

The Challenges Distance Education Students Experience during Their Education Degree Program in the Faculty of Education at the University of Namibia

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Abstract

The main purpose of this study was to identify the challenges distance education students experience during their education degree studies. The specific objectives studied included the following: to investigate the technical and technology limitations, limited interactivity between lecturers and students and among distance education students, and lack of support from administrative staff. The research design employed in this study was the survey research design. The distance education students were asked to complete an online survey to determine their experiences doing their studies on a distance mode. The target population for this study included all distance education students (1675) who are enrolled at the Centre for Open, Distance and eLearning (CODEL) at the University of Namibia in 2020. The questionnaire instrument was administered via google form, 354 responses were received in spreadsheet formats, and charts generated from the responses, the Statistical Package of the Social Sciences (SPSS) file, the descriptive and reliability statistics for all the variables. Based on the findings of this study, this study concludes that the University of Namibia needs to improve slow internet speeds, limited internet access, lecturer student interaction, collaboration between distance education students, lack of computers, among others. Some of the recommendations made by this study include: increased funding in ICT infrastructure for distance education students, better training for lecturers on how to deliver pedagogy and the CODEL administrative staff to better support distance education students.

Keywords: distance education students, online teaching, higher education

1. Introduction

Distance education is growing fastest in the education sector (Gregori, Martinez, Moyano-Fernandez, 2018; Fojtik, 2015). Distance learning students are different from face-to-face students and may experience particular difficulties, which can sometimes lead to misunderstandings (Al-Arimi, 2014; Chapman, Goodman, Jawitz & Deacon, 2016; Heidrich, Barbosa, Cambuzzi, Rigo, Martins & dos Santos, 2018). Distance education students may encounter language barriers and/or translation problems, and therefore may not be able to understand what is required of them (Al-Arimi, 2014; Gregori, Martinez, Moyano-Fernandez, 2018). They also encounter limited interactivity, isolation, and lack of support (Al-Arimi, 2014). Content may become subservient to the technology in which the material is provided. As a result, there is a high rate of dropouts in distance students. The dropout rate is more than fifty percent (European Commission, 2015; Gregori, Martinez, Moyano-Fernandez, 2018).

The aim of distance learning is to deliver, support and enhance learning (Al-Arimi, 2014; Saidi, Sharip, Rahim, Arafah, Zulkifli, Zain, 2021). When used effectively it provides fluid communication when presenting the module, which creates strong connectivity between the module and the student, and the student does not feel abundant and unattended (Al-Arimi, 2014; Heidrich, Barbosa, Cambuzzi, Rigo, Martins & dos Santos, 2018). The advantage of distance learning include flexibility and convenience for the learner, facilitation of communication between learners, greater adaptability to a learner's need, more variety in learner experience with using multimedia and presentation of teaching material (Gregori, Martinez, Moyano-Fernandez, 2018).

On the African continent, there is limited high speed internet, infrastructure and online support from lecturers to students, and among students (Maboe, 2017; Munyoka, 2014; Olumide & Iloanya, 2019; Victor & Lufungulo, 2007). Learners face challenges in several African countries most especially in the remote areas where accessibility to internet is sometimes erratic and poor infrastructure (Olumide & Iloanya, 2019; Victor &

Lufungulo, 2007).

This study adopted the Holmberg's theory of personal communication between teachers and learners in distance education (Homberg, 2005). Homberg (2005) regards distance education as the conversational interaction between the student on the one hand and the tutor/lecturer of the host organization. The central concepts of his theory are motivation, empathy, non-contiguous communication, learner autonomy and interpersonal communication.

2. Research Methodology

This study adopted a quantitative approach in the form of online questionnaires. The data was descriptive in nature and correlations were drawn from the data.

2.1 Sample Size and Population

The target population for this study included all distance education students who are enrolled at the Centre of Open, Distance and eLearning (CODEL) at the University of Namibia. The sample was taken from distance students who are enrolled in the Education degree program.

2.2 Data Collection

Data were collected electronically through the link to the survey at the Announcement and Discussion Forum on Moodle for all distance education students. The link directed distance education students to the online questionnaire itself. The data collection was administered between 01 January 2021 and 28 February 2021.

3. Findings of the Study

The findings of the study are put in different categories, namely: slow internet speeds, limited internet access, power supply, collaboration between students, CODEL support services, support from lecturers, and lack of computers.

3.1 Slow Internet Speeds

Namibia is ranked 150th in the world at 3.91Mbps, while Liechtenstein is ranked number 1 with an internet average speed of 229.98 Mbps, while is the USA (16th Rank) is at 17.30Mbps (Rosshelen & Shutterstock, 2021). The findings indicated that 67% of the participants experienced slow internet speeds which affected their working online negatively.

3.2 Limited Internet Access

The limited or no connectivity alert usually appears when the Windows based computer is not receiving incoming signals from the network (Breines, Madge, & Dalu, 2020; Maboe, 2017). This means that the user cannot access the Internet or other network resources. It could be because of the computer, the Internet Service Provider (ISP) or other network issues. It may mean that the user is connected to the network but do not have access to the internet. The participants in this study who reported limited access to the internet was 61%.

3.3 Power Supply

It is the form of electrical power that is delivered to homes and businesses through the electric grid in many parts of the world. People use this electricity to power everyday items such as domestic appliances, computers, televisions and lamps by plugging them into a wall outlet. The participants who stated unreliable power supply was 22%.

3.4 Collaboration between Students

With the advances in technology, students can collaborate outside the classroom. Students can collaborate within a virtual space, which can provide a positive impact on their interactions beyond the physical learning space. When preparing students for the future, they will most likely need to work with others as part of a team. They need experiences in developing the skills to think critically while collaborating with others, to problem-solve, and to have discussions as part of decision-making process (Olumide & Iloanya, 2019; Saidi, Sharip, Rahim, Zulkifli, Zain, 2021). Lecturers can provide opportunities to create positive experiences for distance education students. There is a need for lecturers to then shift to the role of a facilitator and work alongside with distance education students. These experiences will help them to navigate learning in a collaborative environment. The content material can be involved in activities such as project or problem-based learning. Forty five percent (45%) of the participants indicated lack of collaboration opportunities with other students.

3.5 The Centre for Open, Distance and eLearning (CODEL) Support Services

CODEL is an academic support center that provides study materials and support services to distance students

(Unam, 2021). This online support system enables students to send queries about various issues such as unavailable assignments, unavailable study guides, missing courses, missing marks, students not linked to individual courses, resubmissions, vacation school timetables and assignment extensions on Moodle or missing CA marks (Unam, 2021). Vacation schools are arranged in consultation with faculties, in order to enhance distance education student learning and to complement study materials. Vacation school dates are specified on the CODEL calendar, where students and lecturers meet face to face. In addition, students are encouraged to work with their respective Student Support Coordinators when they experience difficulties with their studies. Forty two percent (42%) reported inadequate awareness about eLearning services provided by CODEL. Further, forty one percent (41%) indicated a lack of technical support provided at the different University of Namibia campuses by CODEL, and nine percent (9%) specified lack of support from CODEL officers.

3.6 Support from Lecturers

Student support is a bridge between distance students and the lecturers. This service is coordinated by lecturers in order to facilitate the interaction between students and lecturers within the respective faculties (Unam, 2021). The service provides opportunities for distance students to interact with the teaching staff face-to-face, and receive guidance with their studies. Forty percent (40%) indicated lack of support of from lecturers.

3.7 Lack of Computers

We live in a technology-driven and technology-aided world. Computers are an essential part of the information age. Nowadays, computers have become one of the part in our daily life. Computers can make our jobs become easier. They can be used for internet access, enable communication between students and lecturers and among students, store and calculate data. Thirty four percent (34%) indicated lack of computers.

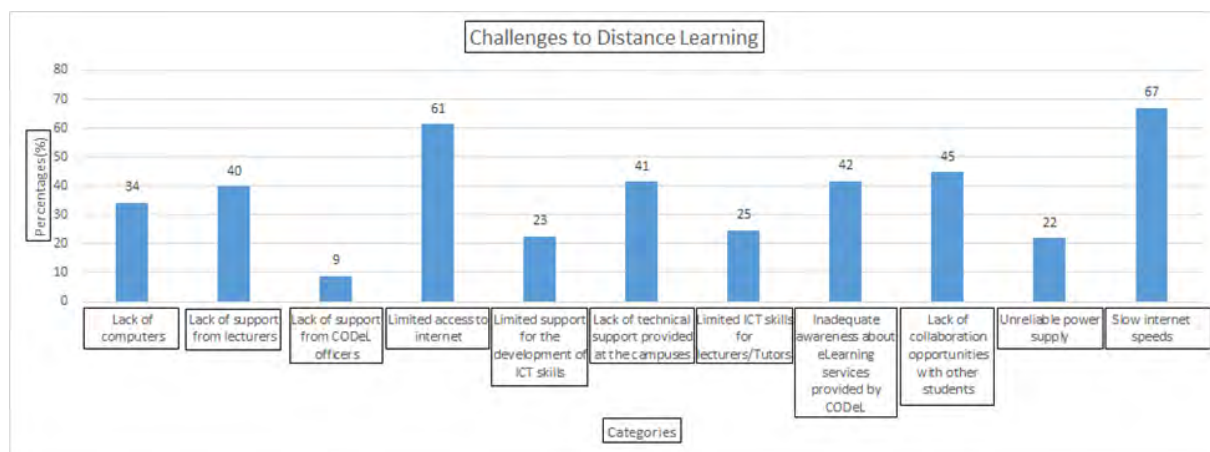
3.8 Limited ICT Skills for Lecturers While Teaching Students

The disruptive and rapid changes that technology is undergoing means that university lecturers must be increasingly prepared in order to remain up-to-date with ICT knowledge and skills. Lecturers should be able to facilitate lessons more effectively using digital technologies. Lecturers require extensive, on-going exposure to ICTs to be able to evaluate and select the most appropriate resources (Chibambo & Jere, 2018). However, the development of appropriate pedagogical practices is seen as more important than technical mastery of ICTs. Participants of this study reported that lecturers have both limited ICT knowledge and skills for use in their teaching practice. Twenty five percent (25%) participants reported limited ICT skills for lecturers while teaching distance students.

3.9 ICTs Skills for Distance Students

Technical competence in the use ICTs by distance students is a must. To keep pace with global challenges and competencies, distance education students require something more than traditional learning approaches. As such pedagogical innovations in educational technology should emphasize individuals' active participation in learning, solving problems, learning with peers, etc. as the key elements of effective twenty-first-century skills of learning (Olumide & Iloanya, 2019; Saidi, Sharip, Rahim, Zulkifli, Zain, 2021) . The new-age approach of learning develops several skills among learners, such as critical thinking, inquiry, autonomy to learn, learn by doing, among others (Saidi, Sharip, Rahim, Zulkifli, Zain, 2021). The participants who reported limited support for the development of ICTs skills for distance students was 23%.

Below is the figure that summarizes the findings of this study.



4. Discussion

The experiences of distance education students at the University of Namibia, are not so different from other students on the African continent and other developing countries. Slow internet speeds are experienced in several countries such as in Nigeria, where network providers make their internet bundles available at different prices (Aruloguna, Akande, Akindele & Badmus, 2020). The cost of internet data bundles can pose a challenge on internet access, social media and emerging technologies for online facilitation. Aruloguna, Akande, Akindele & Badmus (2020) indicated that a large part of the population does not have access, while those who might have access do not have quality network and infrastructure. In Botswana, learners face challenges most especially in the remote areas where accessibility to internet is sometimes erratic (Lwoga, 2013).

Other researchers in Malawi reported no internet access at home, lack of money and cost of data as prohibitive in their access to learning (Chibambo & Jere, 2018). Chibambo & Jere (2018) specified that some students showed that the provision of E-modules should be re-visited since some of them live in remote areas where they cannot easily access the internet and computers. These findings are consistent with this study's findings, where the 67% indicated slow internet speeds, 61 % specified lack of internet access and 22% reported unreliable power supply. Reliable technology and infrastructure are essential to ensure a successful online learning environment.

Another finding indicated that collaboration with other students was important among distance education students. The participants who reported lack of collaboration between distance education students was 45%. Distance students need to collaborate with other students with the intention to help each other and share information (Nistor, Trausan-Matu, Dascalu, Duttweiler, Chiru, Baltes & Smeaton, 2015; Liana & Ngeze, 2015). This builds strong relationships and a supportive environment among group members. Members share a range of resources: stories, experiences, tools and ways of addressing recurring problems. The group share resources, acquire relevant information, discuss with others, skills and knowledge (Garavaglia & Petti, 2015; Theodorakopoulos, Preciado & Bennett, 2012; Vandeyar, 2013). To respond to the increased demands and the complexity of current instructional work, peer support and collaboration among students has become very important (Nistor, Trausan-Matu, Dascalu, Duttweiler, Chiru, Baltes & Smeaton, 2015). The participants who indicated lack of collaboration with other students was 45%.

Another important observation from distance education students was that they were not aware of eLearning services provided by CODEL. CODEL need to make more effort in making aware of the services they provide on their platform, on assignment letters and through direct emails to distance students, so that distance education can take advantage of the services provided by CODEL.

Further, student support is a link between distance students and lecturers (Unam, 2021). The subject's virtual classroom is the gateway to the course for distance learning students (Gregori, Martínez, Julio José Moyano-Fernández, 2018). This space should be used to provide announcements, news, and useful and/or recommended teaching material by lecturers (Saidi, Sharip, Rahim, Arafah, Zulkifli, Zain, 2021). This allows students the opportunity to interact with lecturers online, and receive guidance to address difficulties they have with their studies (Saidi, Sharip, Rahim, Arafah, Zulkifli, Zain, 2021; Unam, 2021). Pre-set weekly schedule must be provided by lecturers in order to be accessible to distance education students. Virtual office hours may be used to answer questions by e-mail, and that could also be carried out by videoconference, depending on the available resources (Saidi, Sharip, Rahim, Arafah, Zulkifli, Zain, 2021). Forty percent (40%) indicated lack of support of from lecturers.

In addition, this study found that the participants reported lack of computers, which was 34%. This finding is consistent with students experiencing a lack of computers in developing countries. In South Africa, researchers revealed that there are insufficient computers for the purposes of teaching and learning, which in turn creates challenges for students and lecturers as it hampers the effective of implementing e-learning (Mabusela & Adams, 2017). Other researchers, reported that many students lack computers or smartphones (Nogueira, 2021).

The participants who reported lack of basic skills in using computers was 23%. Further, the participants who reported limited support for the development of ICT skills was 23%. Some students indicated that they do not know how to type assignments using a computer and hence they get them typed at internet cafés where they pay with their limited funds (Breines, Madge & Dalu, 2020; Mabusela & Adams, 2017). Mabusela & Adams (2017) study recommends that first year students must be provided with basic computer skills during the orientation process.

The participants of study reported that 25% of lecturers lacked training in the use of ICTs. Lecturers require extensive, on-going exposure to ICTs to be able to evaluate and select the most appropriate ICT resources (Jaiyeoba & Iloanya, 2019). Lectures require continuous professional development in order to keep up with

rapidly evolving digital technologies. Lecturers lack adequate technological-pedagogical-content knowledge essential for teaching in the digital society (Lwoga, 2013; Jaiyeoba & Iloanya, 2019). Digital skills that 21st century lecturers require should include cloud storage and sharing solutions, social media, web editing, image editing, presentation software, and general multimedia among others (Jaiyeoba & Iloanya, 2019).

5. Conclusion

The findings of this study indicated lack of internet access, slow internet speeds and unreliable power supply. The Namibian government and the private sector should play a significant role in providing up to date ICT infrastructure and reliable power supply. Provision of E-modules should be re-visited since some of the students live in remote areas where they cannot easily access the internet and computers. A number of students reported experiencing challenges with data costs, which impeded their ability to access the university e-learning platforms. This has been identified as a major factor impeding successful e-learning implementation at the University of Namibia. This was compounded by the fact that sometimes the e-learning system loads too slow, leading to some students aborting their attempts to use it. In addition, the lack of computers should be addressed by the University of Namibia management, so that students can easily access computers at the computer labs, or payment plans put in place so that students can purchase computers through the University of Namibia.

Further, lecturers at the University of Namibia should focus on pedagogical innovations in educational technology which emphasize distance education students' active participation in learning, problem solving, learning with peers, among others as the key elements of effective twenty-first-century skills of teaching and learning. It can be of great benefit to give distance education students opportunities to collaborate within a virtual space, as that often can have a meaningful impact on their interactions beyond the physical learning space. In so doing, it will help prepare distance education students for the future, where they will likely need to work with others as part of a team.

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