

STUDENTS AND FACILITATORS' PERCEPTION TOWARDS UTILIZATION OF I-LEARN PLATFORM FOR INSTRUCTION AT NATIONAL OPEN UNIVERSITY OF NIGERIA IN NORTH-CENTRAL, NIGERIA

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Abstract

I-learn platform is a customized learning management system (LMS) that connects a facilitator and students in a virtual classroom environment. For an efficient usage of the platform there is need to know how users (students and teachers) adopt and perceive this learning platform. Therefore, the study was carried out to investigate students' and facilitators' perception towards utilization of i-learn platform at Study Centres of National Open University in North Central Nigeria. A descriptive survey design was adopted. Two research questions guided the study and two null hypotheses were formulated and tested at 0.05 level of significance. Target population were all students and facilitators in the North Central States of Nigeria. A sample size of 450 (360 students and 90 facilitators) were selected using multi-stage sampling techniques. Two research instruments were used for data collection. The instruments were validated by educational technology experts. Cronbach alpha statistics was used to obtain reliability coefficient indices of the two instruments and they were found to be 0.86 and 0.74 respectively. The data collected were analyzed using Mean, Standard deviation and ANOVA. Findings revealed that students and facilitators have positive perception towards the utilization of i-learn as an interactive learning platform. Findings also indicated that there was no significance difference between male and female students' perception on the use of the platform. It was recommended among others that students and facilitators should have regular training which might be in form of workshops and seminars so as to refresh their skills on LMSs usage.

Keywords: Students, Facilitators, Perception, I-Learn, Utilization of I-Learn

Introduction

The landscape of higher education has changed drastically on a global scale as a result of innovation in information and digital technologies. The advances in information and communication technology are changing the way people live, work and learn.

Communication has developed since ages as civilization and development goes hand in hand. Development is spurred by technology which is a weapon of development and accomplishment in the hand of any nation. Technology is so vital that it has applications in all areas of endeavour, ranging from politics, social, economic, agriculture, and education just to mention a few (Nsofor & Aniah, 2014). During the last 20 years, rapid developments in technology have led to changes in the ways of working, playing, teaching and learning (Barbara, 2007). The recent and unprecedented advancement in technology has led to the modern and sophisticated instructional approaches which have distinctly transformed the teaching and learning activities both nationally and internationally. The fast-growing technologies are changing the methods of

teaching and learning in educational environments which has led also to persisted search for a more effective approach to teaching and learning over the years. Badmus (2012) observed that this search for effective approach to teaching and learning has actually produced a variety of suggested instructional approaches. The importance of using information and communication technology (ICT) materials to enhance learning cannot be over-emphasized. The convergence of ICT as embedded in the internet has transformed the present-day society into a knowledgeable society. Accordingly, ICT has broken the monotony and provided varieties in teaching and learning process whereby learners can access academic information through electronic learning (e-learning), e-coaching, virtual university and others.

E-learning is an essential instructional tool that can be used to facilitate the transfer of information and is an effective means of communication in schools and colleges. In recognition of this, e-learning offers ample and exceptional opportunities to the teachers and students to develop capacities for high quality learning and to increase the ability to innovate. However, the emergency of e-learning system is an enabler to the discovery of innovative learning management systems in instructional content delivery. Globally, the focus now seems to be curriculum delivery through an interactive platform that is flexible, faster and more student-centred. However, the interactive feature of the platform could be experienced via the learning management systems (LMSs). The learning management systems are software applications meant for administration, documentation, tracking, reporting, and delivery of educational contents (Falode, Gambari, Alabi & Falode, 2018; Jorge, Javier & Patricio, 2017). Accordingly, LMSs are very useful in organizing coursework and assessment, facilitating staff and student interactions and can act as repositories of learning objects (Holmes, 2018).

I-learn platform is a customized or domesticated LMS established by National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) purposely to enhance and support curriculum delivery at different study centres across the country. It allows students to access online lectures with features such as virtual classroom, course management, content authoring, assessment, video streaming among others thereby bringing teaching-learning activities to the door-steps of the students. Through these innovative features, students and facilitators can collaborate in real time during the online instructional content delivery by using internet-enabled smartphones and computers. Accordingly, it helps the facilitators to reflect on students' processes of learning as well as meeting the needs of individual students in a virtual environment. The platform served as an agent of mass communication because of its features that provide educational significance to thousands of students at various study centres of NOUN. The interactive aura of the internet has conferred unparalleled and unprecedented popularity on e-learning and by extension i-learn platform (LMS). Although, the traditional (conventional) mode of learning allows students to interact with the instructor, but the opportunities for students to interact with each other and create their personal class space are limited.

This development has encouraged many educational institutions to introduce LMSs to facilitate face-to-face learning process most especially in open and distance learning institutions specifically, i-learn platform in National Open University of Nigeria. NOUN is reputed to have had the largest number of registered students across the country and has taken lead in distance learning models (NOUN, 2017). I-learn could be of good use in the hands of students and facilitators towards the achievement of instructional objectives at NOUN because of her diversity and spread. However, the stakeholders' perception of the platform might determine its adoption and effective utilization.

Perception more than any other thing accounts for the difference in the opinion and action of individual or groups that are exposed to the same social phenomenon. It is an essential concept which affects the information that enters the working memory of an individual. This was buttressed by Oyelekan, Olorundare and Anyimigbo (2013) that perception does not come through a vacuum but rather a process by which people attach meaning to the experiences and also depends on prior background information that will trigger up a particular reaction. Perception in this context simply means the mental judgement or image resulting from awareness or understanding which students and facilitators have for i-learn platform. Studies have shown that students' perception of e-learning was positive (Harun & Mustafa, 2016; Emelyanova & Voronina, 2014) and there is no significance difference between male and female students' perception of e-learning platform (Jorge, Javier & Patricio, 2017). However, studies have also revealed that lecturers perceived the LMSs to be a useful tool in enhancing lesson delivery (Edumadze, Ossei-Anto, Edumadze, Tamakloe, Asamoah & Boadi, 2014) and no significance difference between male and female lecturers' perception of LMSs (Back, Behringer, Haberstrouh, & Ehlers, 2016).

The instructional significance of i-learn as an interactive instructional delivery platform is enormous. If properly utilized, teaching becomes more effective, facilitators become more efficient and students' learning outcomes would be greatly improved. Despite the benefit of the platform, there is paucity of literature that reveals the success or otherwise of utilization of i-learn platform by students and facilitators of National Open University of Nigeria. Could this be due to wrong or otherwise perception which students and facilitators hold for utilization of the platform? A need to ascertain users' perception of utilization of the platform therefore, arises.

Thus, this study was carried out to investigate the students and facilitators' perception towards utilization of i-learn platform for instruction at National Open University in the North-Central Nigeria.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The aim of the study was to investigate the students' and facilitators' perception towards utilization of i-learn platform (LMS) for instruction at National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) in the North-Central Nigeria. Specifically, the study:

- (i) Investigated students' perception of i-learn as an interactive learning platform at NOUN study centres in the north central states of Nigeria.
- (ii) Ascertained the facilitators' perception of i-learn as an instructional platform at NOUN.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

- (i) How do students perceive the use of i-learn as an interactive learning platform?
- (ii) What is the perception of facilitators on the use of i-learn as an instructional platform?

Research Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses were formulated and tested at 0.05 level of significance:

- HO₁** There is no significance difference between male and female students' perception on the use of i-learn as an interactive learning platform at NOUN study centres in the North Central states of Nigeria.

HO₂ There is no significance difference between male and female facilitators' perception on the use of i-learn as an instructional platform at NOUN study centres in the North Central states of Nigeria.

Methodology

The research design adopted for this study was a descriptive survey. A descriptive survey is concerned with the collection of data purposely to answer the existing questions with respect to the current situation of subject matter under study. The variables that were investigated are students' and facilitators' perception towards utilization of i-learn at National Open University in the North-Central Nigeria, while gender (male and female) was the moderating variable.

The population of the study comprised of all students and facilitators at 23 study centres of National Open University in the North-Central Nigeria. The sample size of the study was 450 respondents which consisted of 360 students (192 male and 168 female) and 90 facilitators (68 male and 22 female). A multi-stage sampling technique was adopted. Purposive sampling technique was used to select two study centres from each cluster and random sampling technique was used to select students and facilitators. Two researcher-designed questionnaire was used for the study namely: structured Questionnaire on Students' Perception towards utilization of i-learn (QSP) and structured Questionnaire on Facilitators' Perception towards utilization of i-learn (QFP) which were validated by experts in educational technology. Five point Likert scale format options were adopted in which Strongly Disagree (SD) was awarded 1 point, Disagree (D) awarded 2 points, Undecided (U) awarded 3 points, Agree (A) awarded 4 points and Strongly Agree (SA) awarded 5 points. A benchmark of 3.0 was used as acceptable mean agreement for 5-point Likert scale. The following reliability coefficients were obtained for the instruments using Cronbach alpha statistics: students' perception 0.86 and facilitators' perception 0.74. Data collected were analysed using Mean and standard deviation to answer research questions while Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was used to test the hypotheses at 0.05 alpha level.

Results and Discussion

Research Question One: How do students perceive the use of i-learn as an interactive learning platform?

Table 1: Mean and Standard Deviation of Students' responses on Perception of I-Learn as an interactive Learning Platform

S/N	Items	N	\bar{X}	SD	Decision
1	i-learn platform facilitates knowledge sharing among the students	360	3.01	1.32	Agree
2	The i-learn platform meets student's needs and aspirations	360	3.07	1.12	Agree
3	Through i-learn platform I can freely create and participate in group discussion	360	3.30	1.25	Agree
4	i-learn as a learning tool increases student's creativity and interactivity	360	3.23	1.42	Agree
5	I can get what information I want at my own pace and time through i-learn resources	360	3.23	1.17	Agree
6	I enjoy my time when using i-learn as a learning platform	360	3.35	1.24	Agree
7	i-learn provides reliable means of communication and notification for the students	360	3.33	1.46	Agree
8	i-learn is a distraction that affects my studies negatively	360	2.57	1.37	Disagree
9	Use of i-learn can make me a knowledge producer rather than receiver	360	2.91	1.08	Disagree
10	I have excellent idea about i-learn resources	360	2.87	1.14	Disagree
11	I feel excited when using i-learn for collaborative and interactive study	360	3.13	1.16	Agree
12	High cost of data discourages me from utilizing i-learn platform	360	3.11	1.47	Agree
13	Reading and posting on i-learn platform is time-wasting	360	3.04	1.48	Agree
14	I feel upset when using i-learn for learning purpose	360	2.84	1.32	Disagree
15	With i-learn platform I can excel in my field of study	360	3.31	1.20	Agree
Grand Mean and Standard Deviation			3.08	1.28	Agree

Key: N = number of students \bar{x} = mean SD = standard deviation
Decision Mean = 3.0

The data presented in Table 1 revealed that the respondents agreed with 11 items in which their mean scores is above the benchmark of 3.0 and disagreed with items 8, 9, 10 and 14 with mean scores below cut-off point of 3.0. Since the grand mean scores (3.08) is above the cut-off point of 3.0, all the students agreed to the majority of the items, an indication that students have positive perception towards i-learn platform utilization. The Table also shows that the standard deviation (SD) of items ranges from 1.083 to 1.486 which was below 1.99. This is an indication that respondents are not far from the mean and one another in their responses. This also indicated that the items are valid.

Research Question Two:

What is the perception of facilitators on the use of i-learn as an instructional platform?

Table 2: Mean and Standard Deviation of Facilitators' responses on Perception of I Learn as an Instructional Platform

S/N	Items	N	\bar{X}	SD	Decision
1	i-learn platform allows students to develop interpersonal skills	90	3.08	1.08	Agree
2	Using i-learn tool encourages student's participation in achieving learning goals	90	3.27	1.28	Agree
3	i-learn platform enriches students' understanding of concepts	90	3.28	1.20	Agree
4	Learners receive further clarifications and instant feedback through i-learn	90	3.93	1.41	Agree
5	i-learn can adequately equip students against challenges in virtual classroom environment	90	3.50	1.34	Agree
6	I feel i-learn is time wasting and a distraction to students	90	2.34	1.56	Disagree
7	i-learn platform is flexible and accessible to use any time any where	90	3.12	1.37	Agree
8	I can easily identify students' misconception when on i-learn platform	90	2.98	1.00	Disagree
9	Through i-learn I can engage the students in critical thinking on the course content	90	3.52	1.40	Agree
10	I view i-learn platform as a reflective and collaborative learning tool	90	3.30	1.20	Agree
11	I seldom visit i-learn platform due to type of phone I use	90	2.36	1.55	Disagree
12	I seldom access i-learn platform because of internet connection problem	89	2.38	1.28	Disagree
13	Sometimes what students post on i-learn platform is boring to me	90	2.59	1.17	Disagree
14	Lack of inquiry and feedback from students discourage me from using i-learn	90	2.94	1.23	Disagree
15	Learning through i-learn affords students and facilitators the opportunity to brainstorm on the subject matter	90	3.61	1.44	Agree
Grand (Mean and Standard Deviation)			3.08	1.30	Agree

Key: N = number of students

\bar{x} = mean

SD = standard deviation

Decision Mean = 3.0

The data presented in Table 2 shows that the respondents agreed with 9 items which their mean scores is above the benchmark of 3.0 and disagreed with items 6, 8, 11, 12, 13 and 14 with mean scores below cut-off point of 3.0. Since, the grand mean scores (3.08) is above the cut-off point of 3.0, all the students agreed to the majority of the items, an indication that students have positive perception towards i-learn platform utilization. The Table also revealed that the standard deviation (SD) of the items ranged from 1.01 to 1.56 which was below 1.99.

This is an indication that the respondents are not far from the mean and one another in their responses. This also indicated that the items are valid.

Hypothesis One:

There is no significance difference between male and female students' perception on the use of i-learn as an interactive learning platform at NOUN study centres in the North Central states of Nigeria.

Table3: ANOVA Analysis of Male and Female Students' responses on Perception on the Use of I-Learn Platform

Gender of Students' Perception	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	79.251	1	79.25	72.98	0.29
Within Groups	26127.280	358	72.98		
Total	26206.531	359			

The result of the analysis of variance on male and female students' perception on the use of i-learn platform as shown in Table 3 revealed a $F(1, 358) = 72.98, p = 0.29$. With this result, the hypothesis was accepted because p-value of 0.29 on the Table was higher than the pre-set level of significance of $p > 0.05$. It therefore means there is no significance difference in the male and female students' perception on the use of i-learn as an interactive learning platform.

Hypothesis Two:

There is no significance difference between male and female facilitators' perception on the use of i-learn as an instructional platform at NOUN study centres in the North Central states of Nigeria.

Table4: ANOVA Analysis of Male and Female Facilitators' responses on Perception on the use of I-Learn as an instructional Platform

Gender of Facilitators' Perception	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	14.850	1	14.850	0.28	0.59
Within Groups	4595.606	88	52.223		
Total	4610.456	89			

The result of the analysis of variance on male and female facilitators' perception on the use of i-learn platform as shown in Table 4 revealed a $F(1, 88) = 0.28, p = 0.59$. With this result, the hypothesis was accepted because p-value of 0.59 on the Table was higher than the pre-set level of significant of $p > 0.05$. It therefore implies that there is no significance difference in the male and female facilitators' perception on the use of i-learn as an instructional platform at NOUN study centres in North-Central Nigeria.

Discussion of Findings

Findings from this study revealed that students have favourable perception towards utilization of i-learn as an interactive learning platform. Students were in agreement that the platform facilitated knowledge sharing, met students' needs and aspiration, and provided reliable means of communication among the students. The findings are in line with earlier findings of researchers (Harun & Mustafa, 2016; Emelyanova & Voronina, 2014) who found that students' perception of e-learning platform was positive. Moreover, the study revealed that there was no significance difference between male and female students' perception on the use of i-learn as an interactive learning platform at NOUN study centres in the North Central States of Nigeria. This is supported by Jorge, et al (2017) whose earlier findings showed that there was no significance difference between male and female students' perception of e-learning platform.

However, findings of the study revealed that facilitators' perception towards i-learn as an instructional platform at NOUN study centres in the North Central States of Nigeria was favourable. Facilitators were in agreement that through the platform learners can receive clarification and instant feedback, students' understanding of concepts could be enriched, reflective and collaborative learning can take place among others. This is in line with Edumadze, et al (2014) whose earlier findings showed that lecturers perceived LMSs to be a useful tool in enhancing lesson delivery. In addition, the study revealed that there was no significance difference between male and female facilitators' perception on the use of i-learn as an instructional platform at NOUN study centres in the North Central States of Nigeria. This is also supported by Back, et al (2016) whose study revealed that no significance difference between male and female teachers' perception of learning management system.

Conclusion

I-learn as an interactive instructional delivery platform holds a lot of benefits that could help improve teaching and learning process if enabling environment is provided at NOUN study centres in North Central Nigeria. However, the study concluded that students and facilitators viewed i-learn to be a useful curriculum delivery platform which supports and enhances collaborative learning among the users.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study the researcher made the following recommendations:

- (i) Mechanisms should be put in place to create if it is not available, similar interactive learning platform in other institutions of higher learning that run ODL since students and instructors have positive perception towards utilization of LMSs.
- (ii) Students and facilitators should have regular training which might be in form of workshops and seminars so as to refresh their skills on LMSs usage.
- (iii) University management should be keen enough and ready to play much role in ensuring LMSs usage among students and teachers by investing in new and emerging instructional technologies with provision of internet facilities at free or low cost because students were in agreement that cost of data is very high.
- (iv) LMSs supported instructional platforms should be made as a major teaching strategy in open and distance learning institutions as findings of this study indicated its general acceptability by the users.

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