

## Exploring Lecturers' Perceptions of Undergraduate Distance Learners Experiences with MUELE ICT Support.

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### Abstract

*This study explored lecturer's perceptions of undergraduate, Bachelor of Commerce, distance learners' experiences of using the ICT support-Makerere University E-learning Environment (MUELE). Interviews held with the lecturers were transcribed, exported to RQDA- R program package- for qualitative content analysis. Coding and categorising of codes led to three themes: The first theme was, "student related issues" summarizing the benefits and challenges that learners faced in their use of the ICT support. The second theme was "the role of Makerere University-institution" which revealed what the university is currently doing to promote the use of the ICT support and suggestions from the lecturers. The third theme was called "introductory training for new users of the ICT support-MUELE" and focused on the need for training of each new user of the ICT support. This ICT support has great potential to involve learners in research and discussions; however, there is need to address difficulties such as expensive internet and limited computers*

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**Key words:** Lecturers perceptions, support services, ICT support, Distance learners.

### Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to an increased demand for institutions to deliver teaching online through distance education (DE). Distance Education (DE) institutes have invested in the use of various support services such as counselling, financial support through offering loans and use of information communication technologies (ICT's) to enable their learners to succeed and complete their studies on time (Kajumbula, 2006; Nsamba, 2016). Use of ICT's such as: computers, phones email and internet communications are popular since they promote interaction between learners and their tutors, enable easy access to information and promote independent learning (Hazarika, 2017). Higher education institutions use a Learning management system (LMS), a type of ICT support, to deliver online learning and it comprises of links to coursework's, videos, discussion forums and also provides an avenue for learners and their lecturers to interact (Ellaway & Masters, 2008; Findik-Coşkunçay, Alkiş, & Özkan-Yildirim, 2018). At Makerere University, the Bachelor of commerce external programme is taught using a blended learning approach where lectures are conducted partly via face to face and through use of the Learning Management System called Makerere University E-learning Environment (MUELE) (Muyinda, Bananuka, Okot, & Bateeze, 2017). It has been shown that when lecturers are properly trained and mentored to use Information and Communication Technologies (ICT's), the students were more self-motivated and their grades in class were higher (Arenas, 2015; Gani & van den Berg, 2019; Govender & Govender, 2014; Nilsson, 2018). According to (Ghilay, 2019), in the adoption of LMS, majority of studies focus on technical aspects and design of pedagogical activities, compared to only a few studies in the area of understanding distance learners' attitudes and experiences and yet this understanding is vital, if institutions are to plan for better

support services for their learners (Ghilay, 2019). Since Lecturers who are trained to use ICT's, have a positive influence on their students, the aim of this study was to interview lecturers who had received training in the use of MUELE-ICT support on their perspectives of their students' experiences, with using MUELE-ICT support at Makerere university,

### **Review of literature**

The typical adult learner on the Distance Education programme are older and have other responsibilities they are engaged in like full or part time employment in comparison to the traditional students who study on fulltime (Nash, 2005) . The assumption is that adult learners have a wealth of experience and picked up skills like time management or confidence that will enable them to thrive as independent learners (Knowles, 1980; Moore, 1993). Adult learners are inwardly motivated, have a purpose when they come to study and are ready to apply what they learn to solve their problems. Due to their busy schedule, adult learners are more likely to drop out prematurely from the programme due to reasons such as; financial limitations, feelings of isolation, delayed feedback from the lecturers(Aguti, Nakibuuka, & Kajumbula, 2009).

To provide support to these adult learners is therefore essential and some examples are offering financial services, help orientation course units, ICT related support e.g., use of computers, phones, email, and internet communications. ICT supports are popular and Higher Education institutions use Learning Management Systems (LMS) to deliver e-learning. Elearning is a method of instruction delivery that is learner centred and fosters diagonal exchanges between lecturers and students as well as lateral interactions amongst students (Ellaway & Masters, 2008). If used constantly, learning is bound to take place as learners engage with the learning material according to the social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1999).

Literature uses models and conceptual frameworks to explain factors that affect ICT use for learning implementation. Some of these models include the Tearle's model, which is a theoretical and instrumental framework made up of 3 layers, outer ellipse, inner ellipse and center (Tearle\*, 2004). The outer ellipse is composed of five factors that represent the whole school characteristics, which are linked to organisational environment factors that affect the ICT implementation. They include culture and ethos, internal processes, well-motivated staff, external links and influences and strong leadership. The inner ellipse has five factors that represent the nurturing environment of the ICT implementation process. This includes planning and management, staged over time, support and training, quality of key people, resources. Actual ICT in teaching and learning is characterized by the five individual factors at the center of the model, which signifies their central importance. These include positive attitude to ICT, ICT skills, ICT knowledge and understanding, belief in ICT. The other model is the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) deals with studying peoples behavioural intention towards the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; Davis, Bagozzi, & Warshaw, 1989; Duygu Findik-Coşkunçay, Nurcan Alkiş, & Sevgi Özkan-Yildirim, 2018). In the TAM,

Perceived ease of use (PEOU) and perceived usefulness (PU) are the two primary factors that affected the learners behavioural intention. The theory underpinning both models is the theory of reasoned action (TRA), which, according to (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980), explains, people's behaviour as being determined by the behavioural intention to perform it, where behavioural intention is determined by their attitudes and subjective norms. Behavioural intention is the indicator of individuals readiness to perform a certain behaviour, attitude is the positive or negative feeling about performing in a specific behaviour and subjective norms are the beliefs about what others think about the behaviour. The ICT support used in this study is a learning management system, which according to Govender and Govender (2014) is a driver of learning and teaching and therefore technology competence is a factor that influences the use of the ICT support. When lecturers are supported in the use of the ICT support through training to receive skills, they are more likely to perceive this ICT support as beneficial to them (Zheng, Wang, Doll, Deng, & Williams, 2018). The lecturers are more likely to embrace the use of the ICT support when they benefit from enhanced quality of their instruction and improvement in their students learning.

Some of the challenges that distance learners in developing countries face in the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) are: internet is expensive to purchase and unstable electricity especially in rural areas (Hazarika, 2017). Other challenges are high illiteracy rates according to Ssekakubo, Suleman, and Marsden (2011) and in Uganda the situation is worsened by limited access to computers and infrequent internet use (Mayoka Kituyi & Kyeyune, 2012). In adoption of LMS studies there is a need to understand learners experiences which helps institutions to provide better support for their learners (Ghilay, 2019). Lecturers are supervisors over students and give shape and meaning to the learner's education practices, so they are more likely to explain students' experiences with using a new technology. This study set out to explore lecturer's perceptions of undergraduate distance learners' experiences with MUELE ICT support.

#### **Methods:**

This study used a case study design that involved, in-depth interviews of lecturers. The in-depth interviews of the lecturers were conducted at Makerere University in the second semester of academic year, 2018/2019. These lecturers taught course units using MUELE ICT support to first year students in the previous semester on the Bachelor of Commerce External (B.Com Ext), Distance Education programme at Makerere University. A purposive sampling approach was used to select lecturers who taught the first year B.Com Ext students using MUELE ICT support as the key informants. Two out of the three lecturers willingly consented to take part in the study.

The researcher refined the questions in the interview guide, included in the appendix, with the help of mentors with the use of audio recorders to capture the lecturer's responses. The four questions posed to the lecturers in the interview guide were: the first question was to mention the support features on the ICT support

that they were using to support learning. The second question was to share how they were using the discussion forum to support learning, while the third question was to list in what ways the learners had benefited from using the ICT support and challenges that the learners had encountered. The fourth question was to share what Makerere University and the lecturers need to do to increase the learner's participation on the ICT support. These questions were developed using the theory of reasoned action (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980).

Audio recordings of oral interviews held with the lecturers were transcribed verbatim and saved as text files. These text files were exported to the RQDA package in R programme where qualitative analysis was done by qualitative content analysis (Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2017). Data was coded and categorised into themes. Approval was sought through presentation before a team of lecturers in the School of Distance and Lifelong Learning. All research participants provided informed consent before they enrolled in the study. Throughout the study, the confidentiality of the data was upheld by using unique identifiers to make the data anonymous. Only the principal researcher had access to the data.

### **Presentation and discussion of findings:**

The three themes were ranked according to the number of codes as follows: First theme was Student related issues which comprised of (11) quotations and revealed the benefits and challenges that learners faced in their use of the ICT support; second theme was the role of Makerere University institution in promoting the use of the ICT support and suggestions from the lecturers which comprised of (5) quotations and lastly the third theme was introductory training for new users of MUELE- ICT support which comprised of (2) quotations.

#### **First theme: "student related issues"**

##### **Student related benefits:**

The lecturers shared the following ways in which learners had benefited from use of the ICT support: Learner's performance had improved greatly as shown by this quote: *"the performance has improved greatly"*.

The ICT support's features enabled interactions and students request for help, with immediate feedback, from both their peers and lecturers, which had not been possible in the past. This comment illustrated this: *"no matter where the students are, they are still learning. Some even inquire from the start "I am stuck, I have been reading this text, but I don't know what it means, could you please guide me?"*

Learners were noted to be responsible for their own learning, which was shown by their readiness to pace themselves and still submit their work in time. This comment clarified this *"...Creativity involved the learner's ability to pace their own learning and be flexible."*

Learners' participation had increased through involvement in research, which showed that learners were discovering new trends in what they were learning and added to contributions in the discussions. This comment explained this clearly. *"They are more participative they are more informed, and the learning actually is*

*more, the impact is highly felt because they've been involved in the research, in the contributions, the discussions."*

From the lecturer's perspective, the teaching approach is changing from teacher centered to learner centeredness as students are more actively engaged in activities and research, with potential to result into lifelong learning. *The following comment illustrated this: "Learner centred approach is noted as one in which learning happens for life"*

Studying online and engagement with the ICT support results in students becoming independent learners whose performance improves, which is similar to what students gained from the study by (N. A. Adzharuddin & Ling, 2013; Ellaway & Masters, 2008; Gecer & Dag, 2012). In addition, students with a good foundation of training in the use of the ICT support, tended to be more active and eager to use it, compared to those who did not undergo a good training.

### **Student related challenges:**

Lecturers stated some of the common challenges that the learners reported as they tried to access and use the ICT support from the different geographical locations around the country. Some learners reported failure to be enrolled or log into the system, while at times for technical reasons beyond their control, although they had internet data, they failed to access the ICT support and they could not use it. This comment illustrated this: *"Then access to the computers themselves is a challenge, and many of them come to campus and try to access through the university computer laboratories, but outside campus many of them say they can't access"*

Other learners said internet data was expensive to purchase when off the university campus. This was shown by this quote: *"Learner's access to the computers is a challenge outside the university campus with many of them saying they can't access, others have to look for a café, or load "mbs" (data), which is expensive. But, then it's a new way of learning, which is probably a challenge that they have to adjust to."*

Since the ICT support was a new intervention being tried out for the first time, the learners faced discouraging remarks from senior students who trivialised its use. The following quotation illustrates this clearly: *"...but for us we never did it in our first year; how come they are telling you do it? We were telling them, actually we have posted your coursework online this time, you don't have it the usual way, the physical coursework. They were like, ok. Some would go, some would not, some were handing in on time, and some were not, because of what they were hearing from senior students."*

These challenges in the use of the ICT support such as expensive internet bundles, network failure and limited access to personal computers are not new, since research in Uganda shows that limited access to computers and internet, is a challenge to most students in universities in Uganda (Mayoka Kituyi & Kyeyune, 2012; Ssekakubo et al., 2011). In a bid to achieve inclusive and equitable education for all students, according to the United Nations fourth Sustainable Development goal and pressure due to the COVID-19 pandemic, there is a

new development with Makerere university and a telecom company called MTN, for learners to access the ICT support-MUELE for free without purchasing data bundles (Admin, 2020). This seems to be a short-term solution, because of the lock-down due to the COVID-19 pandemic, however there is need for a long-term solution.

### **Second theme: “The role of Makerere University-institution”**

The lecturers shared what Makerere University had done to make the ICT support affordable and accessible to all the users. The university had trained some lecturers, as shown by this quote: *“in this school, two of us, lecturers underwent, the online training”*

The university had also provided free wireless internet hot spots. The following quotation illustrated this: *“The University is trying to put Wi-Fi, they are making internet free on campus, they have put internet kiosks all over campus, even in the library”*

Lecturers recommended what Makerere University could do to increase the use of the ICT support. The lecturers proposed that the university should create a policy that would make online assessment contribute to a proportion of the overall course exam mark. The comments mentioned are: *“putting it in policy that, maybe if you are teaching a course, maybe half of it must be online, that, I think, they will attract more students to the platform”*

*“If they make online assessment contribute some good chunk of the marks, I think learners could participate, because right now, their participation is not a must. If some modules were taught online, students could know that for that particular model, there’s no way they would meet the lecturer, but to go and do it online”*

Secondly, they could invest in training of more lecturers to use the ICT support, with the help of pilot projects.

This quotation illustrates this: *“if Mak came in and said and supported one college e.g. CEES to say let’s use it as a pilot project and have most of the course, maybe over 50% of the courses onlised, then we try to give it a year a whole academic year and see how it goes, then they come and they check, and see ,ok, come and do the M&E and see how it’s going, then they can think of rolling out the project to the entire university.”*

Makerere University is in the process of promoting access to free wireless internet for students which is an essential step towards making e-learning, affordable and available, to all its users (Asiimwe & Hatakka, 2017; McGill, Klobas, & Renzi, 2014). Lecturers suggested that to increase the students’ perception of MUELE ICT support as useful to them, there would be need for Makerere University to set up a clear policy to let student activities on MUELE contribute to their overall course mark. However, most institutes in developing countries don’t seem to enforce the usage of LMS’s as compulsory (Muyinda, Mayende, Maiga, & Oyo, 2019).

### **Third theme: “Introductory training for new users of the ICT support- MUELE”**

Lecturers indicated the benefits of a good introductory training based on their experience with students who underwent a good introductory training to use the ICT support, compared to those who had not. These students were characterised as interested, enthusiastic, eager to post, ask questions and send mails and were more likely

to participate in the learning activities. These quotations illustrate this: *“they were so interested, very enthusiastic, everybody, was fighting to post, ask questions and sent emails like nothing, which was because they got a good introductory training to use MUELE”*

*“We have to appreciate and accept that the introductory training, even if it’s just done for 2 weeks, it is very good for them”*

Makerere University does offer training to its students and lecturers. This is support that every institute should strive to offer as affirmed in the studies by (N. Adzharuddin, 2013; Shah, 2017). When students received sufficient training to use the ICT support, this affected them positively as they, displayed interest, enthusiasm and curiosity. They were able to engage in the activities that were posted on the discussion forums too. Students made use of the various features on the LMS such as message facilities to notify their lecturers whenever they needed help from wherever they were located.

#### **Limitations of the study:**

This study only focused on the lecturers who taught an online course using the MUELE ICT support to students on the Bachelor of commerce external programme. The work in this paper did not encompass views of other key stakeholders such as university management and IT colleagues. Despite this limitation the results are still informative and may be used.

#### **What this study adds**

To enable Makerere University to provide better support services for the learners, this study highlights the experiences and needs of students on the Bachelor of commerce external programme as they use the MUELE ICT support.

#### **Conclusion:**

These interviews revealed the need to address the difficulties that the first year Bachelor of Commerce external students encountered in their use of the ICT support such as expensive internet bundles and limited access to computers. Every new user of the ICT support should undergo appropriate training to reap its maximum benefits. In addition, the ICT support has great potential to engage learners in research, using discussion forums, which show, lecturers’ progress towards learner centeredness and lecturers are not simply posting material for students to read.

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**APPENDIX I: Interview guide**

1. What support Features on MUELE are used to support learning?
2. How are you using the discussion forum to support learning? a. What skills are you looking for?
3. Since LMS improves learning outcomes, a. What are the benefits to the learner in using MUELE?
b. What are the challenges to the learner in using MUELE?
4. According to you, a. What do the learners need to do to participate more? b. What do the Tutors need to do to get the learners to participate more? c. What does Makerere need to do to get the learners to participate more?