

STUDENTS' VIEWS ON E-LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

In the distance teaching institutions where e-learning initiatives are underway and where the planners and administrators grapple with effective adaptation and implementation of technology-enabled education, students' views on e-learning assume considerable significance. Access to computers and the internet by students plays a crucial role in making an effective shift from a traditional distance education mode of delivery to web-enabled education and teaching. In this study, the researcher focuses on the views of Unisa distance education (DE) students who are enrolled for the PGCE qualification. Data are collected by means of (mainly) quantitative research, plus a certain amount of qualitative research. This paper reports the findings of a study in progress regarding students' standpoint on and access to e-learning.

KEY TERMS: E-learning, open distance learning, quantitative research

INTRODUCTION

In comparison with the long history of DE, e-learning is a relatively new phenomenon. Though etymologically e-learning covers any electronic mediated learning, it really caught the imagination of the educators with the emergence of the World Wide Web (WWW) in 1991 (Mason 1998). For this study, e-learning is defined as an internet- or intranet-based and web-delivered teaching-learning system. There are many benefits of e-learning, but also resistance to it, primarily because of technophobia and a lack of e-learning technology (Panda & Mishra 2007:324). In this paper the following will be discussed:

- a short literature review
- the research method
- preliminary findings
- conclusion

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Open Distance Learning

It is necessary to briefly revisit the concepts of open learning (OL) and open distance learning (ODL). The world-wide postmodern educational paradigm shift from provision thinking to student-centred thinking led to a sharp increase in the popularity of the “open learning” concept. In this perspective on learning, the learner decides *inter alia* on the following (Mackintosh, Waghid & Van Niekerk 1997:166-169): to learn or not to learn; what to learn; how to learn; where to learn; when to learn; the pace of learning; who to go to for assistance; how to evaluate what has been learned and what to do next. “At the heart of open learning is learner choice: putting decisions about learning into the hands of the learners themselves” (Wei 2010:48). Holmberg (1989:17) addresses a popular misconception by emphasising that OL is not synonymous with DE. Any educational institution (on the whole spectrum from contact to distance teaching) can offer OL, “as long as they take measures to make their educational programmes more open and flexible as regards time, place, courses, methods, ideas and people” (Wei 2010:48).

The term “ODL institution” appears to be highly problematic. This description suggests an institution that optimally accommodates distance students’ choice in learning matters. If an institution cannot guarantee and provide such student-driven openness in its distance learning offerings, as is evident from the institution’s formal processes, systems and procedures (and students’ complaints about these), it is unacceptable for such an institution to refer to itself as an “ODL institution”. Nor is it acceptable to deviate from the crux of open learning, and use, as Unisa does (Unisa 2008:1), a definition of ODL which is, in effect, a definition of best practice in DE:

[ODL is] a multi-dimensional concept aimed at bridging the time, geographical, economic, social, educational, and communication distance between student and institution, student and academics, student and courseware and student and peers. Open distance learning focuses on removing barriers to access learning, flexibility of learning provision, student-centeredness, supporting students and constructing learning programmes with the expectation that students can succeed.

The research question is: Can Unisa as “ODL” institution impose e-learning on all its students?

E-learning

Some of the major advantages attributed to e-learning include:

- access to educational resources from outside the institution on a global and instant basis
- a quick and easy way to create, update and revise course materials through low-cost off-the-shelf software
- location- and time-independent delivery of course materials such as notes, reading lists, etc.

- increased and flexible interaction with students through e-mail and discussion forums
- ability to serve a large number of students at a potentially reduced cost (Bates 2001; Piskurich 2006; Rossen & Hartley 2001; Weller 2000)

METHOD

A quantitative approach has been adopted in this study to evaluate students' views on e-learning. A pre-experimental and exploratory quantitative approach that classified logically structured questions as the data collection method seemed to be appropriate for this research project. The initial draft questionnaire was improved by asking for input from two members of other departments. This added to both its content validity and face validity. The questionnaire consists of two sections. Section A focuses on respondents' biographical information, including gender, age and language. Section B consists of 12 closed dichotomous questions and three open questions. The pilot study consisted of 20 respondents. These respondents were students who were enrolled for the PGCE qualification in the senior phase and FET. The questionnaire will be presented to the full sample of a possible 2 000 respondents.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The intention was to elicit the students' views on e-learning. The available pilot research data on student reactions to online learning of the university showed mixed responses.

The responses were as follows:

- 40% revealed that they did not have access to computers or the internet.
- All of the respondents indicated that they had not received any guidance on e-learning.
- 90% indicated that they were interested in guidance on e-learning.
- 50% were positive about online assessment of all their assignments.
- 60% of the respondents stated that e-learning can replace traditional (paper-based) distance education.
- 60% of the respondents thought that Unisa had to shift from traditional distance education delivery to web-enabled education and training.

In the open questions section, positive and negative comments were made, as well as recommendations.

CONCLUSION

Unisa needs to think carefully before claiming that it is an ODL institution. It has to face the reality of its students. Students need training on e-learning before the university can impose e-learning. We have students in deep rural areas without electricity – not to mention a computer! For at least the following few years, the university needs to make provision for all its students – even students without access to computers.

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