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The university staff experience of using a virtual learning environment as a platform for e-learning

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Research Article

Abstract

Numerous open distance electronic learning (ODeL) institutions have embraced a virtual learning environment as a platform to facilitate e-learning. Although ODeL institutions have embarked on the use of a virtual learning environment (VLE), there is still a need to rethink e-learning processes to make content delivery exciting and interactive. The purpose of this study was to explore the experience of university staff using a VLE to study online courses. The use of VLE enhances content delivery, and university staff must embrace a new interactive learning environment to be on par with peers globally. The connectivism theory was adopted as a guiding framework to explore the staff experiences of a VLE. The use of VLE enhances content delivery and university staff have no choice but to embrace a new interactive learning environment to be on par with peers globally. As this study was empirical, a qualitative approach was used to sample seven staff members who studied e-courses using a VLE. This study was conducted at the University of South Africa (UNISA) which was a natural setting. The participants accessed the VLE within UNISA in their offices to share information with classmates globally. Data were gathered through an open-ended questionnaire. The thematical analysis was applied for analysis. Trustworthiness in this study was credibly maintained through member checking of each participant to confirm whether the information tallied with what transpired during the collection of data. The main research question that guided the gathering of data was: *What are the university staff members' perceptions of the use of a VLE*? The findings revealed that VLE was an enabler of content delivery as it is not bound to a specific time and place but can be accessed anytime and anywhere. It may be concluded that the use of VLE helped to develop the participants' digital skills and motivated them to design online learning courses. It is recommended that university staff be empowered to use other VLE interactive tools, to promote participation and engagement among the students, because VLE is not bound to a specific time frame or location.

Keywords: Virtual learning environment, staff members' experiences, open distance e-learning, collaborate, courses.

1. INTRODUCTION

There is an increasing interest in the quality of content delivery and improved pedagogy in higher education institutions. The VLE has emerged as a successful, viable learning-management platform for teaching and learning in the 21st century. Ferriman (2019) defined VLE as a flexible, effective, and inspiring way to deliver learning content that best suits the needs of students. VLEs have also introduced an 'anytime and anywhere' alternative to learning and delivery of content (Saykili, 2019; Shahabadi & Uplane, 2014), provided that the students have the Internet accessibility (Saykili, 2019). Also, VLEs play an essential role by providing users with learning flexibility and unprecedented opportunities to co-create information. Such a platform allows students to study at their own pace (Gunawan, Kalensun & Fajar, 2018), automatically tracking their progress as they collaborate (Barco, 2018). It offers many advantages for people who are willing to further their studies but are constrained by time (Wayne, n.d.) or geographical location. The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of university staff when using a VLE to study courses online.

VLEs contribute to enrolment numbers in ODeL institutions. These ODeL institutions play an important role in accommodating diversified students, irrespective of geographical or time restrictions, to further their studies. However, limited contact between lecturers and students is the norm for distance education learning (Owusu-Ansah, Rodrigues, & Van der Walt, 2019). According to Alves, Miranda and Morais (2017), various higher education institutions have adopted VLE to promote and improve teaching and learning. In adopting VLE, the institutions are increasingly searching for a better means of delivering education for their students. The UNISA where the study was conducted is also keen to provide students with better distance education. UNISA is the largest open distance learning institution in Africa and the longest standing dedicated distance education university in the world. The university nearly enrols one-third of all South African students. UNISA was established in Cape Town in 1873 as the University of the Cape of Good Hope and changed its name to the University of South Africa in 1916 (McKay, & Makhanya, 2008). Saykili (2019) attested that the emerging digital technologies in this industrial age forces higher education institutions to adopt a new educational paradigm. He further attested that these innovations enable students to access external learning (outside the boundaries of traditional learning institutions) through informal and enriched learning experience using online communities on new platforms (Saykili, 2019). Ng (2020), expressed a different perspective, she argued that the use of online environments,

which replaces face to face encounters, will come naturally as higher institutions are gradually adopting this profound educational transformation.

UNISA, as an open distance learning institution (ODL), is concerned about education and is determined to achieve its 2016-2030 ODeL strategy. In ODL, learning is presented in online and offline or traditional via mail mode. Whereas in ODeL learning is offered online only allowing asynchronous learning method. Participants in this study were encouraged to change the delivery of modules online and offline to online using VLE. UNISA took the initiative to improve e-learning by agreeing with the University of Maryland University College (UMUC). This agreement enabled fifteen staff members to enrol for a UMUC Certificate in Technology and Distance Education and E-Learning, which took place within a VLE. UNISA staff members were encouraged to participate in studying for the afore-mentioned certificate as it involved a substantial financial investment from UNISA towards their professional development. The agreement between UNISA and its staff members was that, if a staff member did not pass a programme, they would need to repay the enrolment fee to the university. The contracted enrolments took place from 2013 to 2019. This study focuses on enrolment from 2014 to 2017 because the researcher registered in 2017 and received the certificate in 2020. From the fifteen staff members who were registered in this programme, eight deregistered and did not complete the programme.

The withdrawal of these staff members posed the problem in this study and encouraged the researcher to investigate the staff members' experience of using VLE as a platform for e-learning. Furthermore, as one of the lecturers who obtained the certificate, my concern was why other colleagues would withdraw or deregister their enrolments. The other problem was that the researcher did not come across the studies that explored user experiences on the use of VLE in ODeL. Research shows that previous studies primarily focused on the barriers encountered with the implementation of VLEs relating to the capacity of computers laboratory and the Internet connectivity (Herrera, 2017). Demian and Morrice (2012) found that the use of a VLE has little effect on students' academic performance. Bayburtsyan (2016) found that VLEs have a positive impact on students' communication, collaboration, and participation in the classroom.

The UMUC initiative was an attempt to equip lecturers and other interested staff members with e-learning content knowledge and skill that would improve VLE participation. The concern identified previously by other researchers about e-learning usage at UNISA, was that the VLE

was not being fully utilised for teaching and learning (Bagarukayo & Kalema, 2015). Their study further showed that it remained unclear why e-learning is not taken seriously. Accordingly, UNISA is taking the initiative to develop staff members' VLE skills so that they, in turn, can increase active and improved participation in students' e-learning.

This study explored the experiences of UNISA staff members who used a VLE to study courses through UMUC. Staff members were eager to take part in the online programme at its start. However, as time progressed, eight staff members withdrew from the programme, as mentioned before, if they could not pass, they were expected to reimburse the university for the costs. This considerable interest followed by the significant number of staff who withdraw from the programme prompted me to undertake this research. Given the need for improved e-learning skills among faculty members, it is indisputable that the university staff experience of using VLE had to be explored so that improvements could be recommended. The main research question that guided this study was: What are the university staff members' perceptions of the use of a VLE?

In the current research, I explored the participants' experiences of using a VLE in the ODeL environment to study courses online. This study was conducted to contribute to the body of knowledge about VLE in ODeL because VLE embraces active learning and may promotes good throughput rates in institutions of higher learning.

The introduction and problem statement above present the background for the argument in this paper. Hereafter, consideration will be given to the literature review, which presents various authors' opinions about the use of VLE; the research methodology and theoretical framework used to answer the research question; and the findings and discussions that reveal the staff perceptions evidenced by previous researchers' opinions to cement the empirical findings.

2. LITERATURE

2.1. A Virtual Learning Environment

A VLE is a digital classroom where e-learning courses are presented and students learn through interacting, communicating, viewing and discussing presentations, and by engaging with learning resources (Barco, 2018; Bateman, 2012). Rouse (2011) argued that a VLE is similar to the traditional classroom of an institution. The difference between the two is the method of imparting the content to students (Rouse, 2011). In a traditional classroom, a teacher could use

a chalkboard, whereas an instructor in a VLE could use a variety of flexible digital devices that make learning interesting and dynamic. The approaches differ in terms of social interaction patterns (Gunawan et al., 2018).

The principal components of a VLE package include assessments, student tracking, collaboration and communication tools, curriculum mapping, electronic communication, and internet links to external curriculum resources (Awan, 2013; Oxford University Press, 2016). Communication among the VLE users can occur in various forms, such as text chats, live video or audio transmissions, and more (Wayne, n.d.). The users in particular login, spend time within the VLE, check if there were notifications, work through the curriculum, create and post threads, view and respond to classmates' posts, view assignment instructions, ask instructors questions, access the e-server site, email the instructor or classmates, and access students' support sites.

Activities in a VLE are not only about accessing course information, but also about using different technological resources (such as discussion forums, video, and RSS feeds) and then creating web-based learning artefacts, which can be used as an alternative form of assessment (Awan, 2013). The features and potentialities of VLEs provide the opportunity to assess, promote, and support new teaching and learning processes that are well-planned and directed (Alves et al., 2017). Accessing a VLE is not merely about reading shared information (Ng, 2020). Rather, it is to create knowledge through continuous interaction and collaboration (Saykili, 2019).

According to Alves et al. (2017), user interaction and collaboration enables the creation and processing of large amounts of data. The higher the number of university staff that post and share threaded discussions, the more data can be accumulated. Hence, members can peruse their shared thoughts as often as they wish until they became fully conversant with the shared information. Furthermore, the interaction and collaboration boosts learning and stimulates innovative experiences envisaged by the use of VLEs (Alves et al., 2017). Kristóf and Tóth (2019) mentioned that users benefit from participating in a VLE by:

- access to coursework from anywhere, at any time;
- effective time management;
- expanded world view;
- asynchronous discussions with classmates;

- immediate feedback on tests and
- sharpened digital skills.

Boulton, Carmel, Hywel and Williams (2018), in their study concerning engagement and learning outcomes in a VLE, found that VLE activity is associated with high grades, but the low activity does not necessarily imply low grades. Their study also revealed that VLE usage can help to develop digital skills for all disciplines. Another study conducted by Harding (2018) about staff perception of the VLE and online tools, revealed lack of time as a considerable barrier to staff usage of the VLE and that staff usage is primarily for distribution of resources, communication and assignment submission. As mentioned earlier in this study that VLE is a new technology (Barco, 2018; Bateman, 2012), hence, extensive research has yet to been conducted on the university staff perception on the use of VLE.

2.2 The use of VLE in ODeL

Koskela, Kiltti, Vilpola and Tervonen (2005) examined the suitability of a VLE for higher education by comparing learning with a VLE and learning in a traditional lecture. The findings revealed that the VLE students outperformed the lecture students. Mogus, Djurdjevic and Šuvak (2012) reported about data obtained by students' while logging into the virtual learning environment to detect frequencies and priorities of students' choice of activities in a virtual learning environment, the finding revealed positive correlations between students' logs of particular activities and their final mark. It may be argued from this study that VLE in ODeL should be used because of its positive outcomes and changes it brings in the students.

3. CONNECTIVISM THEORY

The connectivism theory best suits this research as it provides a useful framework for understanding staff experiences of a VLE. Connectivism is a 21st century learning theory that explains how Internet technologies have created new opportunities for people to learn and share information across the World Wide Web and among themselves (Siemens & Downes, 2015). Connectivism views interactive learning as the sharing of information within a networked environment, which functions as a community of practice (Siemens, 2005). The participants in this study shared information that they continually acquired within an interactive networked learning environment and they benefited by building collective intelligence. The shared

information can be stored in a variety of digital formats (Siemens, 2005), and users can visit the platform anytime if they so wish.

Connectivism theorist, Siemens (2005), argued that the community of practice creates, preserves, and uses information flow, which is a key to collaborative learning. The university staff in this research were the community of practice. This research explored their experiences as they shared information and skills; they had acquired collectively using a VLE. The notion of connectivism in this research focused on how the participants created information and facilitated interaction using the diversity of opinions as information sources. Saykili (2019) emphasised that information distribution across the network of connected digital technologies rests on whether such connections are possible. In the context of this research, there was no doubt that the connections were possible because the participants were already a connected networked community of practice as they studied to attain the Certificate in Technology in Distance Learning and E-Learning using a VLE.

4. METHODOLOGY

My choice of the paradigmatic stance that informed the research methodology was interpretivist. In the context of the present research, the interpretivist paradigm was used to find out how knowledge is acquired and communicated to other human beings (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). The acquisition and communication of data were done through a qualitative case study research approach. Stake (2005) points out that in a qualitative case study, the researcher gathers data on the nature of the case, particularly its activities and functions, through which the case is recognized, and the informants through whom the case can be known. In this study, the case was the UNISA staff members who used the VLE platform for e-learning. The natural setting where this knowledge was acquired, shared and deliberated was at UNISA. An open-ended questionnaire was a data source used in this study. The thematic analysis was used to analyse data.

The population in the study were seventeen UNISA staff members comprised of lecturers and educational consultants who studied the Certificate in Technology in Distance Learning and E-Learning using a VLE. Finding the participants was a cumbersome exercise as many staff members gave flimsy reasons for non-participation. I used convenient and purposeful sampling strategies to select the participants. The participants were purposive sampled based on their

attainment of the certificate. In a convenient sampling technique, participants were selected based on their convenience, interest and availability (Creswell, 2003). Hence, the sample contained a mixture of education consultants and lecturers. The case in this study was the participants who were willing to take part in the study. Payne and Payne (2004) argued that purposeful sampling allows the researcher to select people or events because they are knowledgeable, relevant and suitable for the research. The participants participated in learning online courses using a VLE from the year 2014 to 2017. The participants in this study were seven UNISA staff members, four from the Department of Directorate Curriculum Development and Transformation and three lecturers from the College of Education. Figure 1 outlines the biographical details of the seven participants. All the participants were UNISA staff members consisted of five women and two men. Six of the participants' age range between 50 and 64 years; one participant was between 30 and 49 years. Four participants were educational consultants and three were lecturers.

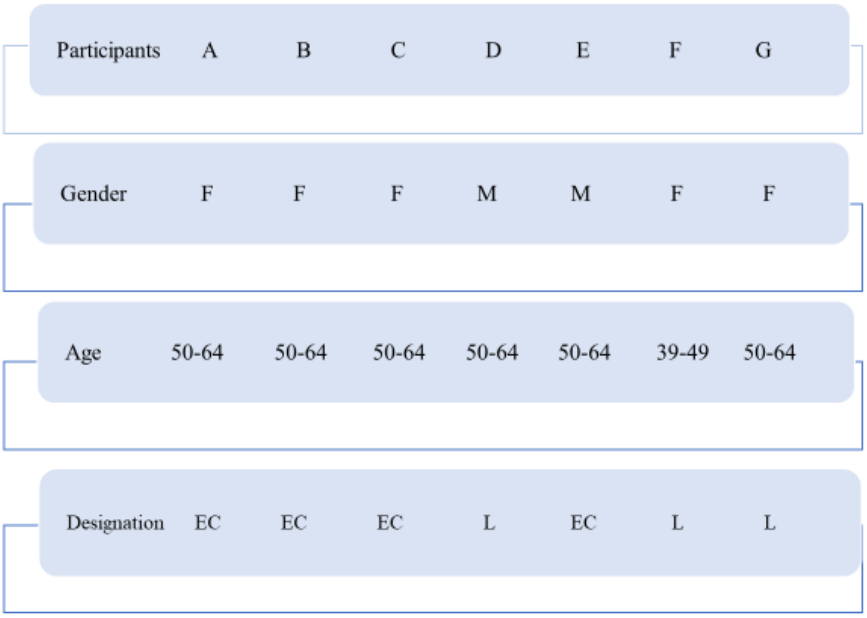

Figure 1. Biographical information of participants

The UNISA College of Education ethics committee granted permission for the study to be conducted. Anonymity, confidentiality, and voluntary participation in the research were also observed. I substituted participants' names with alphabets from A to G and labelled all data accordingly to assure anonymity and confidentiality. I also guaranteed the participants that their shared experiences would remain confidential and that their names would not appear in any

publication resulting from this research. The participants were informed that they were not forced to participate and had the right to withdraw from the research at any stage without any penalty. There was no emphasis on gender distribution, as it had no impact on the study.

Data Collecting Tools

An unstructured interview and open-ended questionnaire was used as an instrument to collect data. The instrument consisted of twelve items that the participants were asked to respond to within one month. The items in the instrument were informed by the purpose of the research and theoretical framework and were asked in such a way as to find out how participants created information and interacted in a VLE platform. To maintain credibility, the instrument was sent to a research expert who confirmed its trustworthiness. Trustworthiness in this research was also established through member checking to validate the credibility of the findings. After the data were transcribed, I contacted each participant to confirm whether the information tallied with what transpired during the collection of data. It was challenging to collect data as the participants always had tight schedules and were not readily available. A combination of open-ended questions requiring written answers and telephonic follow-up on questions that needed further explanation assisted in this regard. An audio recorder was used to capture telephonic data with permission from the participants.

Data Analysis

I analysed data continuously while receiving responses from the participants. The main question that guided data gathering was: What are the university staff members' perceptions of the use of a VLE? Twelve questions were initially posed in the instruments. Data were captured and analysed manually. During the analysis, I created a table, checked data, then captured and cleaned it concurrently. The participants' responses were captured in the order of the questions posed. Data were captured simultaneously while detecting and repairing errors within the collected data. Irrelevant and duplicate responses were not included in the analysis process as they could have delayed the data analysis process. From the twelve questions asked, it is worth indicating that four questions' responses were not included in this data analysis because they were not relevant to the research questions posed for this paper. This implies that only eight questions' responses were used and were relevant to provide answers to the research questions. The thematic analysis procedure was employed in analysing data (Creswell, 2007). I read through the collected data from the open-ended questions and created codes. Noticeable

relationships led to the emergence of eight themes. The themes included VLE participation, technological knowledge, balanced life, VLE opportunities, VLE challenges, digital skill, quitting e-learning and VLE Intention to deliver content. The findings and discussion are presented based on the themes.

5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The findings and the discussions are presented based on the themes that emerged from the eight questions.

Theme 1: VLE participation

In Question 1, participants were asked: *What was your preferred place and time to access or participate in the VLE?* The theme of VLE participation was generated to gain an in-depth understanding of this question. The finding showed that the participant participated and accessed the VLE anytime and anywhere. It was noted that of the seven participants, five indicated that they accessed and participated in the morning, one in the evening, one anytime. In this regard, participant F uttered *I access and participate in the VLE from my office in the morning and late in the evening when the internet traffic is not so heavy*. Participant C said *any time when I was free from my workload*. These findings showed that the participants had different views of the preferred place and time to access or participate in VLE. I may argue in this study that the VLE enable the participants to access and participate 24/7. The use of VLE provided the participants with the opportunity to access and responded to threaded chats in their own time and a place convenient to them. This concurs with the views of Shahabadi and Uplane (2014) and Saykili (2019) who stated that students are provided with alternative 'anytime and anywhere' participation in e-learning. Saykili further attested that these innovations could enable students to learn outside the boundaries of a traditional classroom through informal and enriched learning experience using online communities on new platforms.

Theme 2: Technological knowledge

In Question 2, participants were asked: *Do you think pre-enrolment training on the use of VLE could have assisted you and why?* The theme of technological knowledge was created. The findings revealed that the pre-enrolment training on using a VLE was found to be unnecessary for the participants. The findings showed that five participants could manage without prior training; only two showed the need for training on the use of technology. In this case,

Participant's A indicated that "*No, since I am required to work with technology, I did not feel it much of a challenge except that I needed to investigate a lot more technology use than I am used to working with.* It was also evident in this study that some of the participants' had technological knowledge because they indicated that they could navigate the VLE without prior training. This suggested that their technological knowledge played an essential role in browsing and navigating the VLE. Annansingh (2019) advocates technological proficiency as a key to participation in a VLE.

Theme 3: Balanced life

In Question 3, participants were asked: *As a working adult, how did you balance your work-related issues, family matters and learning using VLE?* The theme of a balanced life was generated. The findings revealed that most of the participants indicated that it was difficult to lead a balanced life. However, they had no choice but were expected to submit assignments weekly without fail. Participants G indicated that *it was not easy to find the right balance between learning courses online using VLE and taking care of the family*. The findings also revealed that the continued sharing of knowledge and information within VLE compromised their family lives. Participant C mentioned that: *My home life suffered a lot. I had little time with my family*. It may be argued in this study that balancing life was not easy for the participants and they had family responsibility as well as to attend to their work while attending to VLE participation. One may argue that the issue of balancing life is related to time in terms of allocation to the various task as an adult. This was observed in Harding (2018) findings that lack of time was a considerable barrier to staff usage of the VLE.

Theme 4: VLE opportunities

In Question 4, participants were asked: *What VLE opportunities did you embrace and share with UNISA colleagues?* The theme of VLE opportunities was generated. The findings revealed that all the participants unanimously felt that they experienced the opportunity to use both asynchronous and synchronous digital tools to discuss and interact. In this regard, three participants identified blog, one a discussion forum, two participated in social media tools discussion and one in synchronous and asynchronous digital devices. Participants B said: *I had a few opportunities to participate in synchronous class discussions and to attend virtual conferences*. It was also found in this study that participants had an opportunity to learn to use

other technology tools to enhance their teaching and learning. In this case, Participant F indicated the use of *ePortfolios, social media, and other educational technology tools to learn and teach*. The argument in this theme is participation and collaboration within the VLE provided the participants with hands-on experience of technology that helped them develop their digital skills. Similar sentiments were found in Boulton et al., (2018) who revealed that VLE usage help to develop users' digital skills. Alves et al. (2017) attested that interaction and collaboration boost learning and stimulates innovative experiences for users.

Theme 5: VLE challenges

In Question 5, participants were asked: *What challenges did you encounter during discussion, and interaction in the VLE?* The theme of VLE challenges was created. The findings revealed that the participants did not encounter any challenges with the use of VLE when engaging in discussion and interaction. It was critical during the programme that they participate and interact as this was one of the criteria for evaluation. One may argue that the participants experience a better way of learning electronically which did not take place in real-time. Here, Participant A's views was that: *Not really, we did not have problems we had opportunities to clarify our points and besides, we knew we were going to be marked for our discussions and therefore generally kept the discussions as professional as possible*. The findings in this study differ with other studied in VLE where challenges are mostly experienced such as slow access to the Internet, lack of infrastructure etc. (Herrera, 2017). I can argue in this study that the reason for not experiences challenges was because all the participants had adequate technologies in their offices and at home to use.

Theme 6: Digital skill

In Question 6, participants were asked: *Did the use of VLE sharpened your digital skill? Please explain what you have acquired using VLE*. The theme of digital skill was created. The findings revealed that most of the participants felt that their digital skills improved. This was evident when they indicated that the acquisition of digital technology was an enabler to deliver content online. This evident when participant F said: *VLE definitely sharpened my digital skills in teaching and learning online. It also sensitised me to opportunities that are available in using various online digital resources*. It was also found that participants gained confidence and realise the possibility to design and deliver modules online. Some of them were motivated to

design online learning courses for their students. In this case, participant G mentioned that: *I have acquired skills in designing an online course for my students*. The use of VLE was a revelation for the participants to realise the possibility of offering modules using digital technologies. Another skill that was identified by the participants was the use of collaboration tools. In this case, participants were able to use both asynchronous and synchronous methods of discussion. The VLE participation was found to be in line with the theory of Connectivism that emphasis the community of practice which is a key to collaborative learning (Siemens, 2005).

Theme 7: Quitting e-learning

In Question 7, participants were asked: *During the VLE collaboration sessions, how many ties did you consider quitting e-learning, and why?* The theme of *quitting e-learning* was developed. The findings revealed that most of the participants never thought of quitting e-learning except for one. Participant B indicated that: *Giving up was never an option to me*. It is evident in this study that besides participants sharing their thoughts, the platform provided them with high learning flexibility that necessitates learning from each other as a community of practice. This finding is supported in literature where the theory of connectivism emphasises that learning together through an interactive, networked learning environment enhances learning (Siemens, 2005), Furthermore, Saykili (2019) concurred by stating that continuous interactions and collaborations as a group brings a meaningful and better understanding among a community of practice.

Theme 8: VLE intention to deliver content

In Question 8, participants were asked: *Having acquired VLE skills, how do you intend to use this experience in delivering content?* The theme *VLE Intention to deliver content* was developed to gain an in-depth understanding of this question. It was found in this study that participants after training had intentions to use VLE support other academics and staff members to deliver content. The findings revealed that the three participants who are educational consultants highlighted that they used their acquired VLE skills to support colleagues in the institution. In this regard, Participant C declared: *I am using my VLE skills to carry out my job as an instructional designer*. It was also found that four of the participants highlighted that they would offer modules online. Here, Participant E said, *I will be able to teach online modules and*

assist students to learn using a variety of online tools like OERs, active learning, and communication apps. These findings are supported in literature where the theory of connectivism emphasised that internet technologies have created new opportunities for people to learn and share information (Siemens & Downes, 2015). I may argue in this study that the acquired VLE skills enabled the participants to enhance support to their colleagues and were determined to deliver modules asynchronously. In this regard, the participants' intention to use VLE is realised.

I may argue in this study that the withdrawal of ten staff members posed the problem. This led to the investigation only focus on the experience of seven staff members who remained and completed the programme. The aim was to find out their perceptions on the use of a VLE. When looking closely at the theory of connectivism, it encourages staff members to embrace digital technology and the internet because of the opportunity it provides for people to learn, interact and share information through the internet (Siemens & Downes, 2015). In this era, the 21st century, it is required and imperative that digital technology integration in education takes a lead. The staff members should embrace the empowerment programmes on the development of digital technology, this will assist them to support students and academics in online learning. Furthermore, students' needs to be competitive and be able to use digital technology with peers globally. It is clear from the findings that most staff members benefited from the programme. They were exposed to various digital technologies that assisted them to improve their pedagogical practices. Participants in this study acquired skills of interactive synchronous and asynchronous. As adult learners who have other commitments, they learnt to balance their lives while becoming life-long learners. Being trained in VLE, given the opportunities to design and deliver their content online. It was noted that from the seven participants who completed the course, none of them thought of quitting.

6. LIMITATION OF THE STUDY

Using the qualitative method led to the concise mapping of the most relevant information about the participants' perception of using VLE. The results showed that the use of a VLE developed the participants' digital skills. The acquired digital skills motivated the participants to design and deliver fully online modules. This finding can be embraced by the institution to help motivate more staff to facilitate their modules in a fully online method.

Despite proper planning of conducting research, it is not always without its challenges. The first challenge was the limited number seven of the participant who participated in this study. Most lecturers and educational consultants refused to participate in the study and gave various reasons for non-participation. Although the plan was to collect data in less than a month, the collection period was extended to one month, which was advantageous as collected data had in-depth and rich contextual responses.

The qualitative case study research approach suits this study, as the intention was not to generalise the findings. On the contrary, this research contributes to new knowledge about modern, innovative digital technologies that readers may need to embrace as innovative ways to facilitate learning. More participants would have been beneficial to provide wider coverage and understanding of the university staff perception of using VLE.

7. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

In conclusion, this study set out to explore the experience of university staff when using a VLE as a platform for e-learning to study courses online. The findings revealed that VLE is an enabler to content delivery and it is not bound to a specific time frame or location. The participants accessed the platform anytime and anywhere. Previous research concurred with the current findings by highlighting that new technologies enable users to learn informally and experience enriched learning using new platforms to build online communities of practice. Enriching learning in this digital era is no longer entirely under the control of an individual but as Ng (2020) states, the contribution of all users builds both individual and collective intelligence. The use of a VLE helped develop the participants' digital skills. These digital skills they acquired motivated them to design and offer fully online modules for their students. It is recommended that university staff be empowered to use other VLE interactive tools, to promote participation and engagement among the students. Again, it is recommended that further research be conducted on how university staff should interact and facilitate online learning using a VLE. A further study may be conducted using a mixed method with a larger sample. Bagarukayo and Kalema's (2015) findings of e-learning, in collaboration with the findings of this study, envisages further study on how e-learning can be promoted and facilitated in the institution.

Üniversite personelinin e-öğrenme platformu olarak sanal öğrenme ortamını kullanma deneyimleri

Özet

Açık ve uzaktan öğrenme (AUÖ) yoluyla öğretim yapan pek çok kurum e-öğrenme süreçlerini kolaylaştırmak için sanal öğrenme ortamlarını benimsemiştir. Bu kurumlar, sanal öğrenme ortamlarını kullanmaya başlasa da içeriklerini etkili, verimli ve etkileşimli hale getirmek için kurumların e-öğrenme süreçlerini gözden geçirmeleri gerekmektedir. Bu bağlamada, bu çalışmanın amacı sanal bir öğrenme ortamı kullanan ve çevrimiçi ortamda ders veren öğretim elemanlarının deneyimlerini araştırmaktır. Sanal öğrenme ortamı kullanımı ders içeriklerinin dağıtımını geliştirmektedir bundan dolayı öğretim elemanlarının dünya genelindeki meslektaşlarıyla aynı düzeyde olmaları için bunun gibi etkileşimli öğrenme ortamlarını benimsemeleri elzemdir. Güney Afrika Üniversitesi'nde (UNISA) yürütülen bu çalışmaya 7 öğretim elemanı katılmıştır. Çalışmanın temel araştırma sorusu şudur: Öğretim elemanlarının sanal öğrenme ortamının kullanımına ilişkin algıları nelerdir? Nitel araştırma modeli ile desenlenen çalışmada kuramsal çerçeve olarak bağlantıcılık kuramı benimsenmiştir. Veriler açık uçlu bir anket aracılığıyla toplanmıştır. Verilerin analizinde, tematik analiz uygulanmıştır. Bu çalışmada güvenilirlik, verilerin toplanması sırasında katılımcılar tarafından aktarılan bilgilerin doğru olup olmadığını onaylamak için her katılımcıya teyit ettirilmesiyle sağlanmıştır. Bulgular, sanal öğrenme ortamlarının belirli bir zaman ve yere bağlı olmadığı, ancak her zaman ve her yerden erişilebildiği için içerik sağlamayı mümkün kıldığını ortaya koymaktadır. Ayrıca, sanal öğrenme ortamı kullanımının katılımcıların dijital becerilerini geliştirmeye yardımcı olduğu ve onları çevrimiçi öğrenme dersleri tasarlamaya motive ettiği sonucuna varılabilir. Son olarak, öğretim elemanlarının öğrenenlerin derse katılımını teşvik etmek ve derse bağlılıklarını artırmak için sanal öğrenme ortamının etkileşim araçlarını kullanmaları tavsiye edilebilir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Sanal öğrenme ortamı, öğretim elemanı deneyimleri, açık ve uzaktan öğrenme, e-öğrenme, iş birliği.

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