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Full Length Research Paper

Integrating on-line learning into traditional Open and Distance Learning (ODL) programmes: challenges and pedagogical implications in Sub Saharan Universities

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Information and Communication Technology (ICT) development has helped Open and Distance Learning (ODL) universities world wide reach out to many global students through on line programmes. Many ODL institutions in developed countries have registered success in their on-line programmes. In Africa integrating on line learning into existing traditional programmes has legged behind. It is therefore critical to find out how best on- line programmes can be effectively integrated into existing traditional programmes. It is also critical to identify ways not to affect the integrity of successful programmes currently being offered through traditional modes. This paper seeks to investigate the views of stratified randomly selected students; tutors' and former students on how best to implement on-line learning into traditional ODL programmes at the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) Data will be gathered through interviews and questionnaires. The findings of this study shall provide answers to the challenges emanating from staffs and students' ICT skills

Keywords: *E-learning, online learning*

INTRODUCTION

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) development has helped Open and Distance Learning (ODL) universities world wide reach out to many global students through on line programmes (Govindasamy2006). Many ODL institutions in developed countries have registered success in their on-line programmes (Bollinger 2004).The UK Open University (OU) for example; formally a print based distance learning institution has gradually transformed itself into an electronic University (Gammil and Newman 2005). In Africa integrating on line learning into existing traditional programmes has legged behind. Heeks (2007) notes that

in Africa, there is insufficient technology and skills to implement e-learning. Laaser (2008) maintains that it is understandable African ODL Universities are new comers in developing e-learning educational programmes. While several research efforts in Sub-Saharan Africa have focused on technological issues such as lack of infrastructure, bandwidth dial up tariffs and copy rights (Eastmond 2006), it is also imperative to empirically focus on pedagogical and contextual issues in integrating e-learning technologies into ODL such as the readiness and attitudes of tutors and students. As pointed out by Cornford Pollock (2008) E- learning is much more than just a simple technical exercise in which some materials or processes are simply transferred from the offline world to some ready made online realm. Mc Pherson and Nunes (2007) maintain that E-learning technology alone

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is not sufficient to foster and sustain much needed improvement into traditional programmes but requires a sustained human intervention. Mc Pherson and Nunes (2004) further claim that e-learning calls for more in terms of pedagogy than simply putting tutors and students on the web.

Statement of the problem

Zimbabwe Open University was established as print based ODL institution and developed all its existing programmes to reach out to many students nationally through the print mode of delivery. This paper sought to find out how best internet development will be reached to global students and how best can e-learning be incepted?

OBJECTIVES

- To find out students attitudes towards e-learning
- To establish students' readiness on e-learning
- To assess the lecturers/tutors attitudes towards e-learning
- To assess lectures/tutors capacity on the use of e-learning
- To establish factors affecting the use of e-learning

Research questions

The main question addressed by the study was what alternative strategies and combinations can be designed to meet the needs of tutors and learners in ODL to implement e-learning?

Sub-problems

- What is students' attitude towards e-learning?
- Are students ready for e-learning?
- What is the lecturers/ tutors attitudes towards e-learning?
- Are lecturers/tutors ready to introduce e-learning?
- How can e-learning be introduced to students?

Purpose

The purpose of the study is to find out how best e-learning technologies can be effectively integrated into existing traditional programmes without affecting the integrity of successful programmes currently on offer. The findings of this study would attempt to provide answers to the challenges emanating from staffs and students' ICT skills.

METHODOLOGY

The research adopted a descriptive survey design to enable the researchers to come up with descriptions and explanations. Mhlanga and Ncube (2003) note that when the thrust of the research is to describe a prevailing phenomenon, a survey is most appropriate to employ so as to develop an in depth understanding and soliciting information.

Population

The population for this study was made up of current students studying with the Zimbabwe Open University under Mashonaland Central Region, former students as well as lectures / tutors for the region.

Stratified random sampling was used to extract 50 current students, 20 former students and 30 lecturers/tutors. Data was gathered in the first semester of 2012. A multi- technique approach to data collection was used in order to obtain a holistic or total view of the students, former students and lecturers/tutors views on challenges of e-learning at ZOU. A combination of self administered questionnaires, interviews and focus group discussions were used as data collection instruments. This however enabled the facilitation of gathering valid and reliable data from respondents more so enabling triangulation to cross validate the validity and reliability of the solicited data.

A pilot study was carried out with 25 respondents to pre-test the instruments before the data gathering process. This enabled the researchers to make improvements to the questionnaires.

Presentation and discussion of findings

Sub problem 1 ought to establish students' attitudes towards e-learning

On benefits of social engagements among students through e-learning and social network, fifty six (80%) of the students said it is beneficial for Zimbabwe Open University students to interact through e-learning social networks, seven (10%) were not sure while seven (10%) disagreed.

On the issue of E-learning facilitating the sharing of academic information with other students through the internet, sixty three (90%) of the students agreed that the internet can enable efficient communication of academic information among students in all the regions in the university and in other universities, five (4, 1%) were not sure while two (1, 9%) disagreed.

On E-learning facilitating the conducting of discussions groups and study circles among the students through the internet, forty nine (70%) of the students strongly supported the idea of setting up discussion groups and study circles through the internet, fourteen (20%) were not sure of the benefits while seven (10%) did not support the idea.

On whether E-learning improves communication between students and the institution, sixty three (90%) of the students preferred to receive study material through e-mail, four (5,5%) preferred both methods while three(4,5%) preferred the traditional method. Fifty six (80%) of the students preferred submitting and receiving assignments through the internet, seven (10%) preferred both methods while seven (10%) preferred the traditional method. The majority 68 (97%) of the students preferred to receive feedback from tutors through the e-mail. Two (3%) preferred both methods. Fifty six (80%) of the students preferred to access modules and library books through the internet, ten (14%) preferred to access from both sources while four (6%) preferred the hard copies.

Sub problem 2 focused on students' readiness for e-learning

A few students fourteen (20%) had cell phones with internet facilities, personal computers, and had access to internet facilities.

Student related findings

From the findings it would appear students are eager and motivated to engage in e-learning technologies to improve their learning environments. However the majority of students lacked ICT skills for utilizing e-learning technologies such as web navigation and web searching. They also lacked technological and academic confidence in utilizing e-learning technologies due to lack of exposure and practice. A few students had social support at home and at work places to support their e-learning programmes. However they expected the University to make all necessary provisions like mobile phone internet services. Mature students' preferred print media and face to face tutorials supplemented by e-learning technologies while young students preferred e-learning technologies to supersede traditional technologies.

Sub problem 3 centered on lectures/ tutors attitudes towards e-learning

Twenty four (80%) of the lecturers/ tutors were of the view that interaction among ZOU staff through the internet improves academic interaction among

themselves. Twenty one(70%) of the tutors supported the idea of developing tutorial material and delivering it online, 3(10%) preferred delivering tutorials using face to face methods, whilst seven(20%) preferred integrating online tutorials and face to face tutorials.

Sub problem 4 focused on tutors' readiness for e-learning

Only nine (30%) of lecturers/tutors had personal computers and only 3(10%) had ICT training and computer literate skills, of the ten percent only five percent had skills of developing course materials on line.

Tutor related findings

Tutors preferred the University to provide them with internet services; however they lacked professional technological, academic and social skills and attributes of e-learning tutoring.

Tutors were eager, motivated and committed to coordinate e-learning programmes but lacked academic and technological confidence to teach through internet and lacked skills and competence to design and coordinate programmes and courses on line.

Sub problem 5 focused on course related findings

Course content was available in printed modules and these are strongly preferred by students. However students preferred access to electronic modules as well.

Both students and tutors preferred the existing course outlines, assignments, tutorial letters and handouts to be developed into electronic material.

Both tutors and students preferred e-learning activities such as chat platforms, online group discussions and online study circles to supplement face to face tutorials.

Both tutors and students preferred assignment management and project supervision processes to be developed into e-learning programmes.

Sub problem 6 focused on challenges in implementing e-learning in Zimbabwe Open University.

Data collected through interviews and focused group discussions presented the following challenges;

There is still very low public esteem for online learning in Zimbabwean higher education. The skepticism that the public has towards online degrees offered by local Universities may create low job prospects for ZOU programmes offered through e-learning.

There is competition from well known higher education institutions and accredited western Universities hence the university cannot afford to attract quality applicants.

Unsatisfactory level of internet connectivity in Zimbabwe affects both the University and the students. Sometimes the internet speed fails to be as fast as needed and this discourages students to continue to be patient especially when things are not downloading fast enough.

Personal interconnections through cell phones are not reliable especially for students in rural areas and this adds to student frustration

CONCLUSION

In view of the findings presented in the foregoing discussion, the study makes the following conclusions, Zimbabwe Open University students:

Lack basic ICT skills such as web navigation and web search to utilize e-learning facilities.

- are eager to engage e-learning technologies in their studies. However they lack academic and technological confidence to use the internet facilities due to lack of exposure and practice

- are still satisfied with the traditional mode of course delivery. They require e-learning technologies to supplement existing programmes.

- come from home and work environments that to a certain extent can support OD e-learning programmes.

- prefer that provisions be made for existing study package to be developed into electronic material and that assignments marking and project supervision be managed electronically.

- It emerged that provision of e-learning programmes at Zimbabwe Open University must complement existing modes of delivery. In this regard e-learning technologies should be driven by the characteristics of ZOU tutors and students in order for them to effectively contribute to the development of the University's ethos. The introduction of e-learning technology alone will not be sufficient to foster and sustain the much needed improvement in the current ZOU programmes without a sustained intervention of tutors and students.

- The findings also established that e-learning pedagogical considerations ought to center on the roles of tutors and students in delivering e-learning. Identifying and developing tutors' and students' skills is paramount in the success of e-learning. ZOU tutors as the main agents of delivering courses through e-learning and the students as recipients have to be equipped with appropriate skills and attributes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In view of the above findings, this research recommends:

Student support services which includes

- The introduction of specific low level skills such as basic use of computer mediated technology, online social skills, web navigation and web searching into existing computer courses for all programme.

- An awareness compelling new and existing students to engage with new technologies to supplement traditional modes of delivery.

- Development of pedagogical approaches that support and facilitate learning using a combination of skills that encompass use of e-learning resources and traditional media.

- A gradual introduction of electronic forms of student support services such as chat platforms, e-library and assignment management through the internet.

Course delivery and content development

- Introduction of pedagogically sound and well designed course materials such as online modules, course outlines and handouts that are continuously updated online by their respective faculties.

- Frequent updating and redesigning of e-learning course content and curricula by faculties in accordance with market needs.

- Changing existing course materials into e-learning technologies such as e-mail, web based resources, online modules, online discussion forums, chat platforms, and web based resources.

Lecturer/ Tutor support services

- Appropriate tutor support mechanisms be put in place in order to provide lecturer/ tutor training prior to e-learning delivery and during the delivery phase.

- The tutors to be equipped with e-learning skills and attributes in addition to subject matter expertise.

- Train tutors to equip them with basic ICT skills to be comfortable with ICT systems and software to maintain and improve the e-learning environment and also to support students by providing technical guidance, feedback, encouraging peer learning and ensuring that time for harnessing ICT systems is always available.

- Train tutors to equip them with pedagogical skills to question, probe for students' responses on line and focusing on critical concepts and skills.
- Train tutors to equip them with social skills to create friendly e-learning social environments.
- Train lecturers/tutors managerial roles such as to set learning objectives, activities, procedural rules and time tabling on line.

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