projects, and transformation of the environment where the learner lives. RE teachers stress the importance of the acquisition of current knowledge that is useful to prepare the students for productive future functioning and the employment market (10)

With the rapid changes taking place in higher education such as digital learning and curricular changes in curriculum, promotion of competency-based education, use of digital resources and virtual classrooms, personalization of learning experiences in technology, and increased research knowledge, teachers must develop learners' capacity for self-directed learning and self-worth. Learners can use the acquired knowledge in class to be creative, productive, communicative, cooperative, and can network with other learners. There is also the growing awareness of addressing the needs of disabled learners, therefore, RE teachers have to adapt teaching methodologies that take into consideration the learning abilities of disabled students.

Teachers of RE can use different learning techniques to cater for individual differences in abilities and personality characteristics of the learners. This will give learners opportunities to use the knowledge they have acquired from school to increase their achievements and engage in innovative projects to change their lives. Adaptation of new teaching skills, will in turn increase learner's self-reliant learning, competence, and motivation to pursue further learning and attaining higher achievements. Higher Education institutions are embracing educational changes to ensure that their staffs maintain a competitive age that transforms the learners' approach to the digitalized world (1).

With new changes in the RE curriculum, there is a need to train teachers to embrace pedagogies that address diverse student learning abilities, learning styles, personality traits, age, knowledge level, and social setting. Teaching RE can greatly be enriched by providing a variety of learning abilities such as activity-based learning, group work, project-based learning, field trips. Adaption of different learning styles used in different learning environments has positive effects on the learner's achievements, collaboration, interaction, reflection, and presentation of materials. It is important to adapt teaching methodologies that prepare learners to find pragmatic solutions to global problems.

Learners should be able to function and be productive in the world of work with different economic conditions, tribes, races, religions, and cultural backgrounds. RE learning environment should promote lifelong skills such as critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, cooperation, communication, and problem-solving. Social media platforms, computers, videos, and other technological innovations (11).

These enable students to acquire knowledge skills that enable them to work in groups, take an active part in decision making, develop their capabilities, satisfy their interests, fulfill their needs and compete in the world of employment. The RE adaptive learning environment enhances classroom activities that increase learners' knowledge, critical thinking, positive attitudes towards life, healthy relationships, problem-solving, respect for humanity, and constructive ideas about life and existence.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Shifting from Examination Oriented Teaching of Religious Education

In Uganda, the teaching of Religious Education in secondary schools is examination-oriented which involves dictating notes and rote learning, an approach that does not promote participation and critical thinking. National examinations, curriculum standards and innovations, education policies, and changes in technology influence adaptation of the learning environment and pedagogy. The current Uganda national examinations board that tests memory and factual knowledge rather than comprehension discourages teachers from using pedagogy that develops higher-order critical thinking and analytical skills.

Teachers also need good communication skills, class conflict management skills to enable him/herto create a conducive learning environment that will foster learners' success, information, communication, and technology skills. These latter skills take on even greater importance where there is significant use of

E-learning and distance education (12). The current modern teacher is defined by having skills in having desired content knowledge, skills, and pedagogy that addresses the needs of the learners in the environment they live in. Pedagogical effectiveness depends on the learning environment, institutional landscape, and national policies.

RE as a subject provides opportunities and conducive environments that enable learners to reflect, discuss, explore, discover and learn more about the changing world in which they live. Religious Education offers answers to life's ultimate and deepest questions of which many young people are seeking answers, as they grow into independent citizens and work out how to live a quality life. The incredible opportunities for learning and development of RE are undermined by the current examination system which does not promote critical and analytical thinking (2). In the current changes in higher education, RE teacher education trainers are required to promote flexibility in their pedagogical approaches to teaching to be able to respond to the individual needs and concerns in a particular environment. RE teachers need to rethink the way they teach and examine learners in the 21st century, by considering putting pedagogical flexibility, creativity, and innovativeness at its heart.

The examination focused on the teaching of RE in Ugandan secondary schools, does not promote lifelong skills needed for employment and problem solving of different life situations, tolerant and compassionate citizens (12). Besides, UNESCO (1) also points out that national examinations, curriculum standards, and education policies influence the application of the learner-centered approach. The current Uganda national examinations test discrete factual knowledge which does not promote critical thinking and innovation.

Responding to COVID 19 crisis using technologies in RE teaching

Technology has fundamentally changed higher education, its role in the teaching-learning processes, altered the way teachers interact with students in the classroom using technology, online courses, WhatsApp-mails, and chat interactions. With a lot of changes going on in the advancement of the digital world, great strides are being made in educational advancement. Mobile learning, e-learning, and video learning models are changing the way RE teachers and students look at teaching and learning (13).

These technologies offer unlimited possibilities in terms of content diversity, ability to retain knowledge and learn. COVID 19 has shown that with advanced technologies, learning does not have to stay limited to classrooms or curriculum. Besides, COVID- 19 pandemics have created a situation in education that

needs to reconsider e-learning as an alternative mode to replace the traditional way of teaching. There is a window of opportunity to set up learning systems that could enable the continuation of education through innovation and distance education approaches (1). Yet, this approach can cause and widen the digital divide between the privileged and the deprived of the society. Whereas radios and televisions can be used across rural areas to enable the continuation of education, learners whose parents cannot afford them can be left out or be neglected. Persistent high levels of poverty in most regions of Uganda imply that many households cannot afford television sets, the cost of electricity, and subscription fees. Additionally, mobile phones allow interaction with broadcast lessons and have the potential to expand content limits through greater interactions. Following the abrupt closure of schools, teachers have extensively used mobile phone applications such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and Google hangouts to continue engaging their students in learning processes (13).

In Ugandan higher education, COVID 19 forced many universities to open online teaching platforms during the lockdown, leading to few individuals accessing this mode of learning due to technology-related barriers of inadequate infrastructure, high costs of access, unreliable and poor quality of internet connections and electricity services, weak policy regimes, inaccessibility to appropriate software and course delivery platforms, shortage of skilled personnel to manage resources and maintain delivery modes, a technology -illiterate user groups, limited bandwidth and a lack of access to online scholarly material have to be overcome to create a conducive teaching-learning environment(11). Blended learning opportunities which incorporate face-to-face and online opportunities have been adopted by digital teaching staff. Additionally, COVID 19 has ushered in an adaptation of blended teaching which is utilized to accommodate students' diverse learning styles. Blended and online teaching has the potential to increase the participation of students in learning activities (14).

Adaptation of technologies in teaching-learning processes has increased benefits, although there are also limitations. Technology utilization is used in schools for different teaching-learning activities (15). Today, many teachers of RE are utilizing technology in classrooms for different learning activities. Today, many RE teachers have taken on issuing examination papers, results, reading materials, and other evaluation learning materials online. RE teachers use social media platforms to reach out to many learners sharing learning information. Students, parents, and their teachers can sign up for online conferencing, hold meetings, give parents their children's school progress, share learning materials and unique student

write-ups and solicit their opinions concerning the subject covered(16). RE teachers can use Twitter and WhatsApp to obtain students' feedback, share their challenges, and fears in learning. RE teachers need to adapt and incorporate new technologies into their teaching models, use current resources for teaching, while at the same time engaging in professional development to continue to grow and have updated knowledge. Higher Education has been forced to adjust to the growing advancement of technology and if properly adapted and implemented, it can have a positive influence on teaching-learning processes in higher education (17).

Equity and Inclusive Learning Environment in Religious Education

There are also millions of children with disabilities in the world that face discrimination and exclusion from learning, yet, teachers are agents of change who should deal with individual learners with disabilities and endeavor to be accommodative during lessons, and increase their accessibility to learning materials. Teacher trainers have the mandate to create and adopt an inclusive learning environment that aligns with learners' accessibility for students with disabilities whose impairment may create challenges for reading, seeing, and hearing digital files or classroom content, accessibility for students with psychological and learning differences that require certain accommodation such as extra time to take notes and process materials or additional exam time. Teachers should also adapt their teaching pedagogies to gender differences, accessibility for students with limited access to computers, and stable internet. A key aspect of equitable and inclusive teaching is recognizing and working with the diversity of students, along multiple dimensions, discovering and adapting new ways of teaching (18). Teachers of Religious Education, are challenged to adopt a learning perspective that includes those with disabilities to increase learning accessible to all children in the learning environment (2).

Teachers are challenged to have a positive attitude towards their learners, be responsive, attentive and tailor their instruction to learner needs, while drawing on students' experiences to make lessons meaningful and contextually relevant. Teachers need to take into consideration of students from disadvantaged groups such as females and disabled learners who often suffer from teacher prejudice during lessons, which translates into low expectations of these learners' capabilities and poor academic performance. Teachers need to have a deep understanding of students' different abilities to adapt their instruction and activities to meet the needs of each student. Teaching and learning of RE can only become effective only when teachers acknowledge the information possessed by each student and help the students to actualize their knowledge. Teachers should

help students of different learning abilities to unleash their true learning capabilities (18).

Adaptation of Student-Centered-Teaching

Adapting of student-centered teaching is taking on a new focus. There is a direct relationship between the kind of learning environment teachers create in their classrooms, learner-centered teaching, and student achievement. Teachers have the potential to strategize their teaching approaches to address student physical, and psychological needs to promote their engagement and increase their learning (19).

Enhancing student learning requires that the teacher adapts the way instruction is delivered to the learner, focus on individual learners, adapt skill development and problem-solving approaches, set guidelines on how individual students may use learning environment to approach work, increase the amount of personal assistance, and assistance to specific learners. Student-centered teaching addresses the distinct learning needs, interests, aspirations, and cultural backgrounds of individual students. It enhances students' flexibility to learn anytime and anywhere outside the classroom environment (20). Student-centered learning encourages learners to be inquisitive, participate in their learning, negotiate, collaborate, accept diversity and develop peer positive relationships beyond their classrooms. It creates an enabling learning environment where students are given opportunities to make choices about their learning while contributing to the design of learning experiences.

Current research into RE pedagogy by Sharkey (21) indicates that today's learners learn better when they are treated as patterners and learning is centered on their engagement with the environment and world around them. The RE curriculum needs to be coherent and incremental, ensuring that learning is developmentally appropriate and tailored to students' needs and backgrounds.

Teachers of RE need to apply a personalized approach to teaching, although it is difficult to meet the learning requirements of every student. RE teachers need to find a personalized approach to teaching alongside the regular teaching model (22). In terms of the personal growth of a student, a teacher has to consider the interest, the pace of understanding of a topic, and readiness for content. Personalization is an ongoing process, which a teacher should engage in to understand the flexibility and adjust the method and pace of teaching individual RE students.

Teachers' utilization of the learning environment

Teachers are challenged to work to create an effective learning environment for students. This ensures that learners have the best opportunities to learn. School administration and boards of governors have the

potential to work together to provide an atmosphere that supports teachers and creates an effective teaching environment where teachers' efforts and plans are supported and encouraged. School administration can also support innovative and creative instruction that encourages students to succeed and achieve. Adaptation of a combination of effective learning and teaching environments can enhance quality education (23). Through the adaptation of good teaching skills, the teacher can build good relationships with learners and parents. The influence of a good teacher and a mentor can encourage or discourage learners to persevere and succeed. Teachers' knowledge of their students can enable them to provide insight into a learners' learning pace, apply motivation strategies and provide feedback that encourages the learner to be resilient and stay in school.

RE teachers can create interesting lessons with real-life applications that provide a positive and effective learning environment. Additionally, RE teachers can provide lessons with multiple modalities and learning styles to encourage students to learn in ways that capitalize on their strengths and abilities. Teachers need to create instructional techniques that meet the needs of learners which can be supported by teachers' use of technologies and resources that enhance instructional variety (10). RE teachers are aware that classroom management brings discipline to the learning environment, therefore, students need to understand the importance of a disciplined learning environment in fostering individual progress and participation. Adaptation of policies that promote a good classroom learning environment creates a favorable learning environment for every student to participate in the learning, and both the learners and the teacher should work together to enhance the process of learning to create a favorable learning environment to meet each other learners' needs.

Equipping RE learners with 21st-century skills

In this globally and digitally interconnected world, RE learners from cradle to career, need new skills and knowledge to succeed. For RE teachers to prepare learners for success in school, work, and life, opportunities for RE students to learn 21st-century skills are essential because they are more important to students now than ever before. The learning environment should be aligned with imparting 21st-century skills because they not only provide a framework for successful learning in the classroom but ensure that students can thrive in a world where change is constant and learning never ends (24). RE learners equipped with 21st-century skills can be civically engaged, creative, critically thinking, dignitary literate, problemsolvers, effective in communication, engage in collaboration and networking. RE teachers should promote the importance of collaboration and creativity at the

classroom level and empower learners with the skills they need for collaboration. The RE classroom provides opportunities for developing fundamental skills that will help learners to reason, think critically, creatively, analyze situations and work collaboratively in the world of work.

RE lessons should provide learners opportunities to develop attitudes, skills, and knowledge to understand and participate in a globally connected world. RE teachers should focus not only on content knowledge to teach but also ensure that students develop innovative solutions, critically think through complex problems, can work and communicate across diverse teams. The world is changing at an unprecedented rate that the jobs that existed for decades are disappearing at a higher speed on daily basis. This implies that RE teachers are responsible for equipping students with the skills they need to thrive in the employment market they will be entering.

RE teachers are challenged to create a learning environment that promotes communication skills because these are increasingly becoming important in society especially in the workplace (25). Besides, RE students need critical thinking to apply what they have learned in class in meaningful, creative, and innovative ways. The promotion of critical thinking and problem-solving in students are very important skills that enable students to face daily challenges of life. Additionally, RE students need to assemble their knowledge to form reasoned opinions and sound judgments. Changes going on in the world, also requires that learners apply skills of collaboration, and teamwork to be able to work with others or peers to change and develop the world around them.

Adaptation of Changes in the new curriculum

Curriculum adaptation is an important form of professional development that promotes learning, teaching and improves student learning. It prepares teachers for future learning and preparation of learners for employment marketability (26). Overhauling the traditional curriculum and producing a learner equipped with 21st-century skills, of which the teaching RE in secondary schools should be part. Curriculum reforms are about change to suit the existing classroom learning environment. Teachers are also expected to adapt new methods of teaching and how to handle the learners to propel the new curriculum.

The adaptability of the new curriculum requires that stakeholders embark on workshops and in-service training of teachers, put in place printed or audiovisual training programs, and lesson demonstration of the expected new classroom practices and learner behavior in the school (27). Teaching and learning RE is not about giving

guidelines but allowing innovativeness and creative freedom at the same time. RE teachers are required to adapt the new curriculum and make necessary modifications in their teaching strategies to increase students' learning abilities and levels of inclusion of the disabled and slow learners.

Additionally, teachers of RE are required to identify learning competencies considered important for learners to be able to analyze and synthesize knowledge learned. The changing new curriculum, stresses generic competencies as an important aspect of learning because they give students greater flexibility when seeking employment. Besides, the RE teacher should bring on board many techniques and styles of teaching to create a better learning environment bring on modern the most current teaching strategies that increase learners learning outcomes. As a way of avoiding rote learning and cramming of concepts, the new curriculum emphasizes that the learner performs activities while the teacher facilitates during the learning process. Under the new curriculum, the teacher does not write the topic on the blackboard but instead introduces the problem to the class to solve. The RE teacher does not give notes but seeks information from the learners. Instead of giving illustrations, the teacher suggests reading materials from the texts and the library, digital platforms, and other learning documents, the new curriculum attempts to encourage the application of digital platforms, yet, in Uganda, administrators fight phones in schools (The Uganda Monitor, 2020).

METHODOLOGY

The research was carried out at Makerere University and Kyambogo University, Uganda. This research was based on qualitative research methods. This is because qualitative research data emphasize peoples' experiences about the phenomenon that is fundamentally well suited for locating the meaning of the issue being investigated. The qualitative study allows in-depth exploration of the issues being researched and captures the richness of people's experiences in their location. The population sample for this study was 48 RE teaching staff drawn from teacher trainers of RE students who teach both methodology and content. In Makerere University a total of 22 both in the school of education and Faculty of Arts, and Kyambogo University had 26 participants from the Department of Religious Studies were the targeted population sample from which sample size was selected. The research involved 10 teacher trainees (3 women and 7 men) who either teach methodology or content to students offering Religious Education in both Makerere (Religious Education Unit, School of Education and Faculty of Arts, Department of Religious Studies) and Kyambogo University (Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences). The criteria for the selection of these

participants were that they also participated in school practice. Purposeful sampling techniques were used to select the participants because the researcher wanted to collect in-depth information from the right respondents. The researcher employed three tools for collecting primary data which were; (i) in-depth interviews which were used to capture information from key informants using phone calls and a physical approach with open-ended questions that provided direct responses. (ii) Observation involved the researchers' physical participation in observing the physical environment of teaching, facilitation of materials for teaching, and classroom environment.

The interview guide was supplemented by documents on adapting RE learning environments and pedagogies formed part of the secondary source. Qualitative data analysis was used to analyze and process data collected. The qualitative data generated by this study was presented in form of verbalisms for participants to support their positions as well as to provide the necessary authenticity to the research findings.

Significance

The study will ;

- (a) Inform stakeholders about the relevance of supporting teacher trainers with mechanisms that enhance enabling learning environment that matches current developments in higher education;
- (b) Enable teacher trainers to understand the importance of aligning RE learning environment and pedagogues to 21st century educational changes in higher educational institutions;
- (c) Enable Teacher trainers to adapt teaching pedagogies that respond to COVID 19 pandemic and school closures;
- (d) Teacher trainers apply blended and e-learning to be compliant with current changes in higher education;
- (e) Teachers' trainers adapt 21st-century skills to enable their learners to fit in the world of changes and employability.
- (f) Build confidence among teacher trainers to lay strategies that align their teaching environments and pedagogies with educational changes in higher education;
- (g) Create awareness among administrators, teacher trainers, students, and the community about the relevancy of aligning learning environment with 21st-century changes in higher education;
- (h) Help administration and teacher trainers in identifying challenges to the creation of enabling learning environments and pedagogies and aligning them with changes in higher education.

Limitations

In this study, the researcher had problems getting in touch with respondents for physical interviews because working places had just been opened after a long period of COVID 19 pandemic lockdown and school closure, everyone seemed to be very busy in these every-day-to day activities. COVID 19 is quite very detrimental to the collection of data for this study. The researcher solved this problem by using, WhatsApp messages, discussion mails, and phone calls. Some respondents were not willing to give detailed information about how they conduct their teaching and how they align their pedagogies with current changes in higher education for fear of being rendered inefficient in their profession.

Time for collecting data, compiling, analyzing, and presenting findings posed a big problem since the researcher had to; conduct online learning and face to face lecturers, supervise masters students, internally examine masters and Ph.D. students, attend Masters and Ph.D. defenses, mark coursework and examinations scripts; train in online teaching and also attend to family responsibilities. Financial constraints were another factor since the researcher was not sponsored by the university or any grant-giving office.

Contribution of the study

This study makes a great contribution to the existing body of knowledge. Academicians, scholars, and students may use this study to widen discourses on adapting alignment of RE learning environment and pedagogies to 21st educational changes in higher education institutional institutions. The study will increase knowledge on the relevance of teaching environments and pedagogies in implementing current changes in higher education. The study builds on the existing knowledge and the findings will be used as a tool for planning advocacy and resource mobilization for supporting the ongoing changes in higher education and quality teaching.

RESULTS

Shifting from Examination and Content Oriented Curriculum to student-centered

Drawing from the respondent's opinions, it was found that Uganda's secondary school and tertiary institution content-based and examination-oriented curriculum had been changed due to producing products that lacked skills for the job market. In 2020, the Ministry of Education and Sports implemented a new competency-based curriculum that focuses on lifelong skill-building. In line with this a teacher of RE had this to say;

I have been trained to teach the new curriculum, there is a shifting paradigm approach in the learning process. I no longer use passive traditional methods of teaching, the

new curriculum requires learners to be more active and to participate in the learning activities, and study continuously based on their efforts. The teacher's role is limited to guidance and monitoring learners' activities. I am required to impart lifelong learning that is learner-centered than rote learning which is teacher-centered. I have learned to adapt a scheme of work, lesson competencies, and lesson plan that suits each individual's learning style.

The experiences from the above respondents indicate that new learning models are now in place. RE teachers have to resist lecture methods, be creative, thoughtful, proactive, and adapt their teaching styles to address different learning styles to enhance learner-centered activities that promote hands-on work

Adapting online Teaching as Response to a Crisis Created by COVID 19 Pandemic and School Closure

One RE teacher shared her experience on drastic changes that have taken place in teaching RE in higher education;

Adapting online teaching has been so challenging. I have been trained on how to upload RE courses online so students can access them anywhere. It has also changed my way of teaching. Online teaching enabled me to reach out to my student efficiently, through chat groups, zoom meetings, WhatsApp platforms, and document sharing during COVID 19 pandemic and school closure. But the major challenge is that few students can afford data, have smart phones and participate in online learning.

Another teacher said;

Online teaching is good to adapt but one major challenge I have with it is that the majority of the poor students mostly girls and disabled from rural communities are excluded from digital learning. This is because of lack of electricity, internet connectivity, lack of digital devices, and money to buy data. For female students, home chores and sibling caring are added burdens to digital learning. The university has challenged all teaching staff to adapt the online teaching blended with

traditional methodologies. Unfortunately, the majority of my colleagues continue to focus on traditional methods of teaching and rote learning rather than skill development such as critical thinking and adaptability which are very important for learner's participation in the employment market and problem-solving.

The study found out that technology has fundamentally changed the way RE is taught in higher education. From observation, teachers have been forced to adapt technology in their teaching approaches which have greatly altered the way they interact with students in face-to-face classrooms, online courses, WhatsApp, and emails. In the context of this observation an RE teacher had this to say;

I worked to create an effective e-learning environment for my students to ensure that they have the best opportunity to learn. But to achieve this I need the cooperation of the school administration to provide an atmosphere that supports me to create an effective teaching environment and also collaboration from learners. I try so hard to build a relationship with my students and their parents through e-learning platforms. When I know my students, it also helps me to know their strengths and weaknesses in addition to learning styles.

Findings revealed that adaptation of technology in higher education has fundamentally changed the way learning and teaching are conducted. In this respect one teacher I interviewed gave her experience;

Using technology in the classroom has forced me to have a personal electric device such as a laptop and smartphone which have changed the way I teach my students and colleagues. It has also changed the way I deliver instruction. I can teach using a laptop and projector or power point slides, which excites students. Lessons are no longer teacher-centered and boring, but learner-centered with active participation which is now taking a new focus. My concern right now is competence, high-quality instruction, and developing relevant

skills for learners. Teaching has become more exciting than ever before due to the application of technology.

These teachers' experiences reveal that Makerere University as an institution of learning is facing a huge impact of COVID 19, with the university being forced to adapt e-learning and blended modes. RE teaching staff have to adapt to this change both by way of teaching and assessment processes. With this revelation and teacher of RE shared his experience;

I have trained in Makerere University E-Learning Environment (MUELE) to be equipped with skills in E-Learning to fit in the new normal techniques of teaching. This training has enabled me to upload the courses I teach online for students' consumption. I use zoom to teach my students wherever they are located.

Furthermore, it was observed the university teaching staff has tried to adapt new teaching techniques to enforce the Standard Operation Procedures (SOPs) as a measure to contain COVID 19. In this regard, I observed that many students move around the campus or go to lecture rooms with no masks, while others put them on hanging below their chin. Whereas there are water and soap at the entrance of the main gate, the majority of the students do not wash their hands. With this observation, an RE teacher shared his experience of his classroom teaching environment;

The majority of the students neither put on masks nor wash hands at the entrance of the main gate, and the majority of these are males compared to females. When I told students, who had no masks to move out of the lecture, they pulled them out from their bags and pockets to put them on. Other students wore their masks below their chins. The lecture rooms are congested, there is no social distancing and the students are not bothered whether they get COVID 19 or not. I have to ensure that I keep a distance and this has affected my style of teaching. The teaching environment has not adapted Standard Operation Procedures (SOPs). When a student is

answering, he has first to remove the mask, then put it on again. Sometimes individuals, use this to create disrupting mannerisms in class forcing the rest of the students to laugh, thus, disrupting the lesson.

The study found that both staff and students adhering to COVID SOPs have created a new set of challenges that are drastically affected students' academic work. In lecture room settings to observing societal distancing is becoming a problem due to the large numbers of students taught in RE as a subject.

Equity and Inclusive learning

Study findings revealed that whereas universities had adapted e-learning to address the learning gap created by COVID 19, students with disabilities had become invisible, the online platforms utilized by the teachers were not accessed by all students. The researcher had the following experience with disabled learners;

I have six students who are disabled in my RE class. When I am teaching whether, in the face-to-face class or Zoom lessons, I try to ensure inclusion by going slow to ensure that I am moving at the same pace with the learners with disabilities and even the slow learners. In some cases, I give them special materials so that they are at the same level as the rest of the students. I learned to adapt to different student characteristics by using diverse methods of teaching with special attention to adapting

Study revelations indicated that RE teachers have the challenges of removing learning barriers and putting to an end the discrimination and exclusion learners with students' disabilities experience in the classroom and when using technologies in learning situations. The study established that RE teachers have to respond to adapting teaching methods that suit different student behaviors, learning styles, personality characteristics, backgrounds, and learning ability levels. The study further established that online learning discriminates learners with disabilities, yet, institutions have not put mechanisms to address their learning challenges. In another incident, another teacher trainer also shared his experience;

When I am conducting online teaching, more boys than girls respond. Due to the creation of the digital gender divide. Few females participate in online learning due to their involvement in domestic work and caring for siblings. Yet in face-to-face classes, my class of RE has more girls than boys. When I am teaching, I ensure that the few boys don't get lost in class. I use teaching methods and learning materials that take into account male and female needs and abilities. I ensure that both sexes are equally contributing to the lesson and sitting arrangement takes into consideration gender and disability concerns.

The above narrative reveals that teachers of RE should create and adapt learning environments that gender-responsive, facilitating male and female learners' abilities to learn, participate in both e-learning and face-to-face classes, progress, and develop their potential equally. The teacher should address the gender stereotypes that arise during learning and address behaviors that undermine gender equality such as dominance, shyness, lack of confidence, and fear to speak in class.

Responding to COVID 19 Pandemic and School Closure

The study revealed innovations in e-learning technologies and distance education were the solution to the school closure caused by COVID 19 pandemic and they enabled the learning environment to continue. Evidence from the study indicates that technology use in learning in higher education has been embraced to stay as they offer opportunities that overcome geographical access and rigidities of traditional education. Interviews reports revealed that during school closure due to COVID 19, nursery, primary and secondary schools embarked on teaching children using print materials, lessons were conducted on radios, televisions, and e-learning platforms. In line with these findings a teacher trainer had this to say;

COVID 19 completely changed my style of teaching. I called the class coordinator to form a class group WhatsApp platform which became our learning center. I started engaging learners in a learning session. The majority of the learners could not participate due to a lack of smart phones, data

internet, and electricity connection. The most affected were those in rural communities and the disabled. I could also send printed notes for those with smartphones to download for those who had no technological devices. When universities opened for finalists to complete their education, it took us only two weeks to tidy-up what we did on e-learning during a school lockdown.

Study findings indicated that e-learning is an answer to the learning crisis caused by COVID 19 pandemic and innovation for distance learning in the 21st century. However, the study noted that e-learning had caused the digital divide between children from marginalized communities and urban areas, leaving female learners disproportionately affected.

Learner-Centered Approaches in RE

The study found out that RE teachers are diversifying their classroom practices which are teacher-centered to learner-centered approaches. RE teachers are also adapting their pedagogies to the learning environment that is learner-centered and aligning it with the current changes in higher education that among others requires critical thinking, creativity in finding answers, problem-solving, networking or sharing ideas, an adaptation of E-learning, and application of innovative learning materials and inclusive learning approaches. Adapting new learning styles that are learner-centered is the most crucial current trend in teaching in higher education. In line with this finding an RE teacher trainer shared his experience when he argued thus;

I no longer teach learners for passing examinations which used to compel me to dictate notes to students to cover the syllabus. Dictating notes made learners play a passive role. These days I teach learners to acquire lifelong skills and to be active participants in my lesson. When I am teaching RE, I focus on the learners to be at the center of learning by taking into account their interests, passions, strengths, and weaknesses. I no longer regard myself as the source of information, authoritative, and an expert in RE class, but I endeavor to see that I meet individual students' interests, needs, and expectations to suit the current changes in learning. My role in class is of innovativeness, creativity, assessing learners thinking, mentorship, guidance, and

promoting group interactions during lessons.

These experiences from the teacher indicate that RE teachers are adapting learner-centered teaching environments which require more classroom activities, asking questions, promotion of communication, collaboration, operation, solving problems, group discussions, working in pairs, and sharing of ideas by the learners. The classroom environment is organized in such a way that students can face each other to engage in discussions and to enable the teacher to move from one group to another.

Teachers Utilization of the Learning Environment

The study further established that there is a direct relationship between the type of learning environment RE teachers create in their classrooms and learners' participation, retention, and achievement. RE teachers can properly utilize the learning environment to the satisfaction of learners' needs. Teachers have to address learners' needs such as physical, psychological, social-emotional, and security needs. The RE teacher should be well informed, create a sense of order in class, and physical arrangement of the class. In line with this a teacher trainer shared her experiences;

When I enter the classroom, I greet the learners, check on the physical arrangement of the class, gauge learners' moods, tell them motivating stories based on peoples' experiences, tell them guiding rules for the lesson, get learners' attention, distribute learning materials and embark on the real exposition of the content.

Revelation from the study indicates that for RE Teachers to utilize the learning environment, they should be competent, trustworthy, collaborative, and know their learners by name, their strength, and weakness. It was found that the physical learning environment should be very clean, well ventilated, and organized to enhance learner's zeal to learn.

Equipping Learners with 21st-Century Lifelong Skills

Interviews from respondents revealed that 21st-century lifelong skills are the most -in-demand needs in Uganda to propel national development. Learners in today's society should be competitive in today's changing job market. These 21st skills were found to be learning skills (critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and communication), literacy skills (information, media, and technology), and life skills (flexibility, problem-solving, leadership,

initiative, productivity, and social/networking). In line with this discovery, one of the teachers I interviewed shared his experiences on the need to teach the 21st skills to his class;

I cannot ignore teaching the 21st-century skills in my lessons because they lay a foundation for the future success of my learners. These skills are also engrained in the use of technology, learners can use them for succeeding in life; in their daily experiences of life; in homes, community, to get employment and workplace. To me as a teacher, they are a stepping stone for adopting new approaches to teaching that can transform the lives of our children we teach. I need technological or digital devices to properly instill in learners these skills because it makes the lesson more relevant and a deviation from the traditional way of teaching.

The study revealed that learners need 21st-century skills to be able to face the lifestyles and challenges of the societies they live in. RE teachers should emphasize skills such as critical thinking and problem solving so that they are not trapped in misleading activities due to incorrect decisions and misleading information. It was found that 21st-century skills are important for learners to answer difficult questions about life and its challenges. The study established that empowering learners with 21st-century skills connects learners to the entire community and the rest of the world. They are also providing the framework for career development, new skills, and knowledge which learners in the job market in the communities they live in and the entire world.

Adaption of changes in the curriculum

Furthermore, the study indicated that teaching of the new curriculum which requires teachers to adapt learner-centered approaches had commenced beginning with senior one classes in 2020 at the secondary school level. The new curriculum requires teachers of RE to adapt the new teaching approaches to propel the syllabus. One teacher who preferred anonymity expressed her views;

Teaching the new curriculum requires me to adopt a learner-centered approach, I have to be vibrant and engage the learners in activity-oriented approaches. As a teacher, I need to first identify the learner's individual needs, educational goals, and lesson-based- competencies which must be emphasized during the lesson. I have

to determine the style in which the content has to be taught, articulate learners' general expectations, and ensure that all learners are actively engaged in learning. To ensure that all learners actively participate in RE lessons, I organize them in small cooperative groups and peer patterning. I no longer use lecture method approaches as I used to do in the past. I have to adapt new methods of teaching or I stand to lose my job.

Discourses from respondents revealed that the new curriculum requires teachers to adopt activity-based lessons to suit stimulate learners, increase their participation and build their hands-on skills. Teachers of RE have also to take into consideration the physical classroom environment, engage learners in experiential-discovery lessons.

The stud findings of this study show that the new curriculum requires adapting approaches to apply instructional materials. Adapting instructional material use requires direct interaction with learners. Most of the printed instructional materials in the new curriculum require reading aloud to or with the learners and interpreting them properly. In line with this, an RE teacher shared her experiences on how she is preparing her students to use instructional materials to teach the new senior curriculum;

I have to provide guidelines on how to use both the printed and audio materials independently to develop learners' skills. This requires adjusting my pace of instruction to ensure that each student is included in the learning irrespective of the learning abilities. I also monitor how students use the instructional materials individually, collectively, and collaboratively. Technological devices are supported to propel the new syllabus, but my school does not allow learners to have personal laptops and smartphones in the school, so this leaves me in dilemma how the new syllabus can produce a 21st-century learner with competent life skills to enable him/her succeed.

This narrative from the teacher trainer, reveals that teachers should ensure learners have intensive instruction and support they need to use properly the teaching materials. Teachers have to collaborate with learners, actively engage them in learning, monitor how they use the learning materials, and how they interpret them to ensure the successful use of

teaching materials at hand. Adapting good classroom management, communication, and interpersonal skills is very important in ensuring that teaching materials are properly used.

DISCUSSION

Findings indicated that RE teachers are struggling to shift from content and examination-oriented teaching where learners are passive recipients of knowledge to learners centered approach where learners actively participate in lessons. Eton (28) points out that in Uganda the old curriculum is more theoretical than practical, subject and examination-based. Teaching is hinged on delivering content that enables learners to pass examinations. Teachers' and learners' target is to complete the syllabus, sit examinations and pass with high grades while ignoring the core concepts that build knowledge and life skills that are required in the world of work. Because schools focus on teaching for passing examinations, it underscores the role of teaching, prompting many of the education stakeholders to engage in examination malpractice. The traditional curriculum which is taught from the current senior two to senior six is subject- teacher-centered. National examination questions are recycled from year to year, a practice makes learners correctly guess what is likely to appear in the next examination forcing them to cram their notes and handouts. In the current changes in higher education, teaching is learner-centered and aims to impart knowledge and lifelong skills that enable the learners to compete in the world market of employment.

Furthermore, Lindsey (29) acknowledges that education space is evolving, therefore the scholar urges teachers to desist from using passive methods of teaching in the 21st century but to adopt a digital approach that offers learners different opportunities to enhance their lifelong skills. State Educational Directors Association (30) urges teachers to develop digital content to enhance teaching-learning processes through multi-media applications, provide students with an opportunity to participate in virtual field trips and other interactive learning activities. Teachers should adapt instructional methods and lesson plans that focus on each learners' capacity. Teachers are further urged to take on blended learning for learners to be proficient in 21st-century skills such as global awareness, learning and thinking skills, collaboration, creativity life skills such as leadership, and adaptability to be competitive in the job market place which traditional teaching may not offer. Lindsey (29) acknowledges that every student is different, therefore, the teacher should apply pedagogies that suit every individual in a class.

From the study, it has emerged that in some cases students with disabilities and slow learners are often not catered for during RE lessons. Gender-responsive teaching was also found to be an issue that is often

ignored during RE lessons. Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (31) supports these findings when they stress that teaching should be conducted in ways that are equitable and inclusive both in face-to-face and online learning. The teacher should endeavor to create an inclusive learning environment by; being accessible and audible, meet students' psychological or learning differences that require certain accommodations such as lowering speed, extra time, and materials. The teacher of RE should be flexible which is a key aspect of equitable and inclusive teaching, being able to recognize he/she is teaching learners from different diversities and multiple dimensions and support learners who need more attention.

A critical characteristic of equity-minded teaching is acknowledging that students are not the same, they have different experiences and learning capabilities. The teacher should endeavor to create interpersonal relationships with learners, support their efforts and be transparent. Additionally, USAID (32) challenges teachers to adapt classroom environments and instructional materials that are gender-responsive to enhance equal participation of males and females. RE teachers should create classroom dynamics and strategies that allow both male and female learners to express themselves

Study findings established that pandemic was already taking a toll on communities that were already vulnerable and the marginalized poor, affecting females more than males, with the education of the children badly hit. With children out of school, many institutions of learning responded to the crisis with an innovative approach of using learning technologies which among others included the use of WhatsApp, emails, conferencing zoom lessons, videos, etc.

Tumwesige (13) urges that learning technologies offer an answer to enable learning to continue in an environment where education has been disrupted but also offers opportunities for overcoming geographical access and rigidities of conventional education.

On the other hand, UNESCO (33) noted that whereas the educational communities have made efforts to maintain continuity of learning during COVID 19 lockdown, learners have had to rely more on their resources to continue learning remotely through e-learning, television, and radio. COVID 19 forced teachers to adopt new pedagogical approaches and modes of delivery of teaching, for which they have not to be trained. The Evolution (34) points out that most institutions of higher learning are using technologies for e-learning that are clunky, outdated, and do not suit modern devices. Take, for example, most university students are tethered to their smartphones, but most of the institutions of higher learning in developing countries do not have mobile-

friendly websites. Murungi (35) adds that there are learners who had no opportunity to use e-learning platforms during lockdown but were expected to compete with those who engaged in e-learning.

The study also found that the current modes of teaching are focusing on learners, engage them in active participation in lesson activities, building skills, applying reflection, and building self-confidence. Related studies carried out by Hughes (22) indicate education is moving towards a more learner-centered model, where learners' needs and interests are the basis for developing lessons and learning activities. According to UNESCO (5) teacher-centered model as a provider of knowledge and the learners are recipients is outdated, does not address the unique needs and interests of each learner but learners depend on the teacher as the source of information and do not promote lifelong skills in learners.

RE teachers are compelled to adopt the learner-centered approach, where learners are at the center of focus in the learning process. In learner-centered lessons, the teacher must; create a learner-centered classroom, build their self-confidence to participate in lessons, know his/her students, promote reflection, encourage exploration and hands-on activities. The study found that teachers are trying to adapt effective learning- teaching environments for learners, to suit the changing approaches ushered in by technological advancement. They need support from the administration and board members. The school administrators can support teachers in terms of accessing resources, teaching materials, innovative and creative instructions that enhance quality learning for learners to succeed and achieve

Concurrent studies carried out by UNESCO (36) in the USA indicate that the influence of a good teacher can inspire a reluctant or discouraged learner to persevere in learning. The theory of constructivism requires teachers to create interesting lessons with real-life applications that provide a positive and effective learning environment. RE teachers should provide lessons with multiple modalities and learning approaches to encourage students to learn in ways that capitalize on their strengths and abilities. Schools that support educational diversity encourage RE teachers to find creative instruction techniques that meet the needs of students. RE teachers should take advantage of professional development opportunities to adapt and apply new information in their teaching styles. This requires schools to provide a clean and safe learning environment for instruction to be delivered to learners.

Collaborative studies by Campos (37) pointed out learner-centered learning encompasses adapting methods of teaching that require learners to actively

construct their knowledge and puts the responsibility for learning on them. The teacher has an authoritative role but learners and teachers play equally an active part in the learning process. The primary role of the teacher in learner-centered processes is to facilitate student learning and comprehension of the subject material. Anthony (38) points out that teachers should adopt learner-centered approaches because learners; learn from their classmates, by experiences and active involvement, apply new learning to real-life - authentic experiences, receive timely and frequent feedbacks, are encouraged to explain the material to themselves and others, engage in communication, know what they are learning and why can use personalized technology and experience a higher degree of engagement. With these learning experiences, the teacher should ensure that the learning environment is enabling to involve all learners in the lesson, cultivate confidence in learners, create activities that require collaborative work, monitor learners' activities, reduce talking time and increase learner tasks and talking.

The findings from the study revealed that RE teachers have to utilize the learning environment for successful lessons. RE teachers have to make use of the physical environment, set rules, motivate learners, learn their names, strength, and weaknesses. A related study carried out by Jonathan (19) indicates that for successful RE lessons, teachers should utilize the learning environment by focusing on the physical arrangement of the classroom, getting to know individual learners' interests, background knowledge, learning, capabilities, strength, and weakness. Teachers should avoid rewarding learners to control the class or judging individual students because it undermines the learners' intrinsic motivation, creates relationship problems between the teacher and the learners but should use the learning environment to build learning confidence among learners. According to Firestone (39), one of the most important things a teacher can do is providing a positive learning environment that allows learners to feel comfortable and confident as learners. Learners need an organized learning environment, a clean and bright classroom, organized space to strengthen learning experiences.

The study found that teachers in higher education are being compelled to adapt learning environment that imparts to learners 21st-century skills. Relatedly, Tsisana (40) and Genevieve (41) urges that learners should be equipped with skills where they are producers of knowledge and keep learning, can use new technologies such as smartphones or can go digital, are global, have adequate communication skills, can collaborate, are creative and innovative, use twitter charts, network with peers, engage in project-based learning and problem-solving. Collaboratively, Ross (24) and a study carried out by the Ministry of Education in Guyana (42) urges that

21st-century skills are more important for learners than ever before because they provide a framework for successful learning in the classroom and also ensure that learners can thrive in the world of work, be good citizens, digitally literate, globally aware, effective in collaboration and communication. The scholar further urges that training learners in 21st-century skills will allow them to develop the foundational skills that will help them to reason, think creatively, analyze situations, solve problems, and collaborate with others in all fields at hand. They allow learners to develop the attitudes, lifelong skills, and knowledge to understand and participate in a globally connected world. Teachers of RE should not only focus on content knowledge but also ensure that develop innovative solutions, think critically through complex problems, and can work and communicate across diverse teams of people.

Besides, findings of the study indicated that a new lower secondary school curriculum is in place; This implies that RE teachers' trainers in higher education have to adopt new methods of teaching and learning styles that suit the changes in the new lower secondary school curriculum. Similar studies carried out by the Independent News Paper, Uganda (43) acknowledge that many world countries are in the digital age, while in Uganda, school administration is fighting the use of phones. Uganda also adopted a new curriculum that is a competency-based and learner-activity-centered approach which is quite different from the teacher-centered approach. The new curriculum gives learners the ability to solve problems, compared to the traditional curriculum where the teachers entered the class dictated notes to learners' which they crammed to aid them to write examinations. In the new curriculum, the teacher does not give notes but seeks information from the learners and suggests reading materials from textbooks, library, newspaper cutting, audio, and digital which makes the lesson more practical than theoretical.

Similar reports by Okello (23) indicate that as a way of avoiding rote learning and cramming of concepts which is the current practice, in the new curriculum the learners perform learning activities, while the teacher guides and facilitates the learning processes. Under the new curriculum, the teacher compiles learners' achievements under formative assessment (20%) in the four-year circle, finds an average score, and submits it to the Uganda National Examination Board (UNEBC) which will account for 80% of the final score. While assessing the learners, teachers will consider both summative and formative assessment models to capture all the learners' developments throughout the study. Whereas lessons have been starting at 8.00a.m -4.00pm, in the new curriculum lessons will be starting at 8.30 am-2.50pm which allows learners' experiential teacher-supervised

learning by engaging in research, project work, participation in clubs, sports and games, have time for self-guided study and reflection. In adapting changes in the new curriculum in the learning environment, the teacher is expected to observe the learner for any signs of acquired values, skills, and changes in attitude, take a record of this to contribute to assessment knowledge, understanding, skill development, creativity, and innovation. In the new curriculum, interested learners will be examined by the Directorate of Industrial Training (DIT) in Nutrition and Food Technology, Entrepreneurship, agriculture, ICT, Technology and design, Performing Arts, Art and Design, and Physical Education to enable the student get a competency-based certificate.

Eagle online (44) adds that the re-conceptualized curriculum will develop the learning skills needed to ensure that all graduating students can think critically, analytically, and study effectively, that they possess the range of generic skills to be successful in their personal and social lives in making a living and rendering them employable in the world market. Teachers will adapt methodologies and pedagogies that promote reforms that address the social and economic needs of Uganda help the nation move towards a system where the learners can realize their full potential and apply lifelong skills to different situations of life. Changes in lower secondary school curriculum have forced higher education institutions to adopt new methods of teaching to align with developments taking place at lower secondary and 21st-century demands.

CONCLUSION

21st-century education is about giving students the skills they need to succeed in the changing world and helping them grow the confidence to practice those skills. With so much information readily available to them, 21st-century skills focus more on making sense of that information, sharing and using it in various ways that benefit them. RE teachers have to align the learning environment and pedagogy to a higher education system that applies e-learning adapts curriculum changes and applies a student-centered and responsive approach to learning. Technology has changed the way teaching is conducted in higher education. It is driving institutions of higher learning to adapt digital learning, although these are expensive for learners from marginalized communities.

COVID 19 has also forced RE teachers in higher education to adapt online and blended learning. RE teachers can conduct lectures using a variety of digital platforms, upload courses or recorded lectures online for students' consumption. Teachers are tasked to adapt learning environments that promote learners' achievement, digital skills, lifelong skill development, and preparation for workforce preparedness. Adaption of online learning offers

opportunities for communication, collaboration, and problem-solving. Lecture-based methods of teaching which left students as consumers of information leaving little room for learners' creativity, innovation, teamwork, networking, and interaction have been replaced by learner-centered teaching. RE teachers have adapted new pedagogical approaches that increase student engagement in learning that are competent based and tailored to the needs of learners. Higher education is driven by the need to equip learners with 21st-century skills if they are to succeed in the environment, they live in. A secondary school's new curriculum that promotes generic skills or 21st-century skills is in place and this dictates RE teacher trainers to adopt pedagogies that suit this development in education.

RECOMMENDATION

- (a) Policy makers should be able to support RE training staff with digital devices and materials and create an enabling environment that enables them to align their pedagogies with the current changes in higher education;
- (b) Stakeholders to align RE learning environments and pedagogies to 21st-century educational changes in higher education;
- (c) Teacher trainers engage RE learners in learning activities that buttress the acquired transferable lifelong skills to meet the requirements in the world of employment.
- (d) Teachers to adapt learning environments that align with the current changes in Higher Education

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