Lecturers’ Perceptions of the Use of Learning Management Systems: A Case Study in Open Distance Learning

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ABSTRACT

Learning management systems (LMSs) provide possibilities to facilitate online teaching and learning; to create communities of inquiry, support dialogue and collaborative learning; and reduce students’ sense of disconnectedness in distance learning. Nevertheless, studies show that LMSs are often under-utilized. This article reports on lecturers’ perceptions of the use of an LMS in an open distance learning (ODL) institution in South Africa. The authors used a phenomenological case study and followed a qualitative approach. Interviews were conducted with ten lecturers from eight academic departments. The results reveal that participants used the LMS mainly for administration and to a lesser extent for teaching and learning, with a limited presence of a community of inquiry. The challenges reported by interviewees were poor access to the internet, a lack of skills, fear, and workload. The study suggests that if lecturers use the LMS for teaching and learning, it will yield many benefits for students.

KEYWORDS

Administration, Community Of Inquiry, Higher Education Institutions, Information And Communication Technology, Presence, Teaching And Learning, Underutilization, University Of South Africa

INTRODUCTION

The use of information and communication technology (ICT) has revolutionized people’s daily functioning in corporate, social and academic spaces. Significant ongoing changes are evident in the manner in which ICT has contributed, specifically in an academic context (Cairncross & Pöysti, 2014; Hustad & Arntzen, 2013; Fisseha, 2011). ICT has become a requirement for the enhancement of teaching and learning, reformulating the nature of teaching that is required of a lecturer, as well as the way in which students learn. Creative and contextualized appropriation of ICT contributes to active and interactive pedagogies, increased motivation, and a great variety of instantly accessible teaching and learning materials. ICT has also made instant communication and consultation possible; it has changed the roles of and relationships among participants and students through a variety of

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media, such as electronic mail (e-mail), satellite broadcasting, video conferencing, social networking and learning management systems (LMSs).

This research was conducted at an Open Distance Learning (ODL) university in South Africa which favours the use of online learning made possible through ICT. The university follows a blended approach to teaching and learning, which means it utilizes a range of teaching and learning strategies, the inclusion of ICT and the deployment of both physical and electronic study material. As all students do not have regular access to the internet, they receive hard copies of their study material to ensure that no student is disadvantaged. The university has adopted the use of an LMS to administer both academic and administrative functions. Lecturers use the LMS to upload study material and students can submit assignments electronically via the LMS. The LMS also offers additional possibilities for teaching and learning. The authors of this article wanted to investigate how participants utilized the LMS and what challenges they encountered.

BACKGROUND

A number of factors impede the successful integration of ICTs for online learning in South Africa. These include the digital divide, where a noteworthy number of students enter university without having been exposed to ICTs. This results in various ICT literacy levels among students (Brown, 2012; Bosch, 2017). Access to hardware such as computers and other devices is furthermore a challenge in South Africa as the country is characterized by an uneven distribution of technology (Bajjah, 2013). Coupling this is limited access to the internet in some parts of the country (Bosch, 2017). Johnson et al. (2013) as cited in Ng’ambi, Brown, Bozalek & Gachago (2016) report several challenges facing higher education. These include a shortage of training for lecturers, use of technology that does not improve learning outcomes, barriers within the institution, which impacts on the use of technologies and the need for a mind shift among academics to acknowledge challenges related to traditional teaching and learning methods. Ng’ambi et al. (2016) report that these challenges are relevant to the South African context as well.

Despite these challenges the university where the research was conducted encourages the use of ICTs, made predominantly possible through the institutional LMS. The university caters for a diverse profile of students. As a result, students enter the university with varying levels of preparedness as is typical of the South African context (Ng’ambi et al., 2016). The university offers various support services for students, including support for technology enhanced learning. Students can also make use of computers with internet access at regional centres located around the country. Academics have at their disposal training for professional development. With specific reference to the use of ICT, training is available which demonstrates how the various tools within the LMS can be used for teaching and learning. As the institution is ODL in nature, students primarily have contact with the university, through telephone, e-mail and the LMS.

Fathema, Shannon and Ross (2015) report that approximately 99% of distance education programmes have adopted LMSs, while Conde, Garcia, Rodriquez-Conde, Alier and Garcia-Holgado (2014) point out that LMSs are useful as they allow collaboration between participants and students, and among students themselves, creating a platform for students’ academic activities. Van den Berg (2012) points out that online discussions, as part of LMSs, are gradually breaking down the barriers found in traditional distance education. It is also well supported in the literature that both participants and students use LMSs as a support tool for teaching and learning (Simonson, 2007; Aydin & Tirkes, 2010; Van den Berg, 2012; Despotovic-Zrakic, Markovic, Bogdanovic, Barac & Krco, 2012; Fathema, Shannon & Ross, 2015).

Advantages of this nature are especially beneficial for ODL institutions such as the university, where this study was conducted. Anderson (2008, p. 222) suggests that ODL “is often perceived and experienced as a lonely way to learn”, but technology-enhanced systems can create a platform
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