LUKENYA UNIVERSITY

ISSN 2663-3183 MULTIDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL (LUMJ)

Vol 1, (1), p.14-21

Understanding the Concept of E-learning: A Case study of the Kenya Methodist University University (KeMU) Mombasa Campus, Kenya

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Article history
Received: July 20, 2019
Received in revised form: October 12, 2020
Accepted: October 23, 2020
Available online: https://research.lukenyauniversity.ac.ke/

ABSTRACT

The study interrogates types of e-learning modes, impact, successes and challenges of E- Learning at the Kenya Methodist University (KeMU), Mombasa Campus. E-learning involves programs that use the internet to allow sharing of instructional material beyond classroom walls, between educators and the learners. The study adopted a desk review approach that focuses on document analysis to get educators and learners' experiences on e-learning. The documents analyzed were journals, KeMU Internet Communication and Technology (ICT) website and students' registration records. The study aimed at improving knowledge on e-learning to universities, middle level colleges and Secondary schools. It also aimed at determining the place of e-learning in modern education and how best it can be improved. The study findings show that wider awareness creation was essential to educators, students and the general public on the need for e-learning.

Key words: Technology, Communication, E-learning, Learners, educators

1.0 INTRODUCTION

E-Learning or online learning is an education process in which instruction and course content is supported by the internet (Watson & Kalmon, 2005). The term online education is used interchangeably with virtual learning, cyber learning and e-learning. Crowther et al., (2014) proposes that e-learning is a broader concept encompassing a wide range of applications and processes which use all available electronic media to deliver vocational education and training more flexibly.

E-Learning is categorized into Synchronous and A synchronous eLearning. Synchronous e-learning involves the learners and the instructor interacting with each other in real time from different locations at a set time. In Synchronous eLearning, the learning

resources are delivered via mobile, video conference or chat and Webinars. The participants can share their ideas during the session and interact with each other and they get detailed queries and solutions. Synchronous eLearning is gaining popularity because of the suspension of in person classes due to COVID 19 and improved technology.

A Synchronous e- learning is when the learner and the teacher are not online at same time (Appana, 2008). Asynchronous eLearning uses technologies such as email, blogs, discussion forums, eBook's CDs, DVDs, etc. Learners can access materials, chat with teachers and also with co-learners at any time. It is a self-paced learning module in form of message boards and group discussions.

Educators and learners find synchronous and asynchronous online learning mode appealing. From the comfort of their homes, students can read materials submit their assignments and examinations papers on their cell phone or any Information Communication Technology (ICT) device from any location because there is no scheduled time of class. Similarly, educators can provide instruction and grade assignments from the comfort of their homes. The learners and instructors only need a desktop computer, laptop or smart phone and internet accessibility to take the online course.

In asynchronous online mode, learners can attend lessons and take their assignments at their discretion depending on the instructors' deadlines, unlike the traditional on campus classes where there is time schedule for each lesson, lasting for an hour or more.

Since on line learners have to plan their own schedule and are responsible for their learning, it makes students to be masters of their own learning. This helps in self-regulation and students can spend more time on courses or topics that they are weak in, and need to improve (Aslanian & Clinefelter, 2012). The self-regulatory virtue is very vital for a successful academic journey. The student puts more effort in studies hence enhanced involvement (Bransford, Brown & Cocking, 2000)**.**

Students may feel comfortable talking and expressing themselves online with their instructors through emails, Skype, Imo, online chats and group discussion than face to face classroom interaction. Online classes help to remove any cultural barrier that might have existed in on campus studies, where students from different background meet. Additionally, students have the chance to respond to questions with confidence in writing without seeing the other source and respond well compared to the face to face classroom set up (Kassop, 2003).

The internet provides a variety of different materials which can be used by all people in online classroom irrespective of their age, economic status or social status. McNeely, (2005) mentions that use of technology in the classroom can increase the participation and inclusion of all students in the learning process. Students are free to say want they want to say and have much time to make comments when ready.

Online learning helps in cutting costs, since students will save money by not attending the classes in person. Costs of food, transportation and books will be reduced. Also books are available through the schools' e-library.

On the contrary, some online learning modes encourage monologue instead of face to face interaction with the instructor. The value of face to face interaction cannot be overlooked. For instance, in the classroom context, students exhibit body language and facial expressions which give the instructor an opportunity to gauge whether the students are grasping the content or not. The online learning does not give the instructor the opportunity to identify an academically challenged student for support.

Online learning offers lots of tasks and assignments such as reading and writing papers depending on the level of study. At times there is no daily supervision and monitoring of the task. Given the strict submission requirements of activities and assignments, students may compromise the standards of performance.

Online classes can be disrupted by technology failure or power outages. Since online learning relies mostly on power and internet efficiency, any disruption hinders the students' class access. As a result, the student's overall performance can decline.

Kasse and Balunywa, (2013) in their study revealed major infrastructural and technical incompetence, and attitudinal challenges (by staff and students). These challenges limit full-scale adoption of e-learning in institutions.

Plagiarism issues and lack of integrity can arise. There are high chances that a student can hand in another person's work. Futher, an imposter can attempt assignments on a student's behalf. In face-to-face classroom situations, the students physically undertake assignments and hand in their work. This minimizes chances of having imposters. Antiplagiarism softwares are handy in reducing chances of plagiarism in all situations.

1.1 Methodology

The study used a desk review approach that focused on document analysis of journals, KeMU ICT website and students' registration records as well as getting educators' and learners' experiences. This approach helped in creating a greater understanding of the concept of e learning in universities and colleges from the educators' and learners' experiences.

1.2 Findings

For effective learning, new educational technologies need to be supported by innovative pedagogical approaches which in turn enable collaboration, communication and mobility (Webster & Murphy, 2008). Most higher education institutions in Africa and Kenya have embraced e learning as a mode of instruction. However, Walimbwa (2008) points out that some universities in the East African region have not fully utilized e- learning as expected.

E- Learning is being practiced successfully by some universities in East Africa. Kasse & Balunywa, (2013) assessed the implementation of e-learning in Ugandan institutions of higher learning namely Makerere University of Kampala (MAK); Makerere University Business School (MUBS); Kampala International University (KIU), and Islamic University in Uganda (IUIU). The choice of these institutions was based on the fact that they are the highest-ranking institutions in Uganda in terms of the quality of education, student population, and ICT adoption. Findings of their study showed that e-learning was used mostly as a means of

delivering learning material (80%), minimally used to conduct discussions (12%), and to conduct assessment (2%).

To attract more students in the universities especially those already employed and interested in part time learning due to various reasons, eLearning is preferred (Hollow& ICWE, 2009). Hennessy, et al., (2010) reveal that educators' knowledge of online learning is key because the internet has increasingly become a source for resources needed for research and other academic requirements.

The KeMU Mombasa campus mostly uses asynchronous eLearning. Mayer (2001) avers that it is important to select online media that resonates with the students' needs. Consequently, with the suspension of in person classes, KeMU was focused on achieving synchronous eLearning.

Since 2006, when the Kenya government developed the Information Communication Technology (ICT) policy there was a great impact of IT in academia. Wong & Looi, (2010) state that most academic courses relay on IT to achieve the objectives of transmitting knowledge. As a result, Kasse and Balunywa (2013), point out that most universities in East Africa use e-learning forum to deliver learning material, conduct discussions and assessments. The use of e-learning has witnessed a massive registration of students in programs that use the internet to conduct classes, submission of examination results and course registration.

To be relevant within the higher education sector and to tap the distance education niche KeMU, developed the center for virtual learning (CVL) which hosts the digital campus. CVL gives the learner a feel of a physical campus environment. The educators and the learners are able to have a platform where communication flows freely. The instructor has a very important role in the success of e –learning by understanding pedagogy strategies, and content (Angeli & Valanides, 2009). Furthermore, Garrison & Vaughan, 2008; Jiang & Ting, 2000) mentions that the instructor and the technical staff has the responsibility of creating a free flowing learning environment.

The learners can access their portal at any time and any place once the internet is available. The KeMU digital campus is for those self –motivated learners who are constrained by work and time during the day or location among other factors, but can study from wherever they are after work or minus the constraining factors. Both postgraduate and undergraduate degrees in computer science, nursing, business, education, finance and economics can be administered through the digital campus depending on the student's choice (https://digital.kemu.ac.ke). The learners get the same level of knowledge as those on campus.

The KeMU Digital campus (Learning Management System) uses videos, presentations, simulations and textual instructions to disseminate information asynchronously. This reveals that elearning makes use of many technologies some of which have been developed specifically for it, whilst others are conveniently used to complement the learning process such as social media. Wenglisky, (1998) states that the main purpose of technology in schools should be to enhance the learners' performance, but not to make the schools have the state –of the-art device. Therefore,

learning should always be an impetus that drives the use of technology in school.

At the KeMU digital campus, the learners get their course outline and other requirements from their instructors on the portal. The learners post their assessments through the same mode. Assignments are carefully incorporated in each course to ensure that the instructors are able to evaluate learners and continuously offer reinforcements to them. The learners can present data, photographs, videos combined with verbal content as part of class assignments.

The learners on the online programme take the same course units and examinations as those on the regular programme. The course units are uploaded on the digital campus and have the same context as the regular class content. There is no difference in the course content between the two programmes except the mode of delivery. At the end of the semester examinations are administered both digitally and physically (face-to-face) following the course outline that is usually common to both, online and regular programmes.

With the Covid-19 pandemic and suspension of face-to-face classes, KeMU, end of semester examinations were switched to the online mode. Through the Learner Management Systems (LMS) students sit for examinations online via a link in their portals. The exam is divided into three sections A, B and C. To curb cheating, web camera students are used to monitor students during the two hours online examinations.

The students on the online programme interact through discussion groups and dash boards within their networks. The Digital Campus is packed with interactive features including chat rooms, discussions and micro-blogging tools that facilitate conversation amongst the user. The Centre has invested in modern learning and instructional resources and methodologies to cater for a self-instruction. The CVL coursework is packaged in High Definition multimedia and textual formats, presented in a structured fashion that allows a learner to smoothly progress through an academic term (https://digital.kemu.ac.ke).

The digital campus has an electronic library which huge volumes compared to the physical library. There is an online curator who guides students as would be in the physical library. The library is a key ingredient in any academic institution. The electronic library enables learners by a click of the button to access any required information with ease. With the advent of electronic library at KeMU Mombasa campus, there is reduced activity by students in the physical library.

This digital campus also allows students from all over the country to apply for courses and programs regardless of their location. Every application is received by the admission staff. Responses are communicated through e-mail.

The University fees at KeMU is determined by the mode of study. Programmes taken through the digital campus are relatively cheaper compared to on campus programs. The students can access elearning materials using their ipads, desk top computers, mobile phones or laptops.

The study revealed that eLearning is a preferred mode of study by students who are employed or busy elsewhere and cannot have time for physical class attendance.

Possibly, most of the students join eLearning class because of the flexibility (Aslanian & Clinefelter, 2012). In this regard, there was an increase in KeMU students' intake in the eLearning cohorts compared to the face-to face cohorts within the three intakes in Januaury 2019, May 2019 and September 2019 before Covid-19 struck. There was greater rise in online intake with the advent of covid-19. The registration process which hitherto was hectic for students was made easier and more flexible. This was also a catalyst to increased student admission.

By the click of a button, the students could easily access their examination results from any location through their portal. It lessened physical interaction between instructors and students especially in the era of social distancing.

2.0 Conclusion

The nature of education delivery is ever changing in the world today. Institutions of higher learning should always be kept abreast with the changes so as to reach out to those who due to work related, family and distance issues cannot attend the tradition face to face classroom set up. Institutions should always advice students on the advantages and disadvantages of online learning for an informed decision making on the choice of study.

2.1 Recommendations

The KeMU instructors in the digital campus and other universities in Africa need to have the Technological Knowledge, together with Pedagogical and Content Knowledge (TPACK). This gives them the ability to handle all the learners' concerns in the digital campus. Proper utilization of technology motivates learners' and educators' participation in tasks given. The instructor's knowledge of the online learning mode is key in influencing the learners.

The KeMU technical staff and instructors in other higher institutions of learning should be facilitated to access computers and have online presence. The technical staff should be ready to respond to the students' challenges such as on how to sign in the portal, check their grades or accessing e-books and the elibrary. Instructors should give timely answers to students' questions or relevant communication required by students to facilitate a smooth process. Subsequently, the instructor together with the technical staff should ensure a successful synchronous and asynchronous online learning.

KeMU and other universities in Africa should invest heavily in online learning technologies. Challenges such as frequent power outages, poor internet connectivity and limited trained ICT experts should be given priority in terms of funding by governments.

The university faculty in Africa should select media that is sensitive to all learners in their context. For instance, there should be tools that are friendly to those with learning difficulties. For instance, some learners may require special devices for auditory purposes or braille. The staff should know how to make the class notes easy to download so as to motivate learning. This is to ensure inclusivity of all irrespective of any learning challenges therein.

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