

Enhancing distance education via online learning: The case of teacher educators

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Using online methods for learning is becoming an integral component in education worldwide, especially in open and distance learning contexts. These methods provide flexibility of time, place and pace of learning, while making the students responsible for their own learning. Accordingly, offering distance learning courses using the Web is rapidly becoming an established practice in higher education. This paper describes a case study that explored the experiences of a group of teacher educators who were distance learners, and engaged in online learning through a learning management system (LMS), as a requirement in their professional development programme. The investigation focused on the following research questions: For what purposes had the learners used the learning management system? What were the types of participation by learners? What were the benefits gained by learners through online learning? and, What were the challenges faced by learners in their online learning process?

Learners perceived the online learning environment to be a valuable resource, which enabled them to communicate with academic staff and peers from whom they were physically remote as distance learners. They had used the LMS mainly to receive course information, communicate with the teacher and peers, and submit assignments. Several participation types such as stating viewpoints, supporting or opposing other's views, seeking and providing help, sharing ideas and resources, critical and analytical comments, reflections, and social interactions were observed. Although certain challenges such as limited access to the Internet, coping with the technology, information and interaction overload, time constraints, increased workload and changing from conventional approaches to a more self-regulated approach were faced, a sense of achievement was claimed by the learners, once they became confident in using this facility and gained competence.

Engagement in online learning was a highly challenging and motivating experience for the teacher educators, as it supported them to interact with the subject matter content, with the teacher and with each other, while learning at a distance. The effectiveness of the LMS in enhancing student learning will depend on the quality of the content included, learning resources provided, learning experiences designed, and also whether the students are adequately and constantly facilitated. The role of the instructor, as a facilitator and moderator thus becomes very important, to ensure effective online learning.

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