Access and success in e-learning in the Zimbabwe Open University

Chrispen Chiome
Senior lecturer, Educational leadership and policy, Zimbabwe Open University. E-mail: chrischiom@yahoo.ca.

The study sought to determine distance education students’ experiences in access to and success in e-learning endeavours. The study was qualitative as the questionnaire used as a data-gathering instrument had both closed and open-ended sections that yielded qualitative data. The research employed the descriptive survey design. In this study, a sample of 158 distance education students from all faculties in the Zimbabwe Open University’s Masvingo Regional Campus was extracted using the convenience sampling method. The study found out that while the majority of distance education students use computer related gadgets such as cell phones, television remote control the majority of them did not have access to the computers and thus to e-learning access and success is affected. Success factors such as collaborative learning and quality e-content were heavily deflowered, marred and spoilt as the majority of them did not have e-mail addresses, had no skills in e-learning and hence could not communicate with other students and tutors on the internet. The students nevertheless were excited about e-learning facilities provided by the university. The study, among others, recommended that wide access to e-learning facilities by distance education students, extensive skills upgrading workshops targeting all students, e-learning support centre and e-learning course must be put in place to enable Zimbabwe Open University students to benefit from e-learning.

Keywords: Access, success, e-learning, open and distance learning, collaborative learning.

INTRODUCTION

Use of Information Technology (IT) in academic work today is unavoidable. Students, especially in institutions of higher learning have to use IT in their studies. Students engaged in programmes with ZOU are no exception. They may find themselves having to search for data on line, communicate with their tutors or regions through the Internet. At times they are compelled to present some of their work typed.

Thus this research tries to find out the extent to which students in the Masvingo Regional Campus of the Zimbabwe Open University access and succeed in e-learning endeavours where E-Learning is the use of network technology to design, deliver, select, administer, and extend learning [1].

Background

The concept of globalisation has been enhanced by the advent of the information technology revolution. It is now widely accepted with convincing justification that information and communication technology is beginning to form the basis by which educational reforms revolve around, the world over [2]. The first operating calculator was built by Blaise Pascal the French mathematician, who in 1942 at the age of 19 produced a gear driven adding machine to assist in calculations in his fathers’ tax office [3]. Machine handling of information, albeit without the programme control aspect, became widespread around the turn of the century. In the USA, John Atanosoff and Clifford Bery constructed the ABC (Atanosoff-Berry Computer) machine between 1939 and 1942- a special purpose machine for solving simultaneous equations with logic circuits using over 200 valves. The ABC was very influential on the design of later digital computers [4].

When we look at what troubles or excite people about
computers, we learn truths that otherwise would have eluded us. Digital literacy—the ability to access networked computer resources and use them is critical to distance education students. The skills for digital literacy are as necessary as the driver’s licence [5]. The Net’s growing universality will create priceless resources for learning and self advancement. Glistter [5] says if these won’t overwhelm your life overnight, they will change it subtly, continually and with irresistible force. Given the fact that computers are extensively used in occupational and educational settings [6], it follows that the Zimbabwe Open University students will not be spared by this computer tide that has swept the world.

It is extremely difficult now to reverse this technological revolution. The best option for students is to join the bandwagon. Students who fail to heed this call may place themselves at a disadvantage through reticence in developing computer skills [7]. McLlroy [7] went further to argue that maximum benefit from using the library is forfeited by the failure to use the electronic facilities that are provided. If McLlroy’s assertions are true for students in general, it remains to be seen what the situation will be in a distance education institution in a developing country.

For a host of human and economic reasons, open and distance education has gained momentum throughout the world [8]. In fact, for many countries, distance education has been the most viable solution for providing education to hundreds of thousands of students. Not only have the costs been kept low, but for people served by distance education, there may have been no other practical option. Allen and Seaman [9] reported a 12% increase in students taking at least one online course from 2007 to 2008. Other estimates confirm that the growth is expected to continue over the next five years with estimates placing the number of students taking online classes in 2014 at over 18.5 million students [10].

The Zimbabwe Open University is an Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institution whose mandate is to provide education to everyone who is keen to learn. It operates in a flexible manner, that is, one, which is less restrictive and less prohibitive as compared to conventional institutions. Education is available on the doorsteps of the learners wherever they are. Despite the dispersion of its clients, ZOU remains resolute in its bid to become a world class Open and Distance Learning University [11]. To achieve this vision and mission it means that the Zimbabwe Open University modes of service delivery must move towards World Class as well. This means the use of Internet technologies to deliver a broad array of solutions that enhance knowledge and performance [1]. Students access services, whether they are academic, administrative, or personal [12] and in all these instances, the computer cannot be avoided. Thus this study is an attempt to find out if students access and then go on to succeed in e-learning endeavours in line with this vision.

Several changes have been recorded in society in general and in university education in particular. One of the most spectacular changes has been the advent of the Internet, which has changed and will continue for a long time to change our lives and the world of communications. Figures that testify to the ever-growing presence of the Internet are quite impressive; 650 million Internet users in 2005 [13]. How many of these are Zimbabwe Open University students, remains to be seen. To this effect ZOU’s vision and mission are achieved if the clients it serves are technologically compliant, and are not forfeiting their computer benefits. The extent of students’ e-learning access and success will be another measure of world class. There are several technological trends that will fuel the blending of ODL with e-learning. These technological improvements range from applications to computing power to the ubiquity of the network [8].

In Malaysia, e-learning is introduced to students undergoing open and distance learning programmes. Distance learning is not a recent phenomenon to Malaysians [1]. In other parts of the world, research has confirmed that universities are expanding current online offerings and creating new programs to address growing enrollment [14]. Thus it is important that Zimbabwe Open University move with the times.

A study by Pancer et al. [15] revealed that a substantial number of people have expressed their anxieties and appreciations about living in a computerised society. Whether these anxieties are present in distance education university students will be seen by the results of this study. Should these be present, then there will be serious repercussions for the students and the university given the fact that computers are here to stay.

Wheeler [16] is of the view that teacher resistance to new technologies can even cascade to the students leading to serious repercussions. Mcllroy [7] wrote that there is still a large volume of evidence indicating that Computer phobia (the fear of computers) has not gone away. To make matters worse for distance education students. Brosnan and Davidson [17] discovered in their study that one-quarter to one-third of the general population suffer from some form of computer phobia. Further, Weil and Rosen [18] contend that university students do not appear to have fared much better than the general population with 25% reporting some degree of technophobia.

Computer anxiety is another problem associated with computers. The problem associated with computer anxiety or negative perceptions about computers is that these attitudes or anxieties may restrict or thwart computer use [7]. Such negative attitudes can have detrimental effects on student’s ability to learn and acquire computer skills. There may also be an added danger that the distance education students may totally
avoid computer use on the backdrop of negative attitudes and perceptions on computers. Wheeler [16] argues that such behaviour need to be changed as it is a barrier to e-learning.

The omnipresence of ICTs in universities is simply unavoidable, particularly for distance learners [9]. It encourages information accessibility, scale up the academic success rate of distance education students, improve the professional standards of the teaching staff, encourage interaction between students and their tutors or the community [13]. Karsenti further reveals that studies carried out prove that a student can learn more and faster with ICTs and online courses than he would in a normal classroom situation [13].

Based on these and other statistics, it is important to see how students in the Zimbabwe Open University fare in e-learning in terms of access and academic success. In the present environment of fast growing information and communication technology, many learners would use the Internet to interact with their tutors and peers provided they have computer facilities and are computer literate. For the Zimbabwe Open University, this is yet to be established hence this study. Fortunately or unfortunately, competition from e-learning will affect the Zimbabwe Open University. There are new entrants to the market, many with significant venture capital backing. The projected value and profitability of e-learning will draw conventional university competitors to a space traditionally dominated by Zimbabwe Open University.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to find out Zimbabwe Open University students’ access to and success in e-learning endeavours.

Statement of the Problem

In today’s world it has become very important to have access to information. E-learning has become the most powerful and widely used medium for providing information in learning institutions. Students’ access to and success in e-learning becomes vital. To this effect, the statement of the problem is, ‘what are the Zimbabwe Open University students’ experiences in accessing and successes in e-learning?’

Research Questions

The study was directed by the following research questions:

1. What are the student’s experiences in accessing computers and computer related electronic gadgets?
2. What success stories do students have in e-learning?
3. What are the challenges met by the students in e-learning?

RESEARCH DESIGN (METHODOLOGY)

The study used a descriptive qualitative design. The questionnaire used had both closed and open-ended sections that yielded qualitative data. Babbie [19] says; “Descriptive survey is a method of research that describes what we see over and beyond”.

Thus the researchers chose this method as it allowed students to say exactly what they felt about their experiences in e-learning. Borg and Gall [20] say descriptive surveys are excellent vehicles for the measurement of attitudes and orientations prevalent in a large population as was the case in this study. One of the characteristics of the descriptive survey method is to investigate the present status of the phenomenon. This was the primary goal in this study.

The target population for this study was all the 1500 returning students for Masvingo Regional Campus of the Zimbabwe Open University for semester one of 2010. A sample of one hundred and fifty eight (158) returning students was extracted using the convenience sampling technique. The method yielded a sample of 44 (27.8%) education students, 19 (12%) natural science students, 36 (22.8%) commercial students and 46 (29%) social science students.

Thus the research cut across all faculties of the Zimbabwe Open University in one regional campus. In terms of gender, 102 (64.6%) of the students were males while 56 (35.4%) were females. The 158 selected subjects were believed to be knowledgeable about e-learning in the Zimbabwe Open University and beyond, as they had gone through at least one semester and they had all registered in the e-learning facility offered by the Zimbabwe Open University. Each individual who took part in this research was consulted and agreement was reached on what data to be collected and included in the research. The privacy, anonymity and confidentiality of respondents was upheld and guaranteed in this research.

Data Gathering

The instrument for data collection was the questionnaire. This instrument was pilot tested to 15 randomly selected students. Items that were not clear were eliminated. The questionnaire was preferred because apart from being cheaper to construct and administer, it is anonymous and appropriate to a literate population like the students in this study. The processing and analysis of data is also less complex than in the case of observations [21]. The 180 students were given the questionnaire to complete and return. 180 questionnaires were administered. 22 questionnaires were declared defunct after they were not returned on time leaving 158 questionnaires to analyse.

Data Presentation and Discussion

The following section presents the data in terms of the sub
Table 1. Access to e-learning.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue raised</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th></th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th></th>
<th>Not sure</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I access e-learning from the university facilities.</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>23.5</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I access e-learning from my workplace.</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>41.1</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>57.6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I access e-learning from private operators.</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>56.3</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>40.5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I access e-learning from my mobile phone.</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>91.8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I access e-learning from a computer at home</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>15.8</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>82.3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have no access to e-learning facilities</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>40.5</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>59.5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 showing responses on experiences in accessing e-learning. Key N= 158 F=Frequency.

Table 2. Access to computers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue raised</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th></th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th></th>
<th>Not sure</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I use a computer daily</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>86.7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have access to the internet</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>24.7</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>73.4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have an E-Mail address</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>21.5</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>76.6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I communicate with tutors on the internet</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>92.4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I interact with other students on the internet</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>91.8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 shows responses on access to computers. Key N= 158 F=Frequency

problems raised earlier on. The following themes will be addressed, experience in operating computers and other electronic gadgets, access to and use of computers, success stories on e-learning and challenges encountered in e-learning.

Access to e-learning facilities

From table 1 it appears students access e-learning from private operators 89 (56.3%) and at their workplaces 65 (41.1). The most interesting finding is that 64 or (40.5%) of the students forfeit their rights to e-learning owing to the fact that they have no access to e-learning facilities. The other damaging finding is that even if most students do have mobile phones [22], they do not use these as e-learning gadgets. The World over, mobile technology is being used as a learning and teaching tool. For instance, the BBC’s use of interactive technologies for learning extends beyond online.

For example, the ubiquity of mobile phones among the young has led to the BBC experimenting with texting as part of its multi-media Bitesize exam revision service [23]. Combining a variety of platforms gives access to a greater range of learners because the apparent lack of access to e-learning as evidenced in this study can have damaging ripple effects for the students.

McIlroy [7] reports that some students develop worse attitudes to computers as a result of lacking exposure to them. Wheeler [16] blames resistance to new technologies as a major barrier to e-learning. Just as Amazon.com put pressure on traditional bookstores, the patterns of e-business and e-learning are shifting expectations of education [14].

Access to Computers

From table 2 it is evident that the access to computers for students is greatly handicapped as they disagreed that they use computer daily 137 (86.7), communicate with tutors on the Internet 146 (92.4%) and interact with other students on the Internet 145 (91.8%). It appears these distance education students are greatly impeded in their studies. Schaefer [24] says that the Internet affords an excellent opportunity to communicate with fellow students, lecturers and researchers. Burns and Sinfield [25] confirm this when they say if the students have Internet access, they will be able to conduct library searches and access on-line journals and course materials. They go on to claim that a computer is rapidly becoming an essential study tool, which unfortunately is not the case with the students of the Zimbabwe Open University in this study.
Further to this, there are exciting websites that are useful for students such as; www.rdn.ac.uk/bth; ferlibecta.org.uk; www.bbc.co.uk/education and others [26]. Unfortunately Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) students do not benefit from these. To add to that, ZOU subscribes to many electronic libraries throughout the world for the benefit of its students but sadly, due to various challenges to be discussed in another section, a sizable number of the students do not benefit.

Success stories on e-learning in the ZOU

Some success stories on e-learning were generated from the open ended questions of the questionnaire. Some of the more prominent ones include:

- E-learning has helped in advancing collaborative learning and sharing of information.
- The ZOU online e-learning centre is an exciting new innovation that makes our learning richer.
- In addition to teacher generated knowledge, we also get brilliant ideas from students’ generated knowledge.
- There is quality e-content in e-learning that is easily accessible.
- Quality e-content

The findings here appear to point that e-learning is an exciting innovation for students in this study who are benefiting from collaborative learning, quality e-content and an exciting e-learning centre established for them by the university.

This comes at a time when Bates [27] point out that computer-based communication has revolutionary implications for distance education, providing the means to free students from the centralised control of pre-prepared and constricted curricula. Many colleges and universities are expanding their current online offerings and creating new programs to address growing enrolment. Institutions often utilize online education as a method to serve more students while lowering instructional costs [9]. This revolution and the indispensability of computers is then meaningless if the students do not have the pre-requisite skills. We less often think of open and distance education in terms of correspondence courses or collections of videotapes these days as is the case with the ZOU students. Our notions are changing because distance education is evolving in a networked world [8]. E-business, e-learning e-commerce and the convergence of digital media are dominant forces today [9].

Challenges to e-learning in ZOU

Open-ended questions were used to solicit for challenges met by the students and some of the following issues came out.

The Issue of Access

A large number of the students had no access to computers at all as evidenced by the following submissions:

‘I never used a computer before.’
‘No challenges since I do not have access to one’
‘No computers in rural areas. I love computers but have no access to them.’
‘Computers excite me but I do not have the necessary skills.’

The evidence here is that the students appreciate the importance of computers in their studies and in life. This is in line with Bates [27] assertion that computers provide an opportunity to teach differently in a way that can meet the fundamental needs of a new and rapidly changing society. The computer and the network have linked the teacher and the student through word processing, e-mail, collaboration, chat rooms and virtual environments [28].

The move of ODL to more technology-based components and the rise in interactivity has created another category of open and distance education e-learning [8]. Because of this, most institutions are keen to embrace e-learning. Nevertheless, issues like lack of e-content, inadequate infrastructure coupled with the problem of digital divide, has resulted in a relatively low adoption rate [1].

The Need for Training

A sizably larger number of the students need training in e-learning. This information appears to corroborate, affirm and confirm earlier assertions in close ended questions that the distance education students in this study lack e-learning skills. The following statements bear testimony. ‘Lack of adequate training affects me. I am computer illiterate, so how can i benefit from e-learning?’
‘I haven’t learnt all the necessary skills to confidently access e-learning resources on my own.’

E-Learning Learner Support

Emanating from the problem of access and that of lack of skills is a new problem in which students do not have e-learning learner support. They subcontract others to do the web search for them. A large number of the students appear to sub contract web search because of lack of learner support in e-learning. The following submissions bear testimony;
‘I subcontract since I do not have the skills and no one is willing to support me.
‘I have pressure of work so I need support which for now is not forthcoming. This research is based on the assumptions that distance
education and e-learning are indispensable bed fellows in a world characterised by continuous change. However, this appears to be under threat considering that students in the Zimbabwe Open University a premier distance and open teaching institution in Zimbabwe is faced by these circuizous pathways which include access to computers, lack of skills and lack of e-learning learner support services in the university. In addition to the importance of lifelong learning, distance education and e-learning will grow in popularity because convenience and flexibility are more important decision criteria than ever before [8]. E-learning will become widely accepted because exposure to the Internet and e-learning often begins in the primary grades, thus making more students familiar and comfortable with online learning. Wheeler and Lambert-Heggs [28] note that through e-learning, distance education students are connected to their tutors. Those in the Zimbabwe Open University appear not to be fortunate enough owing to access challenges.

There are many benefits that can be derived from e-learning that students in the Zimbabwe Open University are forfeiting [1,16,28]. Some of these are flexibility, accessibility and convenience. Learners can access the materials in their own time and study at their own pace and place. Learners can access the content through window-based, Mac-based or UNIX-based computers and low delivery costs. Once e-content has been developed and uploaded on the server, it is relatively inexpensive to distribute domestically and worldwide.

CONCLUSIONS

The benefits and potentials of e-learning far outweigh its challenges. Thus, it is imperative that the ZOU resolve the issues discussed above and promote e-learning. Nevertheless, the research argues that students of the Zimbabwe Open University in this study appear to face a number of challenges as such as lack of skills, lack of access to e-learning facilities and the digital divide. Thus in terms of access, students in ZOU are still handicapped by challenges. These handicappers eat into success stories such as quality e-content, collaborative learning and an exciting e-learning centre.

Recommendations

In today’s world, it has become very important to have access to information. Thus this study recommends that:

☐ The University must prioritise the use of IT by students in their studies.
☐ Costs of technology must be treated as a necessary additional expense for a distance education institution.
☐ The e-learning support centre must be established at every region and used as a stepping stone for moving from traditional mode to e-learning.
☐ Students’ support centre with computers for use by students must be established in all regions.
☐ ZOU need to adopt strategies to become ‘sticky’, providing learners with incentives to remain with them their whole lives through e-learning.
☐ A course on computer skills and e-learning techniques must be compulsory for all students enrolling with the university.
☐ Completion of this study indicates a need for further research in several areas. Further research need to be done on skills needed and on how to overcome challenges faced by students in e-learning.

REFERENCES


