

**Experiences in distance education:
Case –Study Mustapha Stambouli University of Mascara
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Abstract

Algerian universities are adapting distant learning to give a helping hand to people who live far from towns and to the disabled. This paper is going to deal with the experiences of Algerian institutions in distance education. It will take the University Mustapha Stambouli, Mascara as a case-study. The National Open University of Mascara is a full fledged university that operates in an exclusively open and distance learning (ODL) mode of education. It focuses mainly on open and distance teaching and learning system, and delivers its courses materials via print in conjunction with information and communication technology (ICT). This 'single mode' of open education is different from the integration of distance learning system into the face- to- face teaching and learning system. Thus, UFC reflects a development of higher education in Mascara. This study assesses the attitudes and perceptions of distance teaching and learning by students enrolled in the UFC and of the National Teachers compared to their experiences at conventional universities. One hundred (n = 100) randomly selected UFC students were the subjects of the study. The Students' Attitude and Perception Rating of Open and Distance Learning Institutions, developed by the researchers, was administered to the subjects to measure their attitudes and experiences. Finally, we will discuss the results of the study which showed that students generally hold a positive perception and attitude towards UFC, compared to traditional forms of higher education. At last, some recommendations will be provided so as to strengthen UFC's teaching.

Keywords: perception; attitude; flexibility; self-directed learning; conventional institution; learners

المخلص بالعربية

تجارب في التعليم عن بعد: جامعة مصطفى اصطمبولي كحالة للدراسة
تتكيف الجامعات الجزائرية مع التعليم عن بعد لتقديم يد المساعدة للأشخاص البعيدين عن المدن وذوي
الاحتياجات الخاصة. و هذه الورقة سنتناول الحديث عن التعامل مع خيرات المؤسسات الجزائرية
في التعليم عن بعد. وستخص جامعة مصطفى اصطمبولي، معسكر كحالة دراسة. هذه الجامعة الوطنية
المفتوحة هي جامعة متكاملة تعمل في وضع المفتوح عن بعد حصرا للتعليم و التعليم. وتتركز بشكل رئيسي
على التعليم المفتوح عن بعد ونظام التعليم، وتوفر المواد عبر الطباعة بالتزامن مع تكنولوجيا الاتصالات
و المعلومات ووسائل التكنولوجيا. هذه الطريقة الوحيدة للتعليم المفتوح الذي يختلف عن دمج نظام التعلم

عن بعد في نظام التدريس وجها لوجه ، وذلك لتطوير التعليم العالي في معسكر. وفي هذه الدراسة سنتناول تقييم المواقف والمفاهيم في التعليم عن بعد والتعلم من قبل الطلاب و المعلمين عبر الوطن، مقارنين تجاربهم في الجامعات التقليدية. تم اختيار مائة طالب عشوائيا مسجلين في مجتمع الدراسة لدراسة الموقف والإدراك و التصويت المفتوح ومؤسسات التعليم عن بعد، التي وضعت من قبل الباحثين، والتي تدار على المواضيع لقياس المواقف وتجاربهم. و أخيرا، سنقوم بمناقشة نتائج الدراسة التي أظهرت أن الطلاب يحصلون عادة على النظرة الإيجابية والموقف بالمقارنة مع الأشكال التقليدية للتعليم العالي. في نهاية المطاف سنقدم بعض التوصيات وذلك لتعزيز التدريس .
الكلمات المفتاحية: التصور؛ موقف؛ المرونة؛ التعلم الذاتي. مؤسسة تقليدية. المتعلمين

Introduction

A new dimension was introduced into the educational system in 2002 with the reopening of the National Open University of Mustapha Stambouli , Mascara. As far as the conventional educational delivery methods are concerned, there are structured face-to-face contacts between students and teachers and also distant learning with high quality, self-directed, learner-centered instructional materials that are made available to students, while instructional facilitation is carried out when necessary, typically after arrangements have been made by the university based on agreement between the students and the course facilitators. Similar to other distance learning institutions around the world, tutorial facilitation is optional for students. There is also guidance counselors from the Directorate of Learners' Support that are available at the study centers to provide individual students with the necessary information, support, and study skills.

Perceptions of Distance Education

The term 'Distance Education' refers to an educational approach in which there is a quasi separation of the learner and the teacher in time and space (Keegan 1996). In distance education, the instructor and the instructional strategy/ methods are subsumed into the learning material (popularly referred to as Study Materials), that have been designed as a self-directed learning guide for the student. The term 'Open Learning,' on the other hand, refers to the philosophical construct that seeks to remove barriers and constraints that may prevent learners from accessing and succeeding in quality, lifelong education. UFC as an educational method and a philosophic construct has been identified as the most potent

instrument for combating the educational problems. Moore and Tait (2002) asserted that “. . . in developing countries, human knowledge resource development through initial and continuing education is not only seen as crucial for growth and competitiveness, but also has far reaching social impact, for example in influencing birth rate, increasing the independence of women, and improving standards of health and rural environment” (p. 17).

This affirms the crucial role that education can play in developing countries like Algeria. Education is an important ally in the role of social and economic development. The potential of UFC in realizing these educational goals has been viewed ambivalently, however. In efforts to meet the new and changing demands for education and training, UFC may be seen as an approach that is at least complementary – and in some circumstances a more appropriate substitute – for face-to-face classroom methods that still dominate most educational systems. Despite the rapid growth and increased popularity of distance learning, the quality of higher learning via distance education has been called to question (Dede 1996; Harrison 2001 as cited in Peat and Helland, 2002). Walter Perry the first vice-chancellor of the Open University of United Kingdom, noted the “skepticism garnished with ridicule and hostility” of distance education universities (Young 1994). According to empirical evidence, however, there is no significant difference between learning outcomes that can be attained at traditional institutions versus distance learning (Verduin and Clark 1991).

While its benefits can be evaluated by technical, social, and economic criteria, distance learning methods also have their pedagogical merit, which leads students to a different way of conceiving knowledge generation and acquisition. Different people perceive the advantages of UFC differently, and their perceptions have influenced attitudes towards acceptance and use of UFC in the education system in Algeria and elsewhere. There remain concerns, however, about the effectiveness of distance education for learners who may be considered less independent and thus may require direct interaction throughout the instructional process (Schmidt and Faulkner 1989). Another concern is the cost of UC programming for individual students (Ojo, Ogidan, and Olakulehin, 2005).

There is a perception that most all distant learners are members of the working class. Therefore, the regime in UFC suits them well.

Studies have found little difference in the quality of education received through distance learning versus conventional university classroom settings. Studies have determined that students taking distance learning courses perform as well as students taking courses via traditional methods (Gagne and Shepherd, 2001; Russell, 2002). More often than not, perceptions of the distance learning system in the instructional process is influenced by an individual's beliefs about the advantages of distance education, for himself, as a student, as an employer (whose employees are also distant learning students), or as an educational planner (desirous of providing potent solutions to educational problems).

Method

The samples for this study comprised 160 distant learning students randomly selected from UFC. The sample was drawn from students who registered for various graduate diplomas and master degree programmes at the UFC. A structured questionnaire entitled the Students' Attitude and Perceptions Rating of Open and Distance Learning Institutions Inventory, was developed by the researcher to gather the required information. Our aim was designed to measure distance learning students (specifically those who have also experienced conventional university training) attitudes and perceptions towards UFC. The instrument was administered face-to-face to the distance learners during the tutorial sessions through the assistance of the Study Centre Manager. Subjects were asked to rank each item (in comparison to traditional education) as true, false, or undecided. The questions were designed to elicit subjects' opinions and attitudes towards the learning materials used in the two different modes, the instructional technology used, entry point considerations, attention to students' counseling needs, learning materials available, and the perceived advantages of the two modes.

The respondents were 59 percent male and the rest percent female, with age ranging from 24 to 55 years. Thirty-two (n = 32) respondents were from NTI; eighty-eight (n = 88) were from NOUN. Respondents were registered in programmes such as PGD Education; PGD Human

Resource Management, Financial Management; MBA; Masters of Education; M. Sc., Information Technology. Results were analyzed using simple percentage statistics.

Discussion

Widely held attitudes are fundamental to understanding social perception of people, because they greatly influence their own and peoples' actions. Cohen (1966) and Ojo (2000) contend that it is only human nature to view things in certain ways and act accordingly. The flexibility inherent in UFC as a delivery method enables students to pursue whatever kind of degree or training they want, even though they may be working full or part-time. Entry point requirements are more relaxed in UFC, and if there is demonstrable need, students have the opportunity of defer courses, programmes, and even examinations. Such flexibility is very difficult to achieve in the conventional universities because their activities and management systems are more rigid and thus restrictive by design.

Innovative use of instructional technology is another point of potential contact between students and the institution. Use of instructional technology may also be one of the reasons leading to favorable findings students indicated toward UFC. Other favorable factors may be personal, social, academic, and situational – factors that may influence students' intention to enroll for programmes offered by UFC institutions (Walker and Lowenthal, 1981).

Findings from this study are very important. Although respondents' recognition of a conventional university education value was never in doubt, they nonetheless had purposefully chosen to enroll in an UFC institution. Students' responses to Items support this assertion. Most students in this study held positive perceptions and attitudes towards UFC. This finding suggests there is strong rationale for the expansion of the UFC institutions in Mascara. It also suggests that UFC institutions have reached the critical tipping point of acceptance, and as such UFC institutions are well positioned to become a permanent component of the formal education system in Mascara. Sustaining students' favourable perceptions and improving any and all shortcomings as they arise now rests squarely on the

shoulders of those charged with running UFC institutions. These educational leaders must not only run UFC institutions effectively and efficiently, they must strive to continuously improve the quality of their institutions' educational offerings and continuously seek ways to expand their educational provision.

Responses “The use of instructional technology in the UFC is as prevalent as those used during my training in the conventional system” indicates that the use of instructional technology/ ICT remains rather sparse in the pedagogical practice of distance education in Ojo & Olakulihin, Attitudes and Perceptions of Mascara Students to UFC. It is suggested, however, that this shortcoming is more a reflection of the entire education system throughout Mascara and, by extension, its entire socio-economic system. Indeed, most students still grapple with problems inherent in the digital divide; access to instructional technology and capacity to use such technology is negligible compared to those of developed nations (Yusuf and Falade, 2005). Thus administrators and leaders charged with oversight of distance teaching institutions in Mascara may want to concentrate their research efforts on overcoming the deficits that underpin and perpetuates the digital divide.

For the other Item, a large percentage of the respondents (45.8%) agreed that UFC institutions provide ample opportunity for cheating. However, there is no clear cut difference in the responses between UFC and conventional universities on the topic of ‘cheating.’ Such small difference (< 3%) might be attributable to the fact that UFC students are at liberty to answer the Tutor Marked Assignment given to them in course materials provided. This practice can be compared to that of conventional universities in which students are required to answer questions in a face-to-face classroom setting. Thus, whatever cheating that may be perpetuated by UFC students as compared to those students enrolled in conventional universities cannot be easily deciphered. Moreover, perhaps such differences cannot be accurately measured simply because the rationale for giving UFC students the answers in the learning materials in the first place, puts emphasis on functional application of knowledge as opposed to rote memorization and recall-style learning that often characterises conventional learning settings. This means that distance learning

institutions should remain focused on developing open-book, portfolio, and problem-based learning situations wherein students work together to find creative solutions to problems posed in the learning materials.

UFC students may cheat by hiring someone who has a greater understanding of the topic to write their assignments for them. Indeed, no one is there to watch over them and monitor their learning as is the case in conventional universities. Thus quality concerns in UFC should be addressed through the administration of end-of-semester exams that are proctored in face-to-face settings. In short, use of proctored examinations will help ensure UFC students' assessment of learning outcomes is 100 percent reliable. Exam results are key to understanding students' comprehension, knowledge acquisition, and application of the study materials, and are needed to critically assess the learning materials itself.

Recommendations

We believe that three main elements may contribute in improving Teaching/Learning in UFC at the University of Mascara: self-directed learning or autonomy, motivation and the use of multimedia or ICT's.

Ema Ushioda relates to the conference theme of strengthening the why. This article also compares two constructs, learner autonomy and motivation. Ushioda considers what insights from motivation theory may contribute to legitimate learner autonomy as a pedagogical goal. Interestingly, on the basis of contemporary developments in motivation theory and research she describes a move from achievement-oriented to identity-oriented analyses of motivation. This takes us again to self-regulation but now from a different angle. Ushioda concludes her article by answering the question 'Why autonomy?' with the following words: '(. . .) because we want (our students) to fulfill their potential to be persons they want to become and do the things they value in a healthy way'.

Thus, it is no longer the teacher who is the main source of motivation, standing on the stage and dominating but it is time for the learners to be autonomous, to start learning by their own, to discover things with the teacher to only guide and help. By practicing what the famous saying 'do not give me fish but teach me how to fish', they will go further and enjoy learning. From this point, we can move to motivation.

Scientists have been seeking ways to increase students' motivation in learning; there is no better way than integrating New Technologies in the educational system. The best way to improve approaches to the learning / teaching is to use new technologies: the fast development of new media technologies (such as VCD, DVD, DTV, MP5, PlayStations, Visual Presenter, PowerPoint, Internet and Intranet) has begun to usher in new approaches to classroom management. The teachers have to learn to adapt themselves to this new revolution in media technologies with reference to the designing and teaching of cultural studies course. Technology has transformed everyday life all over the world. Computers and the Internet succeeded each other through the 20th century. Technology is the application of scientific and other organized knowledge to practical tasks by organizations consisting of people and machines. We are living in an evolving digital world that has an impact on every aspect of our lives, from working to socializing, learning to playing. Digitals have transformed the way young people communicate and access information and learn. Technology becomes more and more embedded in our culture.

We need to present our students with different kinds of information. The list below shows some possible sources of information which can be used as materials for teaching . By using a combination of visual, audio and tactile materials, we are also likely to succeed in addressing the different learning styles of our students. (Video ,CDs , TV ,Readings, Internet, Stories, Students own information, Songs, Newspapers, Interviews, Jokes, Anecdotes, Souvenirs, Photographs, Surveys, Illustrations).

The use of multimedia will not only increase learners' motivation but will make them learners centered since they are going to learn in a self-directed way.

Using ICT's (Multimedia) in the classroom provides students with a useful interactive means of self-study and self-evaluation. Planning and successfully implementing self-directed learning with technology is likely to produce motivation. Thus, learners are eager to learn and are autonomous. Multimedia can be a powerful tool for adult education. When used effectively it can captivate an audience, tug emotions, maintain attention, and contextualize scenario-based learning. But creating and

producing quality content also has a number of drawbacks in terms of cost, learning curves, and copyright laws. Integrating multimedia into curricula can have a tremendous impact on the learning process.

Conclusion:

Findings from this study reveal that distance learners in UFC of Mascara are favorably disposed to Open and Distance Learning institutions at this time. The students who responded to this survey indicated their interest in the unique features that make-up UFC institutions, such as open access, opportunity for flexible learning, provision of quality learning materials, the use of multi-media and ICTs, etc. The findings reported here also suggest that those administering and leading Mascara's UFC institutions are in an excellent position to build positively on the favorable perceptions already held by many distance learning students. They can achieve this through the effective and efficient management of Mascara's UFC institutions. Put differently, because students currently hold favorable opinions and perceptions towards UFC and its potential, Nigeria is a position to leap forward to take advantage of their UFC institutions at home, and perhaps expand to serve sub-Saharan Africa in general. To achieve the full potential of UFC however, effective measures must be undertaken to adopt instructional technology for distance learning, expand provision of quality assurance in design, ensure the timely development and delivery of quality course materials, and continue to enhance student support services. UFC can be everything to more people and now is the time to act.

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