

Exploring Learning Support Strategies for Effective Digital Experiences at Open University of Kenya

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Abstract

The Open University of Kenya (OUK) offers flexible, inclusive, and affordable digital learning, but this comes with challenges. This action research designed, implemented, and evaluated learner support strategies for pioneer learners in their first semester to promote effective learning. A mixed research approach with a sample population of 130 participants was applied. Data was collected using questionnaires and observation tools. Validity and reliability were established through piloting, descriptive statistics, and thematic analysis were utilized to analyze and present the findings. The results revealed high satisfaction levels with OUK's learner support strategies. Faculty learner support strategies, such as a mobile application, Panopto technology integration, a dedicated WhatsApp group, and weekly synchronous Zoom meetings, were positively received. The study recommends that OUK regularly evaluate and refine its learner support services, explore new technologies, invest in faculty training for effective technology use, and foster collaborative learning environments. These findings underscore the importance of proactive support in creating a positive and inclusive digital learning environment. The insights gained from this study are valuable for institutions offering digital learning, policymakers, learners, and stakeholders interested in this educational approach. By highlighting successful strategies and areas for improvement, the research contributes to the ongoing development of effective digital learning practices in higher education.

Keywords: Learner Support Strategies, Digital Learning Environment; Inclusivity, Flexibility, Affordability, Equity Education, Action Research, Learning Management System, Open University

Introduction

While there have been Open and Distance Learning and eLearning programs in Kenya in a few Universities, there has never been a fully-fledged University offering a wide array of programs like the Open University of Kenya (OUK) that was established in 2023. At the OUK learning is flexible whereby learners customize their learning experience to fit their unique needs and commitments. With the freedom to choose courses, learners set their own pace. OUK has open admission policies, affordable tuition options, and online or distance learning programs, open universities strive to remove barriers to education and promote lifelong learning. Furthermore, OUK welcomes diversity ensuring that all learners, faculty, and staff have access to resources, support services, and accommodations to enable their success. Finally, OUK offers specialized training, Diploma courses, Undergraduate programs, Masters Programs, and PhDs in the following schools.

For many learners, joining the Open University of Kenya (OUK) for their first semester was a dream come true in 2024 when the first cohort of learners was onboarded to pursue various degree programs. They embarked on this journey with a sense of excitement and anticipation, eager to embrace the flexibility and convenience that distance learning offered.

Literature Review

Open and distance learning institutions are growing in popularity internationally and regionally, aiming to offer flexible and accessible education. The International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE, 2018) found a 25% increase in global open university enrollment between 2014 and 2018. Similarly, the African Council for Distance Education reported a growing demand for open and distance learning programs in several African countries, including Kenya.

According to Sarah Guri-Rosenblit (2019), expanding access to higher education is a shared priority among all open universities. She observes, part-time adult learners form a significant part of the global higher education student body. She argues, part-time programs are seen as a practical way to increase access to higher education, allowing learners to balance their studies with work, family commitments, social obligations, health limitations, military service, and more.

The early and swift integration of communication technology played a pivotal role in shaping the future success of open universities. As Guri-Rosenblit (2019) points out, open universities in the 70s and 80s were often referred to as “universities of the air”, capitalizing on television, then the dominant media platform. These institutions were anticipated to leverage mass communication technology for advancing higher education.

Nevertheless, contemporary perspectives acknowledge that mass communication media no longer hold the leading technological role (Contact North, 2018). Undoubtedly, digital technologies now exert a more profound and influential impact on all higher education institutions compared to traditional mass media technologies. Today, the concept of leveraging advanced technologies for the advancement of higher education enjoys widespread acceptance.

Theoretical and Empirical Underpinnings of the Research

This study was anchored on expectancy-value theory to inform the learning strategies applied. The theory was pioneered by John William Atkinson posits that an individual's motivation to engage in a particular behavior is determined by their expectation of success and the value they place on the outcome (Eccles & Wigfield, 2020). Key components of this theory include expectancy, the belief that effort will lead to success; value, the importance or desirability of the outcome; and the individual's goal orientation.

In the context of online learning and learner support, the expectancy-value theory can be applied to understand learners' motivation and engagement (Wang & Xue, 2022; Yli-Piipari, & Kokkonen, 2014). By developing a mobile application, integrating Panopto technology, establishing a dedicated WhatsApp group, creating peer study groups, and staggering module releases, faculty intervene to enhance learners' expectancy and value perceptions. The mobile application and Panopto technology provide tools and resources that make learning more accessible, thereby increasing learners' expectancy of success. Meanwhile, the establishment of a dedicated WhatsApp group and peer study groups fosters a sense of community and support, increasing the perceived value of the learning experience. Staggering module release helps manage workload and allows learners to focus on one task at a time, further enhancing their expectancy of success and valuing of the learning process. Overall, these interventions align with the principles of the expectancy-value theory by addressing both the expectancy of success and the value learners place on their online learning experience, ultimately promoting motivation and engagement.

Mobile Applications

The ubiquity of mobile phones among learners and teachers has ushered in a new era of communication, eliminating spatial and temporal barriers, as noted by Alexander (2004) and Tkachuk et al. (2020). Harnessing this trend, the integration of mobile learning applications has emerged as a powerful tool to enhance the flexibility of learning, as observed by Martono and Nurhayati (2014). Demir and Akpınar (2018) highlight the significant positive impact of mobile learning on learners' academic achievement and motivation. They emphasize that mobile learning not only boosts academic performance but also increases student engagement and motivation (So, 2016). Additionally, Dwikoranto, Setiani, Prahani, and Mubarak (2020) affirm the validity and effectiveness of mobile learning in fostering collaborative abilities among learners. Thus, the utilization of mobile apps for learning not only promotes flexibility but also drives academic success and enhances collaborative skills, making it a valuable asset in modern educational settings.

Panopto Lecture Capture

The integration of Panopto, a video capture platform, can revolutionize the learning process, as highlighted by research conducted by Patterson (2009) and Prince (2016). Lecture videos recorded via Panopto offer immediate accessibility to learners, allowing them to review content at their convenience. Moreover, the flexibility to edit videos enables instructors to refine material, eliminating unnecessary sections and enhancing clarity. In a study by Bordes, Walker, Modica, Buckland, and Sobering (2021), the effectiveness of the flipped classroom model was demonstrated to be maximized through consistent delivery of video content throughout the semester. Notably, learners expressed a preference for videos of optimal length, typically ranging from 10 to 20 minutes, as they found them to be both engaging and digestible. Therefore,

the utilization of Panopto not only enhances accessibility and flexibility but also optimizes student engagement and comprehension, ultimately enriching the learning experience.

Using Whatsapp in Learning

The utilization of WhatsApp in learning has proven to be instrumental in enhancing English skills, as highlighted by Wijaya (2018). By integrating WhatsApp into the learning process, learners find enjoyment in their educational endeavors, thus fostering a conducive environment for learning. Additionally, WhatsApp serves as a valuable tool for assessing student comprehension of topics, as emphasized by La Hanisi et al. (2018). Sayan (2016) underscores the role of WhatsApp in improving student achievement and providing a suitable and user-friendly platform for learning. Moreover, Gon and Rawekar (2017) emphasize the convenience of WhatsApp, enabling learning anytime and anywhere. Suárez-Lantarón et al. (2022) further highlights that the use of WhatsApp promotes independent learning without geographical constraints, allowing learners to engage in learning autonomously regardless of their location.

Weekly Support Meetings with Learners

Weekly support meetings with learners play a crucial role in enriching the learning experience by providing regular opportunities for guidance, feedback, and collaboration. Within educational institutions, these group tutorials have demonstrated promising potential in positively impacting learners' learning experiences (Ober et al., 2023; Ciobanu, 2013). These meetings serve as a platform for learners to discuss challenges, receive personalized support, and share insights with peers under the guidance of educators (Mock & Hodis, 2022). Moreover, research emphasizes the importance of regular progress reports in fostering collaborative learning among learners. By requiring learners to submit weekly progress reports, educators can encourage accountability, reflection, and engagement, ultimately contributing to improved learning outcomes (Yusuf, 2021). Therefore, weekly support meetings not only facilitate academic support but also promote a collaborative learning environment that empowers learners to thrive academically.

The collaborative nature of these group sessions allows learners to support one another, which can alleviate some of the stress on the teacher to maintain order and keep learners on task (Kirk, 2001). Student interaction is a critical component of cooperative learning, as it enables learners to work together as equals, pooling resources and complementing different talents to produce a single project (Kirk, 2001). This sense of community and collaboration is particularly important in disciplines like nursing, where community building is a critical skill for providing quality patient care and interacting with an interprofessional team (Seckman, 2014).

To foster a meaningful and inclusive learning environment, it is crucial that teachers have adequate support and training to facilitate meaningful learning activities and discussions around relevant topics (Ober et al., 2023). Additionally, learning activities, curriculum, and other instructional decisions should be developed and selected with appropriate input from school community stakeholders (Ober et al., 2023).

Learner Experiences During the First Academic Semester in Digital Learning

The study by Nabwire et al. (2024) that evaluated the learners' experiences at OUK, offers valuable insights into the learner experiences during the first academic semester at the university. The findings indicate that the university's efforts to provide support services and resources for its learners were well-received and

effective during this foundational period. The study showed that 62% of respondents out of 130 were satisfied with OUK's support system. This indicates that the university's strategies to assist learners academically were successful in meeting their needs. This positive perception is further reinforced by the specific feedback on various aspects of the support system. Firstly, 60% of respondents found the university's support services, including counseling, tutoring, and technical assistance, to be "Very Good" in addressing their academic requirements. This highlights OUK's strength in offering valuable resources that directly contribute to learners' academic progress and well-being.

Additionally, the responsiveness of the support team was rated as "Very Good" by 66% of respondents. This shows that the university has established efficient and timely mechanisms for addressing inquiries and requests from learners. This responsiveness is crucial in ensuring that learners receive the necessary assistance when faced with challenges or queries, contributing to a positive learning experience.

Furthermore, 59% of respondents felt that OUK provides "Very Good" resources and support to help them succeed academically. This suggests that the university has invested in providing academic resources, such as library materials, online resources, and other learning aids, to facilitate student success.

Despite the extensive research on the benefits of mobile applications, video capture platforms like Panopto, and communication tools such as WhatsApp in enhancing flexibility, accessibility, and motivation in open and distance learning, there is a significant gap in the literature concerning the design, development, and evaluation of learner support strategies specifically tailored for first-semester learners in digital learning environments. This gap is particularly pronounced in the context of promoting equity and inclusivity at institutions like the Open University of Kenya (OUK). Current studies tend to focus broadly on general student populations and their use of these technologies without addressing the unique needs and challenges faced by new entrants to digital learning platforms. By designing and developing targeted learner support strategies and evaluating their impact on equity and inclusivity, this research aims to fill this gap and provide strategies that can be adopted to enhance the learning experiences of first-semester learners in digital learning environments at OUK.

Statement of the Problem

The rapid expansion of digital learning opportunities has presented both promises and challenges for higher education institutions (Alenezi, 2023). The Open University of Kenya (OUK) faces the complex task of effectively supporting a highly diverse student population in a digital learning environment. This diverse cohort includes teachers, entrepreneurs, busy professionals, and parents, each with unique educational needs, time constraints, and career aspirations.

While digital learning offers flexibility, it also risks exacerbating existing educational inequalities if not properly addressed (Pashkov, et al, 2022). The challenge lies in developing and implementing tailored learner support strategies that promote equity and inclusivity, ensuring all learners can fully engage with and benefit from digital education (Anis, 2023). This is particularly crucial during the pioneer student cohort, a critical period for student retention and success.

Existing research extensively explores how mobile applications, video capture platforms like Panopto, and communication tools such as WhatsApp benefit flexibility, accessibility, and motivation in open and distance learning (Misaghi, et al, 2021). However, there remains a notable gap in literature regarding the design, development, and evaluation of learner support strategies tailored specifically for first-semester learners in digital learning environments. This gap is especially evident in efforts to promote equity and inclusivity at institutions like OUK, as current studies often generalize findings across student populations without adequately addressing the distinct challenges and requirements of newcomers to digital learning platforms.

The problem at hand is how to design, implement and evaluate effective learner support strategies at OUK that cater to the diverse needs of its student population, promote equity and inclusivity in digital learning, and enhance the educational experiences of all learners during their crucial first semester. This study aims to address this problem by assessing targeted support strategies that can bridge the gap between the promise of flexible digital learning and the realities faced by OUK's diverse student body.

Objective

The main research questions of this study is: how effective are the Learning Support Strategies designed for Effective Online Learning at Open University of Kenya for inclusivity, diversity and flexible learning? In line with this, the objective of the study was to design, implement, and evaluate learner support strategies for 1st-semester learners in the digital learning environment at OUK.

Research Methodology

The study was conducted at the Open University of Kenya (OUK) from January to April 2024, focusing on the digital learning experiences of the pioneer, 1st semester learners. This study was an action research. Action research is a systematic inquiry approach that aims to bring about change or improvement in a specific context through collaborative problem-solving and reflection. The study aimed to design, implement and evaluate the various learner support strategies to enhance digital learning experiences and make reflection (Pélissier, 2019). This approach allowed for continuous improvement of learning experiences while integrating qualitative and quantitative methods to comprehend the challenges and successes in implementing inclusive digital learning experiences (Sarva & Puriņa-Biezā, 2023).

The research targeted the School of Education Student and faculty, involving a sample of learners from the pioneer cohort across two programs. Purposive sampling was used to select 3 faculty members and 130 learners randomly sampled from undergraduate and postgraduate diploma learners. This ensured a representative sample of the student population (Cohen, *et al.* 2018). Data collection employed quantitative and qualitative methods to ensure an understanding of the learners' experiences and the effectiveness of support strategies:

As an action research design, the 3 faculty members in the study undertook a qualitative research approach to support 130 learners at the OUK to enhance their learning experiences, amidst their diversity. The 3 faculty members developed strategies to support the pioneer learners in their digital learning journey. Faculty strategies included: design and development of a mobile application, integration of Panopto

technology, and establishment of a dedicated WhatsApp group, creating peer study groups, staggering module releases to support student learning and engagement. The implemented strategies aimed at improving the learning progression in module activities coverage, counsel learners at the edge of dropping out, creating peer support study groups, tagging the faster learners to those struggling through the modules to offer mentorship. Creating the zoom meetings to bring onboard all learners to interact with their facilitators, connect with peers, discuss the threshold learning areas and make decisions on the way forward together as a team of facilitators and their learners.

The student Evaluation of the program and faculty evaluation was administered through a questionnaire to gauge their assessment and rating of: module design, course content, learning activities, assessment tasks, feedback mechanisms, and learner support at OUK. Open and closed-ended items were used to overly assess the digital learning experiences at OUK (Cohen, *et al.* 2018).

The faculty collected qualitative data through direct observations of the OUK Learning Management System (LMS) and the implemented learner support strategies. This method provided insights into the same aspects covered in the course evaluation questionnaire in the LMS, offering a complementary perspective on the digital learning environment (Cohen, *et al.* 2018).

To ensure the validity and reliability of the instruments, digital piloting was conducted at the OUK, and in different programs at the School of Science. This process helped refine the tools and ensure their appropriateness for the digital learning context as noted by Cohen, *et al.* (2018). The study employed concurrent data collection and analysis, allowing for ongoing refinement of the research process until data saturation was reached (Vogl, 2018)). Triangulation of data collection instruments enhanced the validity and reliability of both the instruments and the findings. This approach allowed for a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the learners' experiences and the effectiveness of support strategies.

The collected qualitative data was analyzed thematically, focusing on the relationship between learners' inclusivity and flexibility learning experiences on the designed, and implemented learner support strategies. The analysis sought to identify solutions through learner support strategies that cater to equity and diversity, ultimately promoting effective learning. Throughout the study, ethical guidelines were strictly adhered to, ensuring participants' confidentiality and privacy (Cohen, *et al.* 2018). This approach not only protected the rights of the participants but also encouraged honest and open responses, contributing to the richness and reliability of the data collected.

While the findings are specific to the pioneer cohort at OUK, they offer valuable insights that can be applied to enhance online learning practices more broadly. As Cohen *et al* (2018) points out, action research design allows for the immediate application of insights gained, potentially leading to real-time improvements in the digital learning experience for current and future learners.

Results and Discussion

The faculty strategies focused on the efforts made by the faculty to support the learners in promoting the inclusivity, quality, and achievement of the set expected learning outcomes for the programs and courses. The following sections provide the narration on the innovations developed for learner support strategies.

Mobile Application

The Open University of Kenya faculty demonstrated a strong commitment to supporting learners during the onboarding process by leveraging innovative technology solutions. One particularly noteworthy approach was the development of a mobile application by a faculty member, aimed at assisting learners who faced challenges navigating the Learning Management System (LMS) or had weak internet connectivity.

This mobile application was designed to provide a customized and user-friendly experience for learners. It presented the LMS content in a vertical orientation, allowing each module to be displayed on a single page. This feature enabled learners to work on a module in one sitting, minimizing the need for constant scrolling or navigation within the LMS.

As one some users indicated:

One user asked in favor of expanding the app to other courses, querying, "Are there applications for the other units?"

Another user commented,

"I find this very encouraging and resourceful"

A third user remarked,

"It is straight to the objectives of the course unit".

One stated,

"It is the first of its kind.... hoping other courses will be converted within time."

Finally, another expressed,

"This is so good... can we have the rest in this format?"

The app integrated a zoom link for all online meetings. This eliminated the need for learners to leave the application to access virtual classroom sessions. This streamlined approach ensured a seamless transition between course materials and live interactions, enhancing the overall learning experience. Moreover, the mobile application facilitated easy access to linked videos and attached documents, enabling learners to conveniently access supplementary learning resources without the hassle of downloading or navigating through multiple platforms.

The findings concur with Martono and Nurhayati, (2014) and Demir and Akpinar (2018) who points out that the integration of mobile learning applications has emerged as a pivotal tool in modern education. They argue that it aligns with the trends that emphasize flexibility and accessibility.

According to Dwikoranto et al., (2020) and So (2016) mobile learning not only enhances academic performance but also boosts student engagement and collaboration.

Panopto Technology

Another innovative approach they adopted was the use of Panopto, a powerful video content management system, to record lectures during live classroom sessions. By leveraging Panopto capabilities, faculty

members were able to seamlessly capture their lectures, including audio, video, and any on-screen content or presentations. These recordings were then made available to learners through the university's learning management system or dedicated video platform, enabling those who missed a class to access the content at their convenience.

This initiative not only catered to learners with scheduling conflicts or personal commitments but also supported diverse learning styles and preferences. Learners could revisit the recorded lectures multiple times, pause, rewind, or skip sections as needed, facilitating better comprehension and retention of the material. Additionally, the recordings served as valuable resources for review and exam preparation, enhancing the overall learning experience.

By embracing innovative technology solutions such as mobile applications and Panopto technology, the Open University faculty demonstrated their commitment to ensuring equal access to educational resources and fostering an inclusive learning environment. These innovative solutions not only supported learners during the onboarding process but also empowered them to actively engage with course materials and virtual learning experiences, regardless of their technological constraints or internet connectivity issues. It also recognized the diverse needs and circumstances of learners, providing them with the flexibility to engage with course content at their own pace and on their own terms.

According to Patterson (2009) and Prince (2016) Panopto technology has revolutionized traditional classroom dynamics by enabling learners to access recorded lectures at their convenience. This approach not only supports diverse learning styles but also enhances comprehension and retention of course content (Bordes et al., 2021).

A Dedicated Whatsapp Group

The Open University faculty recognized the widespread adoption and accessibility of WhatsApp among learners. This prompted them to leverage this popular messaging platform as a dedicated communication channel to support learners effectively. All learners were invited to join a dedicated WhatsApp group, fostering a sense of community and facilitating seamless communication.

This WhatsApp group served as a centralized hub for disseminating crucial information and updates related to the course. Faculty members utilized this platform to communicate schedules for upcoming meetings, providing learners with timely reminders and easy access to join links. This streamlined approach ensured that learners remained informed and engaged, minimizing the risk of missing important academic events.

Moreover, the WhatsApp group provided learners with a convenient platform to channel their questions, concerns, or challenges they encountered during the learning process. By leveraging the collaborative nature of the group, learners with similar queries could benefit from the responses and insights shared by their peers or faculty members, fostering a supportive learning environment.

The faculty's prompt and responses within the WhatsApp group further strengthened the connection between learners and the administration, fostering a sense of transparency and open communication.

In their WhatsApp group, discussions among educational professionals revolved around:

- Enhancing digital learning experiences and administrative efficiency. A primary focus was on digitalizing course materials and aligning modules through Learning Management Systems (LMS), ensuring all resources are accessible and current.
- Administratively, the group maintained a steady stream of updates regarding departmental meetings, Zoom sessions, and new member inductions. There was a concerted effort to manage student enrollment effectively, track attendance, monitor student progress, and strategize for improved student retention.
- The coordination extended to examination processes, where efforts were made to digitize exams, create question banks, and ensure fairness through moderation meetings. Technical support was integral, with frequent requests to resolve access issues and provide equitable platform access for all team members.
- Synchronous learning support is facilitated through regular announcements of Zoom meeting schedules and faculty updates on class sessions, emphasizing attendance and participation expectations. New members receive guidance from peers and clear instructions for onboarding tasks, ensuring a smooth integration into the group.
- Detailed communication is key, with sharing of session timings, recurrence patterns, and iCalendar links for upcoming meetings, fostering clarity and alignment among members. Overall, the group's collaboration underscores a commitment to advancing digital education while maintaining efficient administrative processes and supportive learning environments.

This approach not only addressed academic concerns but also facilitated the resolution of administrative or logistical issues that learners might have encountered.

By embracing the familiarity and accessibility of WhatsApp, the Open University faculty created a dynamic and inclusive virtual space that facilitated continuous engagement, timely support, and a strong sense of community among learners and educators alike.

According to Wijaya, (2018), La Hanisi et al., (2018) the use of WhatsApp as a communication tool has facilitated real-time interaction and support among learners and faculty. Additionally, Gon and Rawekar (2017) and Suárez-Lantarón et al., (2022) point out that use of WhatsApp has enhanced accessibility to academic resources and fostered a collaborative learning environment independent of geographical constraints.

Weekly Support Meetings with Learners

The faculty implemented weekly asynchronous Zoom meetings as a proactive strategy to support new learners in their transition to the academic environment. These meetings served as a versatile platform for learners to engage with their peers and faculty members, facilitating an exchange of progress updates, challenges, and guidance.

The asynchronous nature of these meetings was crucial, allowing learners to participate at their convenience. This flexibility accommodated diverse schedules and time zones, ensuring that all learners could actively engage without the constraints of fixed meeting times. Within these sessions, learners shared their individual progress, offering valuable insights into their learning experiences and achievements. Such

sharing not only fostered a sense of personal accountability but also encouraged mutual encouragement and celebration of each other's successes within the learning community.

Moreover, these meetings provided a safe space for learners to openly articulate their challenges. Common issues included navigating the Learning Management System (LMS), balancing academic requirements with work commitments, encountering internet connectivity issues, and managing conflicting schedules. By voicing these challenges, learners not only sought assistance but also contributed to the identification of broader systemic issues that may have required institutional intervention.

Beyond addressing immediate concerns, faculty members utilized these meetings to cultivate a supportive and inclusive learning environment. Through active listening, empathy, and acknowledgment of learners' efforts, faculty fostered a sense of belonging and community among participants. This connection was particularly valuable in the context of distance learning, where learners might have felt isolated or disconnected from their peers and instructors. Overall, the organization of these asynchronous Zoom meetings played a crucial role in enhancing student support, fostering collaboration, and nurturing a sense of belonging within the academic community.

Faculty members played a crucial role in addressing these challenges by offering guidance, resources, and personalized support to learners. For instance, faculty provided tutorials or instructional videos to help learners navigate the LMS more effectively. They also offered strategies for time management and work-life balance, recognizing the diverse responsibilities and commitments of adult learners.

The Faculty actively promoted collaborative learning among learners by fostering the formation of study groups. These study groups served as a platform for learners to support each other academically. Ryder et al. (2017) highlight the efficacy of such peer-to-peer support in aiding learners' transition into higher education. Zhong (2023) stresses that collaborative learning systems endeavor to facilitate learner's effective collaborative learning, especially group activities. Through collaborative endeavors like group work, learners engaged in critical thinking, cultivated collaborative skills, and benefited from the diverse perspectives of their peers.

Despite the evident benefits, organizing group activities online posed challenges, particularly for learners new to the environment, as observed by Bo Chang and Haijun Kang (2016). Recognizing this, the Faculty provided guidance and support to facilitate effective online collaboration. They assisted learners in forming groups, ensuring clear expectations were set, and offered instruction on leveraging communication tools to enhance collaborative efforts. This proactive approach aimed to mitigate the hurdles associated with online group activities, ultimately fostering a conducive learning environment for all learners.

Staggering Modules

The faculty implemented a strategic approach to optimize learners' online learning experience by staggering the release of modules. This method involved introducing course content gradually, allowing learners to focus on one module at a time. By breaking down the curriculum into manageable chunks, learners were able to allocate their time and attention more effectively, reducing the likelihood of feeling overwhelmed by a large volume of material.

This staggered release approach not only aided in workload management but also promoted deeper engagement with each module. Learners could delve into the content thoroughly, absorb the material more comprehensively, and engage in meaningful discussions and activities without the pressure of simultaneously juggling multiple topics.

Martin and Whitmer's study (2016), provides insights into the effectiveness of this approach. Their findings indicate significant differences in login sessions when adaptive release was implemented, particularly noticeable early in the course. This suggests that staggered releases may help establish strong engagement habits from the start, crucial in online learning where student motivation can wane.

With the expansion and evolution of online education, strategies such as staggered module release are increasingly pivotal for ongoing research and enhancement. Thoughtful consideration of when and how course content is delivered enables educators to cultivate online learning experiences that are not only more effective and engaging but also centered around the needs of learners. This pursuit aims to fully leverage digital platforms while effectively navigating the distinct challenges they present, thereby enriching the educational journey for online students.

Orientation Meetings

The university administration recognized the importance of equipping learners with the essential technical skills needed to navigate the online learning platform effectively. To address this, they organized orientation meetings specifically designed to familiarize learners with the Learning Management System (LMS) and the process of accessing course materials.

These orientation sessions served as vital opportunities for learners to gain an understanding of the functionalities and features of the LMS. Through hands-on demonstrations and guided tutorials, learners were introduced to key aspects such as navigating the platform, accessing course materials, submitting assignments, participating in discussions, and communicating with instructors and peers.

The orientation meetings also provided a platform for learners to address any questions or concerns they may have had regarding the online learning environment. Faculty members and technical support staff were on hand to provide assistance, troubleshoot technical issues, and offer guidance on best practices for utilizing the LMS effectively.

The meetings revolved around the following content:

- Discussions on technical challenges such as accessing surveys, using platforms like Zoom, and integrating tools like Panopto for course recordings.
- Coordination of meetings, training sessions, and enrollment codes for courses.
- Discussions on academic integrity, handling AI-generated academic work, and training needs for learners in areas like academic writing and digital services management.
- Updates on infrastructure improvements funded by grants, collaborations with external partners and educational reforms
- Informal exchanges regarding meeting times, technical troubleshooting, and social dynamics within academic and administrative teams.

By attending these orientation meetings, learners were empowered to navigate the online learning platform with confidence and proficiency. They gained the necessary skills and knowledge to engage actively in their courses, access resources efficiently, and effectively manage their academic responsibilities in the digital learning environment.

According to Mahoney and Hall (2020), they argue that teaching and learning in the online environment are challenging therefore, learners and instructors must employ technological tools and strategies to be successful. In the same vein, Gast (2019) stresses three specific types of live meetings namely orientations that introduce learners to the class, instructor, and each other; assignment reviews that provide guidelines and strategies for success for upcoming assignments; and workshops that use student work for collaborative discussion and revision.

Learners' First Year Evaluation

Feedback from student evaluations based on 5 areas namely Course Content Organization, Course Design, Learning Activities, Feedback Mechanisms and Learner Support, indicated a high level of satisfaction on a scale of 1 to 5. Figure 1 Learners' Evaluation gives a summary of the feedback.

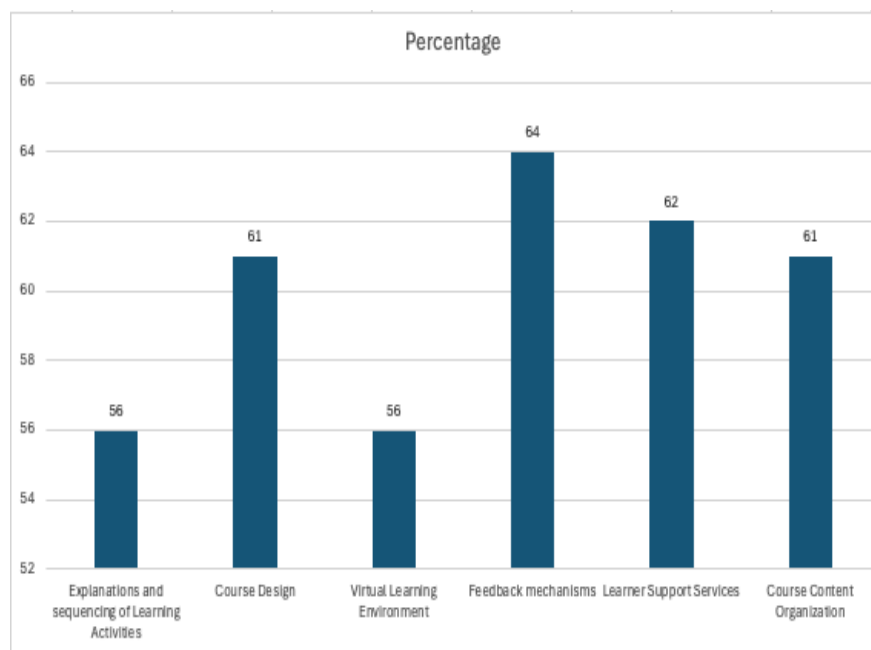


Figure 1: Learners' Evaluation Feedback

Sequencing of Learning Activities

The explanations and sequencing of learning activities hold a rating of 56%, indicating that while these activities are present, their instructions and the order in which they are presented may not be entirely clear or logical to learners. This lack of clarity can lead to confusion and hinder the learning process. To address this issue, it is crucial to enhance the clarity of the instructions provided for each activity. Ensuring that activities are arranged in a logical sequence that builds progressively on prior knowledge and skills will help create a more cohesive learning experience.

Martin and Whitmer's study (2016) provides insights into the effectiveness of this approach. Their findings indicate significant differences in login sessions when adaptive release was implemented, particularly noticeable early in the course. This suggests that staggered releases, where course materials and activities are made available in stages, may help establish strong engagement habits from the start, which is crucial in online learning environments where student motivation can wane. By improving the clarity and sequencing of activities and considering adaptive release strategies, educators can foster better engagement and comprehension among learners.

Course Design

With a rating of 61%, the course design meets basic requirements but lacks the exceptional qualities needed to fully engage and support learners. This score indicates that while the structure and layout of the course are functional, they do not captivate or assist learners as effectively as possible. Improving the user interface to make navigation simpler and more intuitive can significantly enhance the learner experience.

According to Konstantinidou and Nisiforou (2022), the effectiveness of online learning is significantly influenced by several key course design elements: structure, appearance, content, interactivity, and support. These elements not only enhance the learning experience but also align with learners' preferences, ensuring that the courses meet their needs and expectations. This perspective is supported by Castro and Tumibay (2019), who found that well-planned and well-designed online courses and programs are effective in higher education. Together, these findings underscore the importance of thoughtful course design in maximizing the educational outcomes of online learning environments. According to Hu (2018), online learners are less enthusiastic about watching videos and have few reviews between chapters, which affects the design of learning resources and activities. This suggests that incorporating varied and engaging formats for instructions and ensuring regular reviews and summaries can help maintain learners' interest and understanding. By improving the clarity and logical sequencing of learning activities, educators can provide a more effective and engaging learning environment.

Virtual Learning Environment

The virtual learning environment (VLE) has been rated at 56%, indicating potential issues with usability and accessibility. Learners might be encountering difficulties in navigating the platform or accessing the necessary materials smoothly. To improve this, the VLE's usability must be enhanced to ensure an intuitive and user-friendly interface. Providing robust technical support will help address any issues that arise quickly. Furthermore, ensuring that the platform is reliable and accessible from various devices and internet connections will make it easier for learners to participate and engage with the course content.

The 56% rating for the virtual learning environment (VLE) suggests significant issues with usability and accessibility, indicating that learners might face challenges in navigating the platform or accessing necessary materials smoothly. To address these issues, it is crucial to enhance the VLE's usability by creating an intuitive and user-friendly interface. Additionally, providing robust technical support will enable quick resolution of any problems that arise. Ensuring that the platform is reliable and accessible from various devices and internet connections is essential for facilitating easier participation and engagement with the course content. This need for improved usability and accessibility in VLEs parallels issues highlighted by Hamilton (2018) in virtual reality environments, where problems such as simulation

sickness, binocular vision, physical context, and spatiality are compounded by limited developer awareness and the lack of a clear approach to accessibility.

Feedback Mechanisms

Feedback mechanisms received the highest rating at 64%, indicating that while feedback is provided, it may not be frequent, detailed, or constructive enough to fully support learner development. Ensuring that feedback is given promptly can help learners stay on track with their progress. Providing detailed, actionable feedback that highlights both strengths and areas for improvement will guide learners more effectively. Incorporating more peer review and automated feedback tools can also supplement instructor feedback and offer more wholistic support.

According to Spooner et al. (2021), feedback benefits learners most when it focuses on their needs, engages in bi-directional dialogue, and is supported by positive learner-teacher relationships. Additionally, Kim et al. (2019) found that self-controlled feedback allows learners to more actively process task stimuli and feedback information, enhancing motivation and attachment to the task being practiced. By improving the frequency, detail, and constructiveness of feedback, and incorporating these best practices, the effectiveness of the feedback mechanism can be significantly enhanced.

Learner Support Services

Learner support services, rated at 62%, are generally adequate but leave room for improvement. The current services may not be comprehensive or responsive enough to meet all learners' needs effectively. Expanding support services to include academic counseling, mental health resources, and technical assistance can provide a more holistic support system. Ensuring these services are easily accessible and well-publicized will make it easier for learners to seek help when needed. Additionally, improving the responsiveness of support staff to learner inquiries and issues will further enhance the support system.

According to Gasa (2021), learners in ODeL institutions expressed dissatisfaction with the availability of four out of nine learner support services, highlighting the need for improvement. Similarly, Ebabhi and Adewara (2022) found that learners rated support services very low in terms of providing cognitive, affective, and systemic support, indicating inadequacy and unavailability for academic needs. He (2019) emphasized that the use of learner support services and their frequency are highly relevant to the pattern and level of student engagement in online learning environments. By addressing these issues and expanding the range and responsiveness of support services, institutions can better meet the diverse needs of their learners.

Course Content Organization

The organization of course content, rated at 61%, suggests that while the content is somewhat structured, there is significant room for improvement. Learners might find it challenging to locate and follow the course materials coherently. To address this, organizing content with clear headings, subheadings, and a logical flow will make it easier for learners to navigate. Designing the course in easily understandable and followable modules can also help.

Consistency in the presentation and formatting of course materials will contribute to a seamless learning experience. Dorogova and Mareev (2022) recommend using various tools and platforms to enhance the

organization of online course content. These include electronic information and educational environments, interactive textbooks, channels on workspace platforms, corporate messengers, intelligent maps, and intelligent learning systems. Implementing these tools can significantly improve the structure and accessibility of course materials, making it easier for learners to engage with and benefit from the content.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the assessment of Open University of Kenya's strategies reveals a robust framework aimed at enhancing the digital learning experience for its learners. The positive feedback from learners underscores the effectiveness of various support mechanisms implemented during the inaugural academic semester. Notably, the introduction of a mobile application and the use of Panopto technology exemplify innovative approaches to overcoming barriers such as internet connectivity and accessibility to course materials. Moreover, the establishment of a dedicated WhatsApp group and regular asynchronous Zoom meetings facilitated seamless communication and community building among learners and faculty. Despite these successes, there are areas for improvement highlighted in the evaluation, particularly in refining the sequencing of learning activities, enhancing course design for better engagement, improving virtual learning environment usability, and strengthening feedback mechanisms and learner support services. Moving forward, focusing on these areas will further enhance OUK's ability to provide a supportive and inclusive digital learning environment that promotes student success and satisfaction.

The study recommends the following:

- OUK should regularly evaluate the effectiveness of its support services through student feedback and engagement metrics. By identifying areas for improvement, the university can refine its support strategies to better meet the evolving needs of its learners.
- Building on the success of the mobile application and Panopto technology, OUK should explore additional opportunities to leverage technology in supporting student learning. This may include the development of new mobile applications or the integration of emerging technologies to enhance the online learning experience.
- Faculty members play a critical role in supporting student success. OUK should invest in faculty training programs to ensure that educators are equipped with the skills and knowledge needed to effectively leverage technology and facilitate engaging learning experiences in the online environment.
- OUK should continue to prioritize the development of collaborative learning environments where learners can actively engage with course materials and interact with their peers and instructors. This may involve promoting the formation of study groups, facilitating peer-to-peer support strategies, and fostering a sense of belonging within the academic community.

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