



Study on the Impact of Distance Learning Programmes on Student Engagement: A Case Study of Mzuzu University, Malawi

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the effects of online learning on student involvement at Mzuzu University in Malawi. The research paper highlights how crucial remote learning is to increasing access to higher education, particularly for students in disadvantaged communities. It examines the factors that influence participation, the challenges faced by learners who are located far away, and strategies to improve it. The study used a mixed-methods approach, integrating quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews. The findings indicate that while distance learning increases accessibility, participation is challenging due to factors like insufficient computer literacy, inadequate infrastructure, and limited social interaction. In order to eliminate these barriers and improve academic performance and student retention, the report recommends legislative actions.

Keywords: Distance Learning, Student Engagement, Higher Education, Online Learning, Digital Divide

Introduction

Distance learning has emerged as a disruptive force in higher education in developing countries like Malawi, where access to traditional education is typically restricted by physical and financial limitations (Kauffman, 2015). The rapid advancement of information and communication technologies (ICTs), which allow students to access learning resources at a distance, has led to an increase in distance education (Anderson, 2008). While there may be benefits to distance learning, there are also disadvantages, particularly in terms of student engagement and retention. This study looks at how distant learning affects students' engagement at Mzuzu University, highlighting significant problems and potential solutions.

Literature Review

Concept of Distance Learning

Moore et al. (2018) define distant learning as an instructional approach in which students and teachers interact electronically using digital platforms. It is now imperative to increase educational access, particularly for non-traditional students such as working adults, parents, and those who live far away. (2020, Dhawan).

Theoretical Framework

This study is based on the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework and the Self-Determination Theory (SDT). The CoI framework, developed by Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000), emphasises the significance of social interaction, cognitive skills, and teaching presence in online learning engagement. Cognitive presence is the extent to which students generate and verify meaning through extended reflection and conversation. Social presence is the capacity of students to present their social and emotional identities in a virtual environment, promoting participation and collaboration. Teaching presence involves organising, guiding, and supporting cognitive and social processes to achieve meaningful learning outcomes.

The Self-Determination Theory (SDT), first presented by Ryan and Deci (2000), focusses on the internal and environmental elements that affect student involvement. The three primary psychological demands, according to the theory, are relatedness, competence, and autonomy. Autonomy refers to students' ability to manage their learning, competence relates to their perceived effectiveness in engaging with the course material, and relatedness emphasises the importance of interpersonal ties in maintaining motivation. By integrating these ideas, this study investigates the effects of both internal and external factors on Mzuzu University students' involvement in distance learning.

Conceptual Framework

This study's conceptual framework demonstrates the connection between student participation in online learning and institutional, social, and technological aspects. Students' capacity to engage in online learning is greatly impacted by technological elements such as internet connectivity, digital device access, and digital literacy (Koole et al., 2021). Peer relationships, teacher presence, and cooperative learning opportunities that promote participation are examples of social elements (Bolliger & Martin, 2018). Student engagement and retention are also greatly influenced by institutional elements including interactive learning resources, structured course design, and academic support services (Mtegha & Mtegha, 2021). This study attempts to offer a comprehensive knowledge of the factors influencing Mzuzu University students' participation in distance learning by looking at these interconnected elements.

Factors Influencing Student Engagement in Distance Learning

Student engagement in distance learning is influenced by a variety of factors, including institutional, social, and technological considerations. Technology infrastructure, such as internet connectivity and access to digital devices, is necessary to guarantee effective involvement (Mtebe, 2015). Social interactions, like peer cooperation and instructor presence, also boost student engagement by fostering a sense of community in online learning environments (Bolliger & Martin, 2018). Institutional support, which includes academic resources and well-structured learning materials, is another crucial component that increases student motivation and persistence (Kahu & Nelson, 2018).

Challenges in Distance Learning Engagement

Despite its benefits, there are certain disadvantages to distance learning that have an impact on student engagement. Lack of access to reliable internet and digital gadgets remains a significant barrier, particularly in resource-poor countries like Malawi (Koole et al., 2021). Additionally, students may feel isolated and less motivated as a result of the absence of face-to-face relationships (Bolliger & Halupa, 2021). Sociocultural factors also affect student participation and engagement, such as perceptions of online learning as less successful than traditional learning (Chawinga, 2019).

Strategies for Enhancing Engagement in Distance Learning

Many strategies have been proposed to boost student involvement. Using interactive and multimedia learning resources can boost students' attention and engagement (Anderson, 2019). Establishing peer support groups and online discussion boards can promote cooperative learning and reduce feelings of isolation (Bolliger & Martin, 2018). Additionally, institutional support like academic counselling and technical assistance is necessary to guarantee that students can utilise online learning platforms successfully (Mtegha & Mtegha, 2021).

Research Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods research design, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to gain a comprehensive understanding of student engagement in distance learning at Mzuzu University.

Research Design and Approach

A descriptive survey approach was used to gather quantitative data, while semi-structured interviews with professors and students produced qualitative insights. By enabling data triangulation, this approach ensures the validity and trustworthiness of the findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Sampling and Data Collection

The study focused on distance learning students at Mzuzu University and using stratified random sampling to ensure representation from a variety of specialities. Standardised questionnaires for quantitative analysis and in-depth interviews were employed to collect qualitative perspectives (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010).

Data Analysis

While thematic analysis was employed to identify patterns and emergent themes in qualitative data, descriptive and inferential statistical techniques were employed to analyse quantitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Research Findings and Interpretation

Survey and interview data were used to assess how distance learning affected student involvement. Individual motivation, institutional support, and technology access all have an impact on participation levels, according to the findings.

Objective 1: Assessing Student Engagement in Distance Learning

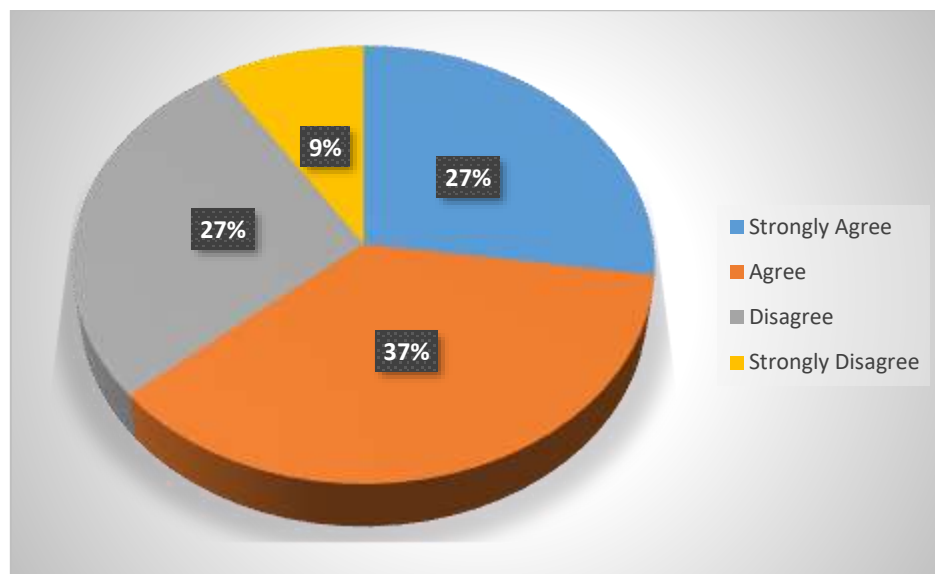
Table 1 illustrates student engagement levels in coursework at Mzuzu University.

Response	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Strongly Agree	30	27.30%
Agree	45	40.90%
Disagree	25	22.70%
Strongly Disagree	10	9.10%
Total	110	100%

While the majority of students (68.2%) indicated good involvement with their course work, a significant portion (31.8%) expressed dissatisfaction

Objective 2: Identifying Challenges in Distance Learning Engagement

Figure 1 highlights internet connectivity issues faced by students.



It was discovered that one important aspect affecting student participation was internet connection. Maintaining steady internet connections was a challenge for 63.7% of students, which made it harder for them to participate in online discussions and homework.

Objective 3: Evaluating the Effectiveness of Institutional Support

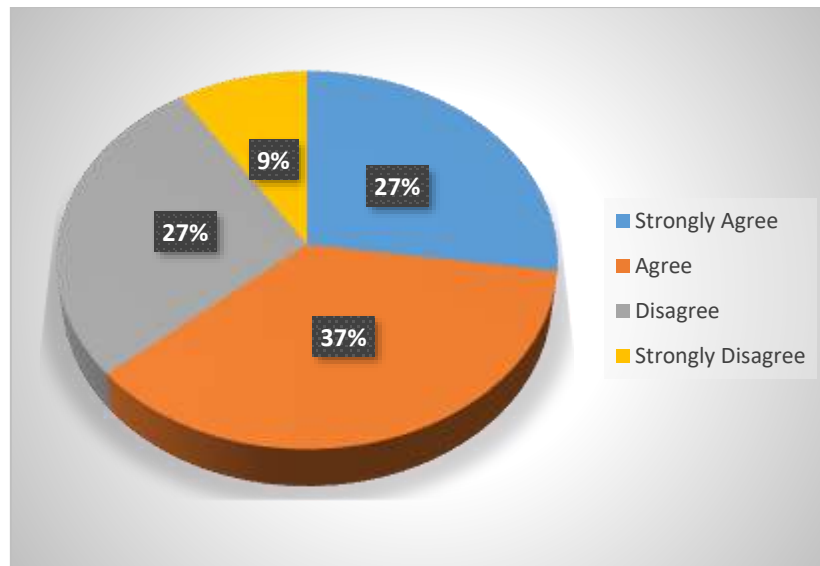
Table 2 presents faculty perspectives on institutional support for distance learning students.

Response	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Strongly Agree	15	60%
Agree	5	20%
Disagree	3	12%
Strongly Disagree	2	8%
Total	25	100%

The lecturers agreed that keeping students engaged requires institutional support. 20% of respondents disagreed, indicating that additional enhancements to administrative assistance and course design are required to improve engagement.

Objective 4: Exploring Strategies to Improve Student Engagement

Figure 2 illustrates student perspectives on the effectiveness of engagement strategies.



Most students (77.3%) agreed that interactive learning techniques, such as forums, collaborative assignments, and rapid feedback were a good way to increase student engagement. The fact that 22.7% of students thought these approaches were less successful, however, suggests that engagement strategies still need to be improved.

Interpretation and Analysis

Faculty interaction and institutional support have a big impact on student involvement. The results show that structured course design increases participation. Table 1 illustrates a gap that requires institutional support: whereas 68.2% of students feel motivated in their education overall, 31.8% have challenges.

Additionally, Figure 1 shows that engagement is greatly impacted by internet access. About 64 percent of students have problems accessing course materials due to erratic connectivity. The relationship between participation and digital accessibility suggests that better infrastructure is required.

Students who actively participated in online discussions and group projects had higher retention rates. *"Group discussions help to better understand concepts, but sometimes peers are inactive, making it difficult to collaborate,"* a student complained. This highlights the need for structured peer-interaction programs.

The importance of feedback systems on students' motivation was emphasised by lecturers. One lecturer said, *"Students disengage when they don't receive timely feedback."* It is crucial to keep up constant communication. This suggests that continuing teacher involvement is necessary to maintain student motivation.

Additionally, student involvement is impacted by technological limitations. *"I frequently have trouble accessing course materials because of poor internet connectivity, which impacts my ability to stay engaged,"* one student commented. Faculty members also emphasised how technical difficulties reduce motivation by impeding real-time contact.

Discussions, Conclusion, and Recommendations

Discussions

Although Mzuzu University's remote learning program offers flexibility, students encounter several challenges that affect their engagement, according to the results of both quantitative and qualitative data. Delays in instructor feedback, low peer involvement, and limited internet availability are major challenges. Regular feedback from their teachers and dependable internet connectivity increased the likelihood that students would stay engaged. Faculty representatives emphasised that interactive course design and peer collaboration strategies boost student motivation and engagement (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000).

In addition, institutional support is essential for encouraging participation. The Community of Inquiry (CoI) approach (Garrison et al., 2000) underlines that cognitive, social, and teaching presence are needed for meaningful learning. According to the research, students' capacity to engage in online learning successfully is greatly impacted by organised academic and technical support. Teachers emphasised that pupils who receive well-defined instructions and well-organised schoolwork had better retention rates. Furthermore, the Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) highlights that the main drivers of online learning are relatedness, competence, and autonomy. Active participation in discussion boards and group projects usually makes students feel more a part of the community, which increases their motivation. Addressing these issues through improved digital infrastructure, increased instructor-student interaction, and more robust peer collaboration frameworks can lead to a more successful distant learning experience. Although Mzuzu University's remote learning program offers flexibility, students encounter several challenges that affect their engagement, according to the results of

both quantitative and qualitative data. Delays in instructor feedback, low peer involvement, and limited internet availability are major challenges. Regular feedback from their teachers and dependable internet connectivity increased the likelihood that students would stay engaged. Teachers emphasised that interactive course design and peer cooperation strategies boost students' motivation and engagement.

In addition, institutional support is essential for encouraging participation. According to the research, students' capacity to engage in online learning successfully is greatly impacted by organised academic and technical support. Teachers emphasised that pupils who receive well-defined instructions and well-organised schoolwork had better retention rates. Furthermore, students who actively engage in group projects and discussion boards typically feel more connected to the community, which boosts their motivation. Addressing these issues through improved digital infrastructure, increased instructor-student interaction, and more robust peer collaboration frameworks can lead to a more successful distant learning experience. Delays in instructor feedback, low peer involvement, and limited internet availability are major challenges. Regular feedback from their teachers and dependable internet connectivity increased the likelihood that students would stay engaged. Teachers emphasised that interactive course design and peer cooperation strategies boost students' motivation and engagement.

Conclusion

The study concludes that the use of distance learning by Mzuzu University students is influenced by institutional regulations, instructional support, and digital accessibility. Students appreciate the flexibility of online learning, but their participation is limited by communication and technological limitations. Resolving these problems would improve student retention and performance.

Recommendations

To enhance participation, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. **Improve Digital Infrastructure:** Invest in better internet connectivity and provide affordable digital resources for students.
2. **Enhance Faculty Support:** Ensure timely feedback and active engagement from instructors to sustain student motivation.
3. **Promote Peer Collaboration:** Establish structured group discussions and peer mentoring programs to encourage active participation.
4. **Develop Interactive Course Materials:** Incorporate multimedia tools and interactive content to enhance the learning experience.

By implementing these measures, Mzuzu University can improve the effectiveness of its distance learning programs, ensuring greater student engagement and academic success.

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