

EXAMINING THE USE OF DIGITAL LEARNING PLATFORMS BY EDUCATORS FOR KNOWLEDGE ACQUISITION AND IMPROVEMENTS IN TEACHING PRACTICES: FUTURE-LEARN BY “THE OPEN UNIVERSITY”

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ABSTRACT

The embracement of the digital opportunities has become revolutionary for the sector of education where learners and educators can benefit from the infinite possibilities for knowledge sharing. The educators can utilize the digital learning platforms for enhancement of their knowledge and professional capacity building. One such digital platform is “Futurelearn” managed by “The Open University UK”. The study is aimed to examine the usefulness of digital learning platforms specifically Futurelearn for the diversified learning experiences by the educators which can be utilized during their teaching practices. The identified objectives of the study were educator’s knowledge, utilization and gained benefits about the digital learning platforms. The post graduate level educators of Open University having M.Phil with 10 years or above teaching experience were the population of the study. Semi structured interviews were conducted from the 20 sample participants and thematic content analysis techniques were used. Knowledge of digital learning platform, Utility of digital learning platforms, learning opportunities and professional capacity building and Benefits of digital learning platforms for educators were identified themes. The findings of the study revealed that the benefits of digital learning platforms include diversified knowledge, professional capacity building, interactive and better communication with trainers of diversified backgrounds and inclusive and blended learning opportunities.

Keywords: Digital learning, Futurelearn, Knowledge, Training of educators, capacity building.

INTRODUCTION

Knowledge transfer by the educator to the students always remained a difficult task for the educators. This is since; just like every learner had different learning capability and capacity, similarly different geographical areas have different social and technical issues faced by the learner and the educators (Colace et al., 2003). E-learning is a tool developed and started around year 2010 for the transformation of knowledge from the educator to the learners. Unfortunately, E-learning

has its own limitations as well. The last decade has witnessed immense growth and adoption of E-learning methods and tools for communication of knowledge from the educators to many masses at the same time which was not possible in conventional schooling method due to limitation of resources. In third world countries where the road and other infrastructure are still weak, E-learning methods and tools ease out the transition of information from the educator to the learner in real time (Purwantoro et al., 2021).

20th century has witnessed great advocacy by the educators and the scholars in favor of adoption of E-learning methods especially at the higher education level. With the rapid development and advancement in technology, more and more educational institutions designed and opted online learning methods for the dissemination of knowledge by using different means of knowledge transition such as with use of sound, images, animations, real time classrooms, etc. This helped the institutions in meeting the needs of the learners by provision of knowledge to large number of students simultaneously, and in some cases, at the time of ease of the learner to learn, which was previously not possible due to condition of physical presence at a particular place and in a particular timeframe (Sonwalkar, 2013).

With the use of technology, new doors have opened to a tremendous limit for both the educators and the learners to make education an easy process with more coverage and less limitations. Although distance learning system was already in place with Allama Iqbal Open University running the largest open distance learning (ODL) in Pakistan and ranked as the largest ODL system university of Asia region, yet with the introduction and adoption of E-learning tools and systems; the university has managed to achieve targets of reaching far more students than it had by using the conventional ODL system.

In the current study, we opted to gather the knowledge as to how many of the educators educating at higher education level in largest ODL university of Asia are utilizing the platform of Futurelearn by British Council and how use of Futurelearn platform has benefitted the educators in teaching in E-learning scenario. Futurelearn is a British digital learning platform founded in 2012. The platform is owned and managed by “The Open University” and “Seek Ltd”. The essence of “Futurelearn” platform is that it is not only a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) platform, but it also provides Expertrack, microcredential, and Degree learning opportunities from more than 250 UK and international learning partners. The selection of “Futurelearn” for the current research was based on the facts that both “Edx” platform by Harvard and MIT and “Futurelearn” by “The Open University” were founded in 2012 and considered as pioneer platforms for MOOC. However, the versatility and ease of learning on “Futurelearn” platform along with its near resemblance to ODL systems in Asia made it first choice of researchers for further examination. The main reason for examining this is that in adoption of any new system, there is a big chance that reluctance could be shown by individuals in adoption and practicing of the system as some might feel it as a threat due to complex nature and different understanding and use of system.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the past few decades, the world has seen immense changes which made the world more globalized and provided easier access to information. One such reform or revolution in the field of education is the development of E-learning tools and methods which provided with possibilities for transformation of knowledge and information from one part of the world to a large mass sitting in different regions of the world (Cuniah, 2017). Basically, E-learning is a result of combination of three separate technology modules i.e., information technology, telecommunication, and audio-

videos. Although these three modules can relate to any computer, but possibility to make anything possible by combining two or all three of these modules is made possible by internet (Ouadoud et al., 2018).

Distance learning has been in practice to ease out the educational process for a long time now. This is since every individual has the right to education. However, physical, geographical, financial, and social issues provided hindrances in making this practically happen. With the birth of E-learning systems, these issues are now resolved to much of the extent as most the systems provide the ease to the educators to place the information over the internet at their time of ease, and the learner can read or learn through the information at their time of ease. This removes the hurdles like physical barriers, time constraint, and geographical barriers to very much extent. However, as some or much part of any system is also dependent on the financial systems, the E-learning system is far more affordable for the learners then the conventional system. Also, as no physical space is required by the educator to provide education, overhead expenses required to run a particular dedicated institution are minimalized (Demian& Morrice, 2012).

Four basic terms are commonly used or heard these days in relation to digital learning i.e., a) E-learning, b) Distance learning, c) Tele-Education, Tele-Training, or Tele-Television channel, and e) E-Learning platforms (Ouadoud et al., 2018).E-Learning means that the transmission of education is done with the use of information technology modules and the learners can easily complete their courses via sitting their own pace and in some cases in their own time and also at their own pace with the use of a computer, laptop or a smartphone with internet connection. Distance learning conventionally involved use of telephone, fax, postal services etc. which were useful for the transmission of knowledge from the educator to the learner. The essence of the distance learning is that a mass of learners can avail the learning opportunities and the educator can easily manage a mass of individuals at the same time rather than a physical class with fixed capacity, physical restrictions, and particular number of students. With the use of information technology modules, the educators got the option, possibility, and opportunities to teach even far bigger audience as technology has converted the world into a globalized community without any boundaries. This simply means that distance learning can now achieve more and more audience with ease of knowledge transfer to the target audience. Also, in conventional distance learning system, there was no way between the educator and the learner to connect visually. However, with the audio-video module of information technology, this distance has also been removed and now educators and learners can interact in far better way even sitting apart many miles. Tele education initially started off with the use of telephone. However, this then developed into television channels and many channels are broadcasting educational programs for the viewers. The limitation with this method remains the same as programs are telecasted at a particular time and the learner has to sit in front of the television. Also, there is no direct method of interaction between the educator and the learner to communicate which may leave the learner with questions and queries in mind. E-learning platforms are the most common method opted by both the educators and the learners for teaching purpose. E-learning platforms involves use of software which provides automated connection of all the three modules of information technology and result in provision of a remote classroom scenario where the educator can easily provide with the information they intend to deliver, and the learner can easily learn. Also, interaction in real-time between the educator and the learner gets possible which makes learning more interesting and appealing. The ease of sitting in own space, in own time and learning at own pace with a more affordable fee makes the best out of E-learning platforms (Ouadoud et al., 2018).

Types of E-Learning Systems

Transferring from face-to-face learning systems to online or E-learning educational systems not only needs change in individual's attitudes towards adoption and practicing of the system. But also requires the will of the individual to learn, adopt, and practices the system to its fullest capacity so the best can be achieved by implementation of the system. In any educational system, the relationship between trainer, curriculum/content, and the trainee are the key to make any system an effective educational system. As said in conventional education system that every individual learner has its own learning needs, similarly; in E-learning systems, more than one system might be needed to fully cater the needs of all individuals as every individual has its own learning scenarios and circumstances (Šumak et al., 2011). On these difference of learning needs, various E-learning systems have been online for some time now and can be categorized into two types i.e., synchronous system, and asynchronous system. Synchronous systems are those systems in which both the trainer and the learner are online at the same time using some digital platform and using two or all three information technology modules for transfer of information. In synchronous system, the connection and communication between the learner and the trainer are in real time which removes the gap or chances or any miscommunication. The Asynchronous system is different in a way that there is no need for both the trainer and the learner to be online at the same time. These systems are also known as offline mode systems. The curriculum or the content is placed at a particular online place by the trainer and the learner can access the information easily at their own time and in their own ease and study the material at their own pace. The most used communication channel in asynchronous system is the use of electronic mails for correspondence (Bello et al., 2018).

Futurelearn by “The Open University”

FutureLearn is a digital online learning platform developed in 2012 by “The Open University” and the “SEEK Ltd”. FutureLearn is designed on Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC) system where the curriculum and the content are placed by more than 250 universities, organizations, and other partners (Rizvi et al., 2019). Courses and the material available on the FutureLearn are both made available by The Open University itself or from its partner organizations. The certificate or degree awarding body in case of FutureLearn is the institution providing the course on the platform of FutureLearn. As per “Financial Times” 2016, FutureLearn was the first platform which enabled the students to get a certificate or a degree from reputed educational institutions while sitting at their own desk and at their own pace. The model of the courses present on the FutureLearn are asynchronous model courses where the content is places by the institutions as per their requirements and the learner can easily select courses of their interest and can learn at their own pace (Duru et al., 2021).

Objectives

The basic of the study was to examine the usefulness of digital learning platforms specifically FutureLearn for the diversified learning experiences by the educators which can be utilized during their teaching practices afterwards. In the light of this aim of the study, three objectives were identified as a) educator's knowledge about the digital learning platforms (FutureLearn), b) utilization of digital learning platforms (FutureLearn) for advanced learning and professional development, and c) benefits gained by the educators from digital learning platforms.

Research Questions

The research questions for the study are

- Do the educators have knowledge and awareness about digital learning platforms specifically FutureLearn?
- Are the educators utilizing any of the digital learning platforms for the advanced learning and professional development, specifically FutureLearn?
- What can be the advantages and benefits of digital learning platforms for educators?

Delimitations

Following were the delimitations of the study which were identified before the finalization of the methodology,

The study has been limited as a case study of Allama Iqbal Open University (AIOU).

Post-Graduate level educators of AIOU's education department were only considered as the population.

Criteria has further been restricted to post-graduate level educators having minimum qualification of M.Phil. with 10 years or above teaching experience as the population.

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative case study approach has been adopted by the researchers through which the perceptions and opinions of purposively selected participants were explored to examine the usefulness and importance of digital learning platform specifically FutureLearn for the educators of AIOU. A case study approach helped the researchers in getting an in-depth information and multifaceted understanding about the issue in its real-life context. Case study approach led towards an in-depth examination of the views and opinions of selected participants regarding the usefulness and importance of digital learning platforms (FutureLearn) for their diversified learning experiences where such experiences and learning can be used during their teaching practices in future.

Population and Sample

The study was a case study of AIOU where the post-graduate level educators from the education department minimum qualification of M.Phil. with 10 years or above teaching experience having were considered as the population of the study. To recruit the sample participants, snowball purposive sampling technique was adopted through which 20 sample participants provided the data for the study.

Instrument for Data Collection

A semi-structured interview protocol was developed by the researchers to collect the qualitative data from the sample participants. This data collection tool was content validated by five experts and it was assured that the interview questions were in alignment with the research questions and objectives of the study.

Data Analysis Technique

The qualitative data of twenty (20) sample participants was analyzed through the thematic content analysis technique with the support of NVivo 12 software. Thematic content analysis technique identified some of the most prevalent and recurring themes within the data to answer the research

questions and objectives of the study. Furthermore, the NVivo 12 software also supported the coding and interpretation of analysis through graphical representation.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Four basic themes were identified from the data through the thematic content analysis and NVivo 12 software. These themes were a) knowledge of digital learning platform (FutureLearn), b) utility of digital learning platforms (FutureLearn), c) learning opportunities and professional capacity building of post-graduate level educators, and d) benefits of digital learning platforms for educators. The result findings for each of the theme are interpreted and discussed as under.



Figure 1: Word cloud

A) Knowledge of Digital Learning Platform (Futurelearn)

It has been analyzed that the postgraduate level educators were aware about the idea of digital learning platforms, but at the same time limited number of post-graduate level educators specifically had knowledge about FutureLearn. It is to be noted that only five (5) participants provided the views that they totally unaware about any type of digital learning platform. The analysis indicated that participants had the confusion between digital learning platforms (FutureLearn, EdX, and Coursera) and digital learning platform creation tools (Moodle, LMS, MOOCs, Google Classroom, or ExpertusOne). Another confusion was between social networking platforms and digital learning platforms, where few of the educators considered social media platforms and other online resources like e-mail and blogs as the digital learning platforms. One of the participants stated,

“Yes, I have knowledge about digital learning platforms but have never heard about Future Learn”. Online learning platforms mentioned by the participants are,

- Google Classroom
- Coursera
- Edx

- Digital Learning Platform CHANDRA, Annat Agarwal
- ExpertusOne

B) Utility of Digital Learning Platforms (Futurelearn)

The findings of the analysis indicated that majority of the participants were of the view that they have utilized digital learning platform for their advanced learning and professional development during their career. An alarming finding was that most of the educators have never used any of the FutureLearn programs for their learning or capacity building. It is to be noted that only one of the participants out of twenty (20) notified the enrolment and completion of future learn course. Two of the participants of the study provided their views in these words,

“Yes, Google Classroom”.

Yes, some were offered online by university of Oregon”.

C) Learning Opportunities and Professional Capacity Building of Post-Graduate Level Educators

Digital learning platform especially FutureLearn is providing learning opportunities and professional capacity building opportunities to learners. Any educator during the professional career, can opt for the advanced learning and avail the learning opportunities provided by digital learning platforms for professional capacity building. Participants also listed the learning opportunities as the benefits of digital learning platforms and emphasized upon the usefulness and importance of such platforms specially for the post-graduate level educators who have the time constraint and workload to opt for the conventional learning opportunities. Educators of post-graduate level are needed to be upgraded and well-equipped with the advanced learning techniques as well as the advanced knowledge which can be made possible by availing the digital learning platform opportunities for capacity building and professional development. One of the participants provided,

“Currently enrolled in logical and critical thinking course. Previously few readings on a course on mindfulness were done”.

D) Benefits of Digital Learning Platforms for Educators

The responses of the participants highlighted some of the most evident benefits and advantages of digital learning platforms which included,

- Diversified knowledge experiences
- Professional capacity building
- Interactive communication with trainers of diversified background
- Updated knowledge from global perspective
- Time management
- Autonomy flexibility and openness
- Inclusive and blended learning

Views provided by the participants in relation to benefits of digital learning platform are,

“Very interesting and easy to interact”.

“Paper free online interaction with students. Prompt feedback. Time bound. International exposure, diverse groups of students.”

“Quick, ready and informative platform to learn, easy access, students can use it anywhere, everything may be in your pocket as any digital device, i.e., mobile, tablet etc.”

“Updated information, no boundaries of time and space etc.”

“It is easy, flexible and interactive”.
“Interactive potential increases”
“Teaching and learning of concepts become easy”.
“Flexibility, autonomy, diversity and openness”.
“It provides easy access to updated knowledge”.
“Anytime learning, self-paced learning, networking”,
“Learning at my own pace. Easy addressal of areas of interest. Professional capacity building etc. is made easy”.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It has been concluded that even after having so many benefits and advantages of digital learning platforms, the area is still confused in the minds of the educators at the university level. Due to this confusion and ambiguity, the utilization of the digital learning platforms is getting affected, however digital learning platforms can play a great part in professional capacity building of educators. Knowledge about FutureLearn is limited, and even those who have the knowledge do not utilize the learning opportunities provided by the FutureLearn for their professional development and advanced learning. Some of the recommendations may include:

Awareness should be created in the universities especially in the open universities about digital learning platforms.

Faculty of the universities should be provided training regarding the utilization of digital learning platforms for their personal and professional growth and development.

More and more institutes, especially those from the developing countries should collaborate and associate themselves with such platforms, both at institutional and individual level.

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