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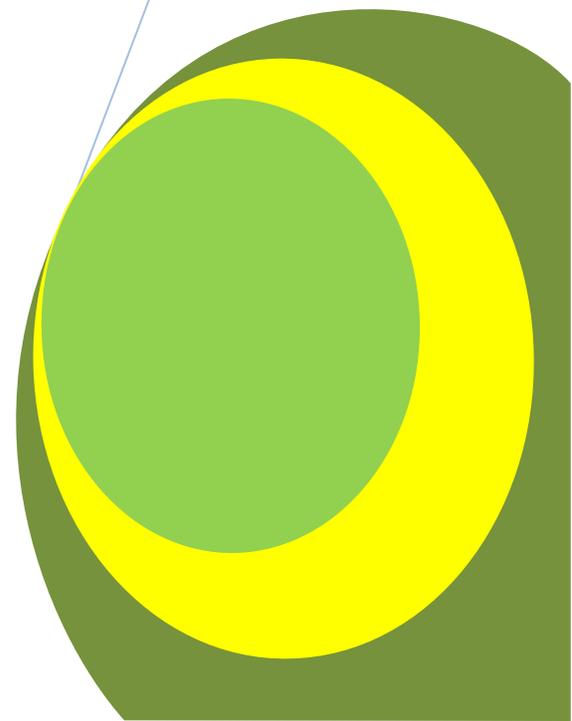
An Analysis of Challenges encountered by students on the E-learning platform at Zimbabwe Open University

By

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ABSTRACT

The philosophy of distance education is that it removes barriers to learning. Individuals learn what they want, when they want, and where they want. All this freedom is accomplished by a variety of technologies. Hence technologies in printed and non-printed formats can be used. This study focused on the challenges that students encountered on the E-learning Platform at the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU). The study used a qualitative approach using a case study design. Structured interviews and document analysis were used to collect the data. According to Flick (2009) these enables the generation of appropriate descriptive information on the phenomenon under study. Purposive sampling was used identify the students; lecturers from the four faculties of the ZOU who have used the e-platform Key informants from the Information, Communication Technology (ICT) department of ZOU were also interviewed. The findings of the study show that ODL students face challenges when accessing the e-platform. Students, lecturers and even most ICT personnel do not have the capacity to use the myVista internet based programme. This is an e-tutoring programme which allows learning to occur between the student and the tutor on line. The study recommended as a priority that all students, lecturers and key ICT personnel be trained in the use of the e-platform especially the myVista programme. ZOU should put in place a policy on how e-tutoring should be conducted. This would help to make the e-platform materials student friendly. Furthermore there is need to improve students' computer literacy skills.

Key words: distance education, technologies, e-learning platform, e-tutoring.

1. INTRODUCTION

Open and Distance providers should consider the extent and manner of support they offer to learners. All learners no doubt need access to some kind of a tutor to help them through their learning process. A variety of technologies can be used to deliver knowledge to students, examples of these technologies are the printed and non- printed formats. The use of variety media should enable students to have a variety of learning experiences in order to assist them in their understanding of the printed course materials (Keegan, 1995; Greenberg, 1998).The use of various media is intended to address the diverse learning needs and styles of the large number of students (Moore & Kearsley, 2005). In most educational settings the e-learning platform has assisted in providing an avenue of some kind of modern learner support. More so the advent of widespread domestic access to the internet has dramatically altered educational providers' views of ODL. The e-learning platform uses technologies to transport information to students. Technologies can be in form of print or non print formats.

In ZOU the most commonly used technologies are both print and non-print modes. Taylor (2001) identifies the multimedia model in distance education as being based on the print mode. It is from the print mode that learning materials can be in print, audiotapes, CD Rom, videotapes or computer- based learning. The computer- based learning platform is being handled by the ZOU Information, Communication Technology (ICT) department in conjunction with other departments and faculties. Effective communication is the heart of open and distance learning and technology provides the key to connectivity (Peraton, 1991).ZOU has enhanced students and tutors access to computers by having computer laboratories throughout its regions. ZOU has also provided a credit scheme to full-time tutors resulting in many tutor acquiring laptops. Thus e-learning platforms are supposed to promote interactions such as between:

- Institution and learner;
- Learner and content;
- Learner and learner;
- Learner and society.

The above interactions no doubt promote problem solving platforms which are needed by a distance learner (Burge, 1988).

Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) is not lagging behind in developing a multi-media platform. It has an Information Technology Department which caters for the computer needs of the university. There are computer laboratories in every region which can be used by the students and staff. It is against this background that the researchers wanted to analyse the challenges encountered by ZOU students on the E- learning platform. This would help to improve service delivery to its students.

2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Open and distance learning can be promoted by various technologies in the form of print or non print formats as once mentioned. Among the non- print format is the e-learning platform and ZOU has availed such a platform in nearly all the regional centre. There is need to establish the types of challenges ZOU ODL students face.
Hence the following main research question was posed:
What are the challenges encountered by ZOU students on the E- learning platform?

3. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The study sought to identify and analyse the challenges encountered by ZOU students on the E-learning platform and present suggestions to enhance learner support.

4. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What is the level of awareness of ZOU students towards the e-learning platform?
2. Have students been trained to use the e- learning platform?
3. What challenges do students face on the e-learning platform?
4. What are the solutions to these challenges?

5. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

This review focuses on technologies; the theory underpinning e-learning; benefits of the e-learning platform; challenges and solutions.

5.1 Underlying theory of e-learning

According to Banget (2004) cited in Mason and Rennie (2006) the majority of web-based courses today are designed using constructivist educational principles. This constructivist theory is learner focused. The learner interacts with content and events there by understanding ideas and events. As a result the learner finds solutions to problems by actively participating in discussions with others and getting instant feedback. Thus the constructivist principles in e-learning boost independence and self- reliance to learners resulting in building learners confidence and skills. Construct-based models frequently used on online environments are:

- Situated learning
- Problem-based learning
- Communities of practice
- Simulations

(Mason and Rennie, 2006)

5.2 Situated Learning

Situated Learning implies that learning is situated in a society (Lave and Wenger, 1990 in Mason and Rennie, 2006). There is social interaction which enables the learner to acquire some behaviors during the learning process.

5.3 Problem based learning

This type of learning challenges students to learn to work cooperatively in groups in order to seek solutions to real world problems. Thus the approach enables students to think critically and analytically to find appropriate solutions to the problems.

5.4 Communities of practice

This learning is characterized by a common purpose where learners collaborate to solve problems or to create. This need not be intentional. In e- learning organizers may initially plan for it but when learners get on to the platform it may end up developing a life of its on. Online students develop knowledge through interaction with others and members develop a sense of belonging and mutual commitment. They become more active and engaged with the culture.

5.5 Simulations

Simulations are mimicries of everyday activities placed on the e-platform. These are derived from models of real life situations or activities. Simulation provides interactive multi-media presentations that explain difficult concepts. Learners can experience some scenarios without any risk. The use of virtual reality is one form of simulation which is now popular on the internet to teach and as entertainment.

5.6 What is E-learning?

Naidu (2006) defines e-learning as the use of linked information, communication and technologies (ICTs) in teaching and learning. Manson and Rennie (2006) have cited relevant features of the e-learning platform as:

- need to update knowledge and skills
- need to retrain
- need to keep informed of current issues on the internet

Thus the definition focuses on the content, some communication and some technology. It covers a wide range of applications such as web-based learning, computer-based learning, and virtual classrooms, digital collaboration audio and video tapes CD-ROM. Penteliuc-Cotosman (2006: 196) says that it:

- 'Provides Instant response to student input
- Records analysis and reacts to the student
- Stores and manipulates information
- Controls and integrates a wide range of media
- Serves many students simultaneously.'

According to Mason and Rennie, (2006), it is the use of network technologies to create, foster, deliver and facilitate learning all the time. In addition to above criteria the following features in Table, 1(Mason and Rennie, 2006) have been identified.

Table 1: Features

Features	Examples
Communication between tutors and students	E-mail, virtual chat facilities supporting various types of communication synchronous and asynchronous, one to one, one to many, many to many
Self-assessment and summative assessment	Multi-choice assessment with automated marking and immediate feedback
Delivery of learning resources and materials	Through the provision of learning and teaching materials, video clips, links to other web resources
Shared work group areas	Allows designated groups of students to upload and share files as well as communicating with each other
Support for students	Could take the form of communication with tutors or other students, provision of supporting materials such as course information
Student tools	Individual student web pages, drop boxes, electronic diaries and calendars
Management and tracking of students	Usernames and passwords to ensure students can access the course
Consistent and customizable look and feel	A standard interface that is easy for students to understand and use Courses can be individualized with colours, graphics and logos
Navigation structure	Structured delivery structure supported by standard navigation toolbar

Taken from Mason and Rennie (2006)

E-learning is one of the most recent and significant developments in open and distance learning. It is uses very powerful technology of the internet that enhances the flexibility of study and quality of communication between the ODL teacher and the learner. Gunawardena (1992) cites that on this platform the learner is connected to several resources such as other learners, the library and other databases thus the learner is constantly in touch despite the distance. In this scenario the role of the teacher is to be a facilitator linking learners to other resource empowering learners to control their own learning experiences. Thus learners must be taught how to use electronic networks as well as a collaborative learning network to enable students to teach and assist each other without depending on the teacher. Learners are exposed to use self-directed skills that empower them to take charge of their learning experiences.

5.7 Production of Learning Materials on E- learning Platform

There is a current wave in ODL building up towards the generation of technologies that provide the use of multi-media (Penteliuc-Cotosman, 2009). According to Gunawardena (1996) the providers and the users should be competent in the use of communications media. Hence they should have the ability to:

- Interface with technology
- Clearly understand the unique strengths and weakness of each media
- Use the medium to communicate with teachers or other distant learners.

A deliberate attempt has been made at ZOU to fulfill the above abilities. It has computer labs in all its regions indicating the existence of the e-learning platform. It is also in the process of providing course materials and communicating with students on them to improve the quality and effectiveness of learning.

5.8 Principles of E-learning

Anderson and McCornick (2005) identified ten principles of E- learning as:

Principle1: Match to the Curriculum

A programme should have an appropriate curriculum with clear objectives as well as appropriate content and appropriate activities.

Principle 2: Inclusion

The physically challenged, different social, ethnic and gender groups can be supported by e-learning. E-learning is designed to allow students to be in charge of their own learning. The platform supports aids such as braille, magnifying glasses etc.

Principle 3: Learner engagement

It enables more learner engagement more often with more choices (Robinson, 2008: Chokri, 2012). The interface is friendly and accessible. Students are kept informed of their status at all times

Principle 4: Innovative Approaches

Creating a personalized learning environment that challenges students to practice problem-solving, share and present ideas thinking and learning.

Principle 5: Effective learning

The E-learning platform offers an individual learning plan. It provides learner autonomy and encourages collaboration. Students can easily collaborate with fellow students, teachers, administrators, to satisfy their educational needs.

Principle 7: Real time
It allows frequent testing and the immediate provision of feedback to learner (Naidu 2006).

Principle 8: Promotes learning

It never stands in the way of learning

Principle 9: User friendly

Ease of use thus it needs no training

Principle 10: Cost effectiveness

Reduces administration costs, instructional costs and increasing students engagement.

5.9 Advantages of the E-learning platform

E-learning has brought about many advantages to ODL (du Plessis, 2012). The internet has made it possible for the delivery and interaction in and with course materials. Du Plessis (2012) points out that able to access materials whilst they are outside the university. Hence in ZOU student are able to access some information for example examination results, timetables, tutorial letters and so on. Thus providing s one type of learner support which a distance learner needs. More so prospective students can come on board by registering on line. For example ZOU's Virtual Region provides such a facility. Students no doubt, can study anyway any time.

Some studies have high lighted the benefits of e-learning being based on three levels (Planty, M., Hussar, W., Snyder, T., Kena, G., KewalRamani, A., Kemp, J., Bianco, K., Dinkes, R., 2009)

5.9.1 First level benefits

Hall (1995) cites that e-learning has the ability to significantly reduce costs. Firstly learning materials are delivered on the desktop. This results in less down time to travel and attend learning events let alone the savings on cost to travel and subsistence costs. Learning activities can also be done on mobile devices. Secondly online delivery of learning materials results in lowering printing and distribution costs. Furthermore digital delivery is easier and cheaper. It is also faster to update learning materials on the e-platform than on the printed format. There are also lower tutor and classroom costs. However while the e-learning platform is expensive to develop the benefits listed above indicate the cost saving measures attached to it. Blended learning is also practiced on the e-learning platform. Students have part of their learning in the classroom setting and another part o the e-learning platform. The learner is given time to do more productive work on his own on the e- learning platform. ZOU offers six hour tutorials per programme as part of the class room setting and the e-learning platform is being developed to cater for the other part of learning.

5.9.2 Second level benefits

Besides the cost-saving aspect of e-learning, it is also effective in terms of knowledge retention and improvement in learning. Chou, Lin, van't Hooft and Lin (2008) point out that they are pedagogical values in the form of collaboration, peer evaluation and ICT skills improvement. In addition self-paced learning materials leads to higher retention rate as the learner digests the content at his/her own pace rather than the tutors pace. Furthermore mobile learning provides convenience of learning for it allows greater levels of repletion and improved retention. There is strong evidence that computer based training results in an equal or higher quality of learning over traditional instruction (Planty, M, et al, 2009). With e-learning every one gets the same content presented in the same way. Therefore there is consistency in learning.

5.9.3 Third level benefits

The third level benefits see the e-learning platform as promoting organizational transformation. It is through connecting people to people that organizations create community based knowledge. This sharing of knowledge provides knowledge gaps and also raises competencies through training interventions. Today's technological developments promote self-directed learning. Furthermore today's employees expect a certain level of freedom in their learning choices. The distance learner craves for   such an atmosphere because he/she is loaded with other responsibilities besides learning. The e –learning platform provides an outlet for one aspect of learner support needed by the distance learner.

5.10 Designing E-Learning Technical Issues for Students

A well designed e-learning platform benefits both the learners and the lecturers. This is achieved if the following ideas are taken into consideration. The students' expertise in the use of technologies and the technical infrastructure used (Chokri, 2012)

5.11 Students' E-learning activities and challenges

E-learning requires hands-on activities. Challenges for student and tutor include computer experience and confidence, computer ownership, technical problems, and time management.

5.12 Technical Issues on E-learning platform

These are technical issues that hamper instructors' activities- technical limitations of course management software. For example,
- Lack of technology proficiency
- Unreliable technology can hinder instructor ability to monitor student activities when the system is down.
- Back up to class if system is down.

5.13 Challenges and solutions for the e-learning platform

Andersson (2007) has established thirty-seven (37) factors that can inhibit and facilitate e- learning. These factors fall under eight categories such as student, teacher, institution, support, course, technology, costs and society (ibid). Table 2 highlights these factors.

Table 2: Inhibiting and facilitating factors

Student	Teacher
Motivation Conflicting priorities(time) Academic confidence Technological confidence Learner style Gender Age	Technological confidence New learning style confidence Motivation and commitment Qualification and competence Time
Technology	**Course**
Access Software and interface design Costs Localisation	Curriculum design Pedagogical model Subject matter Teaching and learning activities Flexibility (delivery mode) Localisation
Institution	**Support**
Knowledge management Training of teachers and staff	Support for students from faculty Social support for students Support from employer Availability of educational resources Support for faculty
Costs	**Society**
Technology Access rates Tuition, course fees Books Institutional economy and funding	Role of teacher and student Attitudes on e-learning and IT Rules and regulations

Taken from Andersson, A. (2008)

Students' learning styles, computer expertise, access, costs, the curriculum design for the student and the presence of the computer laboratories in the regions need to be interrogated. In general, attitudes can either be positive or negative. People should perceive e-learning in a positive way if it is to succeed. Both the students and teachers should develop positive attitudes towards e-learning or else it becomes a major challenge in developing this particular platform.

Andersson (2008; 2007) mention that the challenges are hitched on issues such as support and guidance, flexibility, teaching and learning activities, access, academic confidence and localisation of content which we discuss below:

a) Support and Guidance: Support and guidance refers to support systems needed for students to go through their course. Intervention by the institution and support from the tutor and other staff are said to improve learning and pass rates (Simpson, 2004). The fact that students can access their exam results, timetables, assignments on the e-learning platform is a step in the right direction.

b) Flexibility: Flexibility in e-learning is seen in terms of being learning for anyone, anytime and anywhere (Broadbent, 2000). Furthermore emphasis is on self-paced learning allowing examinations to be taken when one wants and student being given the opportunity to choose the medium of content delivery (Pattern, 2000). Flexibility in course pace is important because the majority of students are working. Thus inflexible deadlines can be a problem. Another dimension of flexibility is seen in student's choice of the educational delivery mode. Students engage on e-learning activities and as such when they want on the e-learning platform.

c) Teaching and Learning activities: Activities that affect students' performance are the level of interactivity, the level of collaboration, interaction with peers. According to Naidu (2006) the learning can be individual self-paced online or offline or group based synchronous or asynchronous. The ZOU has created e-learning activities which students maybe accessing.

d) Access: Chokri (2012) says that the ease of use of the technology determines the learners' attitude towards it. ZOU has computers nearly in most of its regions allowing access to students. However the quality of connectivity affects availability of the e-learning platform. The reliability of this connection and band width will affect the user's ability to access the content needed.

e) Academic Confidence: Academic confidence of the students in most cases indicates how successful a learner will perform in a given course (Simpson, 2004).

f) Localisation of Content: Content and experiences should be authentic and grounded in the learning context (Naidu, 2006). The images or symbols should be appropriate for the local culture.

The review has highlighted the extent of the challenges under study. We present the research methodology used in the next section.

6. METHODOLOGY

The study used a qualitative approach using a case study design. A structured interview and a document analysis schedule were used to collect the data. Purposive sampling was used to identify the students and the lecturers who had used the e-platform from the four faculties of the ZOU. They were eight (8) students who participated in the study. Each one was identified by a number to ensure confidentiality. The researchers ensured that all ethical considerations were adhered to. Key informants from lecturers and some staff from the ICT department of ZOU totaling seven (7) were also interviewed to triangulate the students' data. According to Flick (2009) this enables the generation of appropriate descriptive information on the phenomenon under study. Data generated patterns from the interviews and the documents analysis were grouped into themes in line with Creswell's (2009) guidelines. The themes are presented in the next section.

7. RESULTS

The results are presented in the order of the themes which emerged in the posed research questions.

7.1 What is the level of awareness of ODL students towards the e-learning platform?

The eight ODL students who took part in the student were aware of the ZOU e-learning platform. The identified themes in this section indicate the level of awareness. Table 3 shows the five themes which show how the students use the e-platform. More students use it for research purposes when doing their projects.

Table 3: Students use of E-Learning Platform at ZOU

Students	Access Books	Access Information	Access learning activities through my vista	Research	Access Results
1	X				
2		X		X	
3	X			X	
4.				X	X
5.			X		
6.			X		
7.				X	
8.	X				

The students also perceive the benefits of the e-platform as indicated in Table 4. There see time saving and access to current information as the major benefits.

Table 4: Benefits of E-Learning

Students	Saves time/ Convenient	Interaction between tutor and student	Access to current information	Cost effective
1.	X			
2.			X	
3.		X	X	
4.			X	
5.	X		X	
6.		X		
7.	X			
8.	X	X		

7.2 Have students been trained to use the e- learning platform?

Most ODL students acknowledge being trained in the e-platform as shown in Table 5. However the quality of training limited their access to certain features of the ZOU e- learning platform.

Table 5: Training on E-Learning Platform for Students

Students	Yes	No	Not Sure	Not All
1.	X			
2.	X			
3.			X	
4.	X			
5.	X			
6.	X			
7.				X
8.		X		

Table 6 also shows that lecturers have also been trained. The quality of their training has mainly been basics. This clearly shows that their ability to help students on the internet is greatly curtailed.

Table 6: Training on E-Learning Platform for Lecturers

Lecturers	Yes but need more training	Yes for some	No	Not All	Not Sure
1.			X		
2.				X	
3.	X				
4.	X				
5.	X				
6.		X			
7.	X				
8.	X				

Table 7 shows what has been the impact of the type of training provided by the ICT department. Two themes emerged; limited information and improvement on student learners.

Table 7: Impact of E-Learning on Students at ZOU

Lecturers	Limited Information	No Impact	Improvement on student learners	Submitting assignments	Interaction with tutors/ students
1.				X	
2.	-	-	-	-	-
3.	X				
4.			X		
5.			X		
6.	X				
7.	X				
8.			X		

There is need for instructors to rethink and restructure tutorials. Instructors need technical and pedagogical training to improve tutorials on the e-platform. Instructors also need additional time to communicate with students and this can be achieved through the use the e-learning platform.

7.3 What challenges do students face on the e-learning platform?

All the three groups of respondents have faced challenges which we will analyse in this next section. Table 8 shows the challenges the students are facing on the e-learning platform.

Table 8: Challenges of E-Learning on ZOU Platform: ODL students

Lecturers	Accessibility	Publicity	Lack of computers/ hardware	Power cut	Lack of training	Connectivity
1.	X			X		
2.						X
3.			X			
4.						X
5.			X			X
6.		X				X
7.			X			X
8.						X

The seven key informants in table 9 confirm that they are challenges in the programme. They agree with the issue of connectivity as shown in theme 'lack/slow connectivity'.

Table 9: Challenges on ZOU E-Learning Platform: Lectures and ICT staff

Lecturers & ICT Staff	Lack of training	Availability of platform	Time Management	Lack/Slow Connectivity	Not fully utilized
1.					X
2.	X	X		X	
3.	X			X	
4.	X				
5.		X			
6.				X	
7.				X	

This is a summation of the challenges being faced by ODL students in Box 1:

Box I: Challenges faced by the ODL students on the e-platform

- Lack of adequate computers and confidence have been indicated as some of the challenges facing many of e-learning students at ZOU
- Many of the distance learners are adults who might not be quite prepared for technology experiences. Even those students who are comfortable using a computer might not possess all the necessary skills.
- Both tutors and students seem to have inadequate technology proficiency
- Both tutors and students have limited access to higher-end tools
- Access to enough bandwidth is also somehow limited
- Both tutors and students seem to lack time management skills and self-motivation as this impact on student performance in e-learning.
- Most frequently cited challenge of e-learning is the amount of time required to develop and maintain an e-learning course.

7.4 What are the solutions to these challenges?

ODL students proffered theses solutions in Table 10. Training is the major theme emerging from their responses. This theme was confirmed by the other groups and the key informants.

Table 10: Improvement of ZOU E-Learning Platform: ODL Students

Students	Training	Increase Publicity	Partnership with other providers	Availability of Computers	Improved Connectivity
1.	X		X		
2.	X				X
3.	X	X			
4.	X				
5.				X	X
6.	X			X	
7.	X				
8.	X				

Lecturers and ICT in Table 11 verify what the students are proposing.

Table 11: Solution to Challenges on ZOU E-Learning Platform: ICT staff

Lectures & ICT staff	Training	Development Platform	Improving Connectivity	Accessibility Provision of PC	Awareness	Available time to use Platform
1.			X			
2.				X		
3.		X				
4.	X	X				
5.					X	
6.			X			
7.			X			

The ICT department has a key role in the solution. They see the improvement of connectivity as the key to improving the e-platform. Table 12 provides three themes which capture their role. They all agreed that support for e- learning was very important to students.

Table 12: ICT Role on ZOU E-Learning: Lecturers and ICT staff

Lecturers & ICT staff	Develop E-Learning	Support E-Learning	Train Users
1.	X	X	X
2.	X		
3.		X	
4.		X	
5.		X	
6.	X	X	
7.	X		X

Table 13 shows the other issues to be tackled by the e-learning platform. Of concern is the lack of mention of myVista by this category. This clearly indicates that lecturers and ICT staff need training in e-tutoring.

Table 13: ZOU E-Learning Platform: Lecturers and ICT staff

Lecturers & ICT staff	Dissemination of Learning Materials Platform	My Vista	E-Library	Communicate
1.	X			
2.	X		X	X
3.	X			
4.	X			
5.	-	-	-	-
6.	X			
7.	X			

These themes in Box 1 are the ones which need to be emphasised if students are to effectively use the e-learning platform.

Box 2: Ways of Improving the E-learning Platform at ZOU

1. **Accessibility**
2. **Positive Attitudes**
3. **Student Time Allocation**
4. **User Friendly**
5. **Improved Connectivity**
6. **Training**

8. DISCUSSION

This study sought to identify and analyse the challenges encountered by ZOU students who were using the E-learning platform. To achieve the above these research questions were posed: What is the level of awareness of ZOU students towards the e-learning platform? Have students been trained to use the e- learning platform? What challenges do students face on the e-learning platform? What are the solutions to these challenges? The discussion will follow the order of these research questions.

The generated themes clearly show that the ODL students were aware of the e-learning platform. This is shown by their knowledge of its benefits and also their use of certain sections of the platform. Students were using the e-learning platform for research purposes. This is contrary to Mason and Rennie (2006) who emphasise other activities like creating learning. The results show that the student usage is still at an elementary level. There is need to upgrade use to other activities like e-tutoring.

The results show that students were trained in the use of the basic functions of the e-learning platform. This is not in agreement with Gunawardena's (1996) assertion that providers and users should be competent in the use of communication media. ZOU lecturers and ICT staff have not received training in myVista, an e-tutoring tool which enables synchronous and asynchronous communication to take place. ZOU is failing to accrue the benefits Hall (1995) suggests. All ODL students, lecturers and ICT staff should be capacitated as a matter of urgency. The results show that students face numerous challenges which must be taken into consideration when crafting an ICT policy. This situation is similar to Andersson's (2007) challenges. There is a significant link between the ODL students' lack of capacity training in using the e-learning platform and the large number of challenges they encounter. ZOU needs to provide students with enough time to use the e-platform.

The ODL students need to be given opportunities to provide solutions through various ways including using discussion forums on the e-platform. The types of solutions they have provided in this study are realistic and attainable.

9. CONCLUSION

We can conclude that ODL students are aware of the ZOU E-Learning platform and its benefits. However, this is at a basic level. The ODL students, lecturers and most ICT staff have no training in the myVista e-tutoring programme. Success rests on the fundamental requirements that instructors and students possess adequate technical skills to use e-learning tools. ZOU lecturers need to learn computer skills to become better teachers.

ODL students must be enabled to acquire computers at subsidized costs negotiated by their university. This will enable them to get much needed practice. ODL students face numerous challenges when using the e-learning platform. The biggest challenges are lack of access and time to use the platform. Lack of time has impeded students' abilities to gain adequate computer skills.

10. RECOMMENDATIONS

The study made the following recommendations:
- More orientation programmes be given on the e-learning platform with special emphasis on the numerous features of e-learning.
- All students should be trained in the use of the e-learning platform with emphasis on My vista.
- All lecturers and ICT staff must be trained in all aspects of the e-learning platform. Emphasis should be on the My vista programme.
- Students should have access to the laboratories. These should be opened in the evenings and during weekends to give students more time to communicate with their tutors and peers.
- ZOU must adjust its ICT policy to support the above recommendations.
- Further research need to be carried out on the benefits of e-learning in an African context.

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