

**Title:** Program Design, Layout and Management of Distance Learning. A case of UMI distance learning program

By Bbuye Julian & Resty Mwogeza Kamyra

Distance learning & E- Learning

Makerere University Uganda Management Institute

+256 (0) 772 587027

**+256 (0)772 86785**

[jbbuye@iace.mak.ac.ug](mailto:jbbuye@iace.mak.ac.ug)

[kamyaresty@yahoo.com](mailto:kamyaresty@yahoo.com)

## **Abstract**

This paper examines the nature of the design, layout and management of two pilot post graduate distance learning programmes offered at Uganda Management Institute(UMI) and the challenges it so imposes on the quality of the programs within the context of a growing institution. The programmes offered are “Project planning and Management”; and “Monitoring and Evaluation of Programs”. The writers explore how Print and online methods are fairing as perceived by the students and tutors on the course, and depict results from interviews carried out with 10 out of 12 tutors and also from answers to questionnaires distributed to 100 students during face to face sessions out of 120 supposed to attend. The paper seeks to find out how issues that arise from the evaluation such as inadequate support for the students, a systems failure or unstable internet network, limited interaction between students and tutors, the eminent minimal follow up of students, and generally the institutional inadequate knowledge of the special needs of distance learners compared to the conventional students can be approached and eventually solved. The writers conclude that most challenges that befall the pilot distance learning programs of UMI emanate from the onset design, layout and management of the program as laid down in the proposal to start distance and online studies. There is need to revamp the proposal and develop regulations that befit distance learning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century that put the learner at the forefront and

technology as unavoidable partner, thus creating a community of learning and a community of learning organization. The impending recommendations are that there is a need for tutors to challenge students enough to cause them to read from their work stations. Secondly tutors training and capacity building workshops should be regular, and for the UMI to realize that in order to build contextual capacity, it is important to bench mark with other institutions if the institution is to start on the process of continuous improvement through the customization of best practices, processes and experiences. Just around the corner distance learning programs use digital libraries, quality content modules, and in built discussion programs are in place to improve on the management and implementation of distance learning. It is in the pipeline that the most immediate solution to challenges so depicted is to accommodate a blended learning system consisting of both online and print based distance learning

## **1.0 Introduction**

With the aim of catering for the increasing demand for management training in Uganda, UMI commissioned a pilot two years postgraduate distance learning programme. The programmes offered are postgraduate diploma in “Project planning and Management” and “Monitoring and Evaluation”. These programmes have attracted big numbers of students at different location from the institute which has tremendously helped in solving the problem of space and heavy workloads for tutors. Incidentally three models of distance learning exist; the institutional – centered distance education models, person centered models and society –centered models, exist and are implemented by different institutions (Rumble, 1986). This paper focuses on the institutional centered distance education model because it applies to the structures UMI utilizes, and is easily compatible with many distance education projects. In this type of model, the learner is a recipient of the educational messages from the material developer and exhibits minimal or non-existent communication between the learner and the material developer. This model is applicable where the primary focus of the institution is to increase efficiency and cost effectiveness as a massive education provider.

The distance learning approach to deliver education has enabled institutions reach out to big numbers of people. For instance, the Open University of UK has become the largest UK University with over 200,000 students (OU, 2003). There is great evidence that Distance learning is an effective method of delivery for adult learners (Moore and Thompson (1997)). Distance learning also brings new dimensions and increases the motivation to learn more and allows for new ways of exploring and solving problems. This also increases readiness to learn if students are allowed to move into new social roles through the course (Nicolau, Caeiro, Martinho, Azeiteiro, Amador (2008)).

Turning to management training, Linstead (1990) observes the demand for management training and development is currently shaped by a requirement for flexibility in delivery, minimising time spent away from the workplace, and an associated demand for content relevant to the workplace activity. Despite the achievements, a number of challenges have been encountered; the tutors are not challenging the students enough to cause them to read from their work stations. There are inadequate trainings and capacity building workshops for tutors and little has been done to benchmark with other institutions. According to Moore (1996), distance learning has three types of interaction: student-content, student- teacher, and student-student and if this cycle of interaction is not complete, then the effectiveness of the Distance learning is questionable. Furthermore, Moore (1990) asserts that distance learning is determined by the amount of communication or interaction which occurs between the learner and the instructor. Slaciwena (1989) asserts that institutions need to build capacity and provide incentives of tutors to allow acquisition of the new teaching and facilitating skills relevant to the distance learner besides creating positive attitudes.

This paper give the perception of tutors and student on the effectiveness of distance learning /eLearning methodologies as provided by UMI. The writers explored how Print and online methods were fairing as perceived by the students and tutors on the course. The paper draws from issues that arose from a study that sought the perception of tutors and students on the program lay out, design and management of distance learning courses at UMI such as inadequate administrative support for students, unstable internet connections, limited student to tutor interactions, inadequate

remuneration and special needs of the UMI distance learner and tutor can be approached and solved.

Tutors and students participated in the study using five data sources: personal interviews with tutors and students, a questionnaire survey, observations and assessment/evaluation materials produced by the students. These data were designed to evaluate the perceptions and attitudes of tutors and students towards the distance learning methodology design in terms of: student motivation, student-content-tutor interactions and the special needs of the UMI distance learner compared to the classroom based student undertaking the same module

### **1.1 Context of the study**

Uganda Management Institute (UMI) is Uganda's national centre for training, research and consultancy in the field of management and administration. Its primary function is to strengthen the country's administrative and management capacity, which it goes about by offering a rich blend of short, medium-term and long-term programmes (courses) for middle, senior, and executive level managers. It also provides research, consultancy and distance learning services in addition to facilitating conferences, seminars and workshops.

The Distance Learning Department (DLD) which is under the School of Distance Learning and Information Technology has one of its objectives being to reach wider audiences and enables people constrained by various factors like time; distance, etc. enrol on UMI programmes for instance participants located in faraway areas like Qatar, Southern Sudan, Ugandan upcountry regions of Uganda.

The Distance Learning Department has embarked on the development of module readers (course material) which are currently used by students of the two programmes of the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Intakes of (2011 and 2011). Enrolment is at an average of three hundred (300) students per intake and 75% retention rate. The targets are five thousand (5000) students and twenty (20) Postgraduate programmes rolled out in a period of five years.

Tutors teach both classroom based and distance learning students although they are mainly recruited to teach the classroom based students. The tutors from such a background worry about the sustainability of the distance learning methodology in terms of time, skills and institutional support. At the same time, they have greatly improved their teaching and research skills for the classroom based programmes as a result of module writing and facilitation on distance learning programmes. On the other hand, the students are quite satisfied with the impact of the courses on their jobs. The method of delivery of content has allowed students to develop reflection and critical thinking skills as they engaged in self-study but the students are not content with the level of interaction they got from their tutors and the instability of the internet connection which affect their learning processes.

## **2.0 Methodology**

The study follows an exploratory case study survey design. Both qualitative and quantitative were used to collect data from a sample of 10 tutors, 162 students. Two questionnaire surveys, observations, semi structure personal and exit interviews by quality assurance were used to obtain a diversified set of data that were analyzed using SPSS and qualitative analysis methods of relying on the constant comparative method (Merriam, 1998; Miles & Huberman, (1994) identifying key themes, pattern matching according to themes, use of narratives and blending of similar answers brought to bring out relationships displayed in tables.

Questionnaires sought to find out issues of sex, level of satisfaction, how they would use the knowledge acquired, Suggestions for improvement of the programmes, interactions with both tutors and content readiness of the tutors. Another set of questionnaires was given to students using online means together with print and sought to find out; Readiness of ICT usage, online interaction with the tutors and content and online potential The semi-structured interviews were administered to tutors to ascertain their perception of the effectiveness of the distance learning platform. The exit interviews were carried out with the students to get their general views on the programme

effectiveness. Students and tutors were observed on how they went about using distance and online platforms.

### **3.0 Findings**

**Findings on Tutors Perceptions /Attitudes towards distance learning was obtained through interviews seeking their** satisfaction and difficulties they had felt when teaching at a distance since this would be the last time to interact with the first intake the fact that the students were in their last semester. The findings show that

- i. 70%of tutors were very enthusiastic and satisfied about the Distance learning method of delivery, it improved greatly their level of research and teaching skills
- ii. 20% indicated Coordination is good but there is need to restructure the department of distance learning to allow growth of distance learning concept.
- iii. 90% felt they were not being given adequate time and skill for writing modules and teaching
- iv. 20% indicated Face to face sessions should be twice in a semester at the beginning and in the middle.
- v. 90% noted missing structures such as digital libraries, discussion forums, online registration and exams to support students.
- vi. 95% observed Remuneration does not march the intensity of the work.

#### **3.2.0. Exit Interview held between the Quality Assurance Unit and the 2011/2013 distance learning (DL) students**

**In the group interviews the following issues were picked**

*'The time given for the face to face session is not sufficient to cover the course content. The contact hours with Lecturers (facilitators) was found to be inadequate'*

*'The scheduling of end of semester exams and the face to face session was not appropriate for workers because need for them to get permission twice from their employers and some fail to turn up for the face to face sessions'*

*'A SWOT Analysis on DL courses was suggested'*

*'Submission of course works is a challenge for the distance learners because last semester, they were requested to hand in hard copies instead of soft copies which is very difficult for them since a majority of them are upcountry while others are out of the country'*

*'Virtual class should be created so that material is uploaded'.*

*'Appreciated the DL mode for people far away which exposed them to many concepts, among other things,.'*

*'Appreciated the administrative support from the department'*

*'Payment of fees should be broken down to manageable installments'*

*'Submission of coursework to UMI outreach centres instead of coming to Kampala should be explored'.*

### **3.2.1 SKILLS from the course as per responses from group interviews**

Students responses as to whether they were satisfied and had been equipped with skills and knowledge during their time of study were as follows

*' Discussion Skills; 2<sup>nd</sup> Semester had a lot of problems, but appreciated the great improvement during the current face to face sessions where examples and discussions have been included during facilitation'*

*'Applying Content learnt to workplace situation – appreciated relevant content, still need to make it more practical and relevant to their work situations to enable them apply the skills and knowledge acquired in the field. Feedback is also lacking'.*

### **3.2.2 Students recommendation on the way forward**

*'requested that apart from awarding marks for coursework, lecturers should comment to enable them gauge their strengths/weaknesses and improve,*

### 3.3 Responses of first cohort students' questionnaire

This questionnaire survey was administered to both the first and the second intake to assess the students' perception/attitudes of the distance learning platform. The first (2011/12) and second (2012/13) intake comprised of 66 out of 202 admitted students and 96 out of 166 admitted students respectively.

For purposes of clarity, the first intake used print only and the second intake shall be a combination of print and online materials..

The results of this survey are shown in table 3.1

**Table 3.3.1 perception of the 1<sup>st</sup> intake on the effectiveness of distance learning platform**

	Completely	To a great extent	To some extent	Not at all
content of the modules was appropriate	52.2%	43.5%	4.3%	0.0%
satisfied with what the modules accomplished.	52.2%	34.8%	13.0%	0.0%
modules provided information I need to carry out responsibilities of my current job	39.1%	47.8%	8.7%	4.3%
modules effectively achieved its learning outcomes	34.8%	56.5%	8.7%	0.0%
time allocated was	8.7%	34.8%	39.1%	13.0%



appropriate to content				
website reference materials contributed to my learning	11.1%	33.3%	38.9%	16.7%
The telephone and/or email address options added value to my learning	22.2%	38.9%	22.2%	16.7%

From the above analysis, we got 23 responses out of 96 distributed questionnaires of which 65.2% were male and 30.4 % female with 4.3% as a missing link. Of the above, 95.7% were satisfied with the level of the content in the modules while the 4.3 felt otherwise. More still 87% felt that they had accomplished much while 13% felt little had been covered. On the other hand, 87% felt there was valued added to their job responsibilities while 8.7% felt was value addition to some extent and 4.3% felt there was no value added. 95.5 % said the objectives and outcomes of the modules had been very clear while 4.5 % found difficulty in understanding the objectives of the modules with 4.3% as a missing link. On average, the students are very satisfied and have a good perception of the structure of the content on the distance learning platform but felt a need for support in terms of extra reading materials and continuous useful feedback from the tutors either through email or phones as indicated with the poor responses in tables above. They also felt their tutors lacked adequate skills in handling the distance learner and advocated for the integration of ICTs into the distance learning platform.

**Table 3.3.2 Perception of 2<sup>nd</sup> intake of distance Learning Platform**

	Completely Agree	To a great extent	To some extent	Not at all
Module contents appropriate	50.0%	40.0%	10.0%	0.0%
satisfied with what the modules accomplished	40.0%	50.0%	10.0%	0.0%
modules provided information I need to carry out responsibilities of my current job	20.0%	50.0%	30.0%	0.0%
modules effectively achieved its learning outcomes	60.0%	40.0%	0.0%	0.0%
This module effectively and efficiently achieved its learning outcomes/objectives	44.4%	33.3%	22.2%	0.0%
time allocated was appropriate to content	20.0%	30.0%	50.0%	0.0%
website reference materials contributed to my learning	16.7%	16.7%	33.3%	33.3%
The telephone and/or email address options added value to my learning	37.5%	37.5%	12.5%	12.5%

40 responses out of 66 distributed were obtained of which 70% were male and 30% female. Of the above, 90% were satisfied with the level of the content in the modules while 10% were not. 90% felt they had accomplished much while 10% felt little had been covered. 70% felt they got valued added to their job responsibilities while 30% felt value addition to some extent. 77.8 % said the objectives and outcomes of the modules had been very clear while 22.2 % found difficulty in understanding the objectives of the modules with 10% as a missing link.

Quantitative and Qualitative findings show that on average, the students in this group were less satisfied. For example Table 3.3.2 show that 30% thought the module give them enough information, compared to 8.7 of the cohort. 10% were not satisfied with content compared to 30% of second cohort. and had a fairly good perception of the structure of the content on the distance learning platform but strongly felt a need for support in terms of extra reading materials, simplified course materials and continuous useful feedback from the tutors either through email or phones as indicated with the poor responses in tables above. They also felt their tutors lacked adequate skills in handling the distance learner and module writing which was very evident in the way the activities and instructions had been stated in the module readers. They put more emphasis on the improvement of the virtual learning system and requested the Distance learning department to highly prioritize the system usage and availability.

**i. Online experiences of second intake 2012/2013**

The second cohort students were asked to give their experiences concerning the use of the online platform. Table 3.4.1 shows their responses on internet usage habits.

Table 3.4.1 Responses on internet usage habits as per responses of 2<sup>nd</sup> cohort.

Internet usage habitats	completely	To a great extent	To some extent	Not at all
Able to use on-line	44.8%	40.1%	15.1%	0%

course				
ICT substitute the absence of face-toface contact	24%	60.5%	5.5%	10%
Student-students interaction important learning process	98.6%	2.4%	0%	0%
additional materials are relevant	79%	15.9%	5.1%	0%

From the table 3.4.1 we noticed that second intake was not very satisfied with online resources though they agreed that teacher’s support materials (texts), fellow students and internet links, improved their learning outcomes than to Power Point presentations, that accompanied the online materials.

## 1. Discussion of the findings

The main advantage of distance education is that knowledge can be distributed from the educators to the students from anytime and anywhere. Recorded and online lectures, online group meetings, discussion and assessments are just few on the tools that will help the implementation of distance education (Nicolau, Caeiro, Martinho, Azeiteiro, Amador (2008)).

The tutor interviews indicated a positive perception about the distance learning methodology as seen from their honest responses may be because distance learning is where most higher institutions are a heading and the fact that these tutors are dynamic, they would not want to be left behind ( Abrahamson, (1998)). They had also improved their teaching and research skills having facilitated on the distance learning programmes. They could have also experienced some of the advantages of distance

learning i.e. enrollment of many numbers, saving of physical space and cost cutting of institutional budgets (Hannay and Newvine (2006)). On the other hand, their dissatisfaction may be attributed to poor remuneration, inadequate skills to work in the distance learning environment and heavy teaching workloads (Siaciwena(1989))

This finding indicated differences between the two groups of students analyzed, the first one having used only the print and a pilot group using online resources and print.

Students using print said they would be more motivated if the distance learning platform was supplemented with online materials and acceptance of online course work submissions instead of delivering hardcopies that either got lost or needed a lot of transport fee to be delivered at the institute. On the other hand, group using online resources and print did not give a lot credit to a successful online experience. They said much as online materials were supplementing distance learning, there was hardly student-teacher interaction online and also, they could not easily trust the delivery of the assessments given the fact that at times tutors would not receive the assignments due to unstable internet connection and if they did, they never made useful feedback. They gave greater importance to student-to-student interaction but also indicated that it was also a bit difficult to contact their classmates more often as they stayed and worked in different districts besides working in very remote areas that lacked internet connections and phone networks.

Students using online was more positive than group using both online and print, may be because they had witnessed the evolution of distance learning at UMI. They had seen the gradual improvement of the structures and this created an anticipation of a better platform in the near future. The fact that second intake used the print material that had not yet been revised, coupled with poor interactions with the tutors, unstable internet connections among other challenges, could have created a negative perception of the all process of studying at a distance. However, the finding in here with Eneroth, (2000) asserts that learning is an inherently social activity and as long as Distance/E- learning is more about content and technology than human interactions, it will probably remain a gadget for only the most motivated students. Similarly Davies and Graff (2005) reveal that greater online interaction does not lead to significantly higher performance for

students achieving passing grades (however, students who failed in their courses tended to interact less frequently). Therefore there is need for the second intake to become more accommodating and improvise where necessary.

The main reason for pursuing these courses on distance learning platform appeared to be related to the flexibility nature of the delivery mode which allows easy balancing of students' commitments and this agrees with (Hannay and Newvine (2006)). However there is likely to be a number of dropouts as a result of inadequate support, time (job- or family-related causes) and difficulties in dealing with distance learning based structures (Nicolau, Caeiro, Martinho, Azeiteiro, Amador (2008)) and findings support it

The exit interview for group further reinforced the above challenges and negative perception but indicated that the distance learning management at UMI was gradually improving and there was a general feeling/anticipation of a well rolled out system in the future which will go a long way in increasing the standards of management training at UMI and the country in general.

Students pointed out that "initial technical ICT difficulties and isolation were very difficult to overcome because they had been trained for a very short time on how study at a distance and could not easily internalize the new system. Shanley et al., (2004) also asserts that online education provides individuals with a busy lifestyle with an alternative to face-to-face courses, allowing them to proceed studies, at their own pace, and to identify their own personal course timeline. Observations showed that students attended in big numbers, were interested in studies and interacted well with the students

## **5. Conclusion**

This study concluded that most of the students and tutors have a relatively good perception (satisfaction) of the distance learning platform for the post graduate programmes at UMI. It is evident that the course contents and the delivery method catalyzed students to change their attitudes, beliefs and behavior in their respective courses as well as reached many who had been constrained by time and distance. The distance learning platform also brought in new dimensions of exploring and solving problems in an interactive way and increased readiness to learn by allowing students to

move into new social roles. However, the major conclusion is that the biggest challenges that befall the pilot distance learning programmes at UMI emanated from the onset design, layout and management. The management of UMI has inadequate knowledge of the special needs of a distance learner and has more or less equated them to those of a classroom based learner. There is a small budget allotted to the building of capacity of the tutors, module writing and e-learning interactivity. In addition, the level of interactivity between the tutors and students is still very low, almost nonexistent as both the tutors and the students lack skills to use the discussion forum. There is therefore a need:

- i. To redesign the distance learning platform to suit the distance learning structure by systematically developing a framework for module development and design for both the print and online resources besides creating a facilitate for digital libraries and discussion forums which has been the case
- ii. For management of UMI to work out a reward system that adequately and demonstrably recognizes the tutors' contribution to distance learning. In addition, tutors require some form of professional guidance and training to be able to work well in the distance learning environment (Siaciwena (1989)).
- iii. To identify funding and bench mark with other institutions in order to share and adopt good practices, processes and experiences.

## References

1. Lejla A. Bexheti, Marika A. Trpkovska and Arbana B. Kadriu Establishing Distance Education: The tools, challenges and experiences ISBN: 978-1-61804-034-3 Recent Researches in Applied Informatics
2. Richard M. C. Siaciwena. - 1989 - *Staff Attitudes Towards Distance Education* at the University of Zambia. ... VOL. 4, No. 2, 47-62 ..
3. **Maureen Hannay and Tracy Newvine.** [jolt.merlot.org/Vol2\\_No1.htm](http://jolt.merlot.org/Vol2_No1.htm) (2006) Format. Perceptions of Distance Learning: A Comparison of Online and Traditional Learning,
4. . P. Bacelar-Nicolau, S. Caeiro, A.P. Martinho, U.M. Azeiteiro, F. Amador, (2009), "*E-learning for the environment: The Universidade Aberta ,experience in the environmental sciences post graduate courses*
5. . Greville Rumble. (1986). *The planning and management of distance education.* London. Croom Helm.
6. Open University (OU) (2003a), "E-learning at the Open University", available at: [www3.open.ac.uk/media/factsheets/Information%20about%20The%20Open%20University/E-learning%20&%20the%20OU.doc](http://www3.open.ac.uk/media/factsheets/Information%20about%20The%20Open%20University/E-learning%20&%20the%20OU.doc) (accessed 21 May 2004).
7. Stephen Linstead (1990 ) *Developing Management Meta-competence: Can Distance Learning Help?* Source: [Journal of European Industrial Training](#) Volume: 14 [Issue: 6](#) 1
8. Moore, M. and Kearsley, G. (1996), *Distance Education: A Systems View*, Wadsworth Publishing, New York, NY.
9. Moore, M., Thompson, M., Quigley, A., Clark, G. and Goff, G. (1990) "The effects of distance learning: a summary of the literature", Research Monograph, 10. No. 2 (ED 330 321), The Pennsylvania State University, American Center for the Study of Distance Education, University Park, PA.
10. Moore, M. (1990), "Introduction", in Moore, M. (Ed.), *Background and Overview of Contemporary American Distance Education*, Contemporary Issues in American Distance Education, Pergamon Press, New York, NY, pp. i-vii.



11. Abrahamson, C. E. (1998). Issues in interactive communication in distance education. *College Student Journal*, 32 (1), 33-42.
12. Shanley, E.L., Thompson, C.A., Leuchner, L.A. and Zhao, Y. (2004), "Distance education is as effective as traditional education when teaching food safety", *Food Service Technology*, Vol. 4, pp. 1-8.