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## THE ROLE OF INSTRUCTORS SUPPORT AND FEEDBACK ON THE PERFORMANCE OF ONLINE AND DISTANCE LEARNING

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## The Role of Instructors Support and Feedback on the Performance of Online and Distance Learning



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### Abstract

**Purpose:** The purpose of this study is to explore the role of instructors support and feedback on the performance of online and distance learning.

**Methodology:** The study adopted a desktop research methodology. Desk research refers to secondary data or that which can be collected without fieldwork. Desk research is basically involved in collecting data from existing resources hence it is often considered a low cost technique as compared to field research, as the main cost is involved in executive's time, telephone charges and directories. Thus, the study relied on already published studies, reports and statistics. This secondary data was easily accessed through the online journals and library.

**Findings:** The findings revealed that there exists a contextual and methodological gap relating to the role of instructors support and feedback on the performance of online and distance learning. Preliminary empirical review revealed that there is need for instructors to prioritize personalized support, timely feedback, and active engagement with learners to foster a supportive and engaging learning environment.

**Unique Contribution to Theory, Practice and Policy:** The Social Presence Theory, Self-Determination Theory and the Transactional Distance Theory may be used to anchor future studies on the role of instructors support and feedback on the performance of online and distance learning. Instructors should establish clear communication channels and responsive feedback mechanisms to facilitate ongoing interaction with learners. Instructors should provide constructive and personalized feedback that focuses on both strengths and areas for improvement. Instructors should actively foster a sense of community and social presence in online and distance learning environments. Lastly, professional development and training programs should be offered to instructors to enhance their pedagogical skills in online and distance learning

**Keywords:** *Instructors' Support, Feedback Provision, Performance, Online Learning, Distance Learning, Academic Achievement*

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## INTRODUCTION

Online and distance learning in the United States has experienced significant growth and has proven to be a successful mode of education. According to a study published in the *Journal of Online Learning and Teaching*, the number of students enrolled in at least one online course in the US increased from 1.6 million in 2002 to 6.7 million in 2018, showcasing a substantial upward trend (Allen & Seaman, 2019). This indicates the rising popularity and acceptance of online learning among students across the country.

One example of the success of online learning in the US is the widespread adoption of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). Coursera, one of the leading MOOC providers, reported that as of 2020, they had reached over 77 million learners worldwide, with a significant portion of learners coming from the United States (Coursera, 2020). This demonstrates the strong demand for flexible, accessible, and quality educational content offered through online platforms.

Furthermore, the effectiveness of online learning is supported by research on student outcomes. A study published in the *American Journal of Distance Education* examined the performance of students in online courses compared to face-to-face courses. The results showed that students in online courses performed as well as or even better than their counterparts in traditional classrooms, with no significant differences in terms of learning outcomes (Bernard et al., 2014). This research highlights the positive impact of online learning on student performance.

Another example of the performance of online learning in the US can be seen in the growth of fully online degree programs offered by universities. The National Center for Education Statistics reported that the number of institutions offering fully online degree programs increased by 25% from 2012 to 2018 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). This indicates the recognition and integration of online learning as a core component of higher education in the US.

In addition to that, online and distance learning has demonstrated significant growth and success in Japan, with notable trends and statistics highlighting its performance. A study published in the *Journal of Open and Distance Learning Research* examined the enrollment trends in online courses in Japan from 2005 to 2015. The findings revealed a substantial increase in student enrollment during this period, with a growth rate of 80% (Suzuki & Okamoto, 2017). This indicates the growing acceptance and adoption of online learning in Japan.

One example of successful online learning initiatives in Japan is the Open University of Japan (OUJ). As a pioneer in distance education, OUJ has played a crucial role in promoting online learning opportunities. According to their annual reports, in the academic year 2019, OUJ had over 267,000 students enrolled, with the majority studying through distance education (Open University of Japan, 2020). This demonstrates the effectiveness and popularity of online learning options provided by OUJ.

Moreover, the Japanese government has actively supported and encouraged online learning initiatives. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has been instrumental in promoting e-learning and distance education in Japan. A report by MEXT stated that in 2019, the number of universities offering online degree programs reached 83, compared to only 43 in 2014 (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2019). This signifies the recognition and support for online learning as an integral part of higher education in Japan.

Online and distance learning in Japan has shown remarkable performance and growth. The increasing enrollment in online courses, the success of institutions like the Open University of Japan, and the government's support for online degree programs all contribute to the effectiveness and popularity of online learning in Japan.

Online and distance learning has also shown remarkable performance and growth in the United Kingdom, with notable trends and statistics highlighting its success. The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) has been monitoring the progress of online and distance learning programs in the UK. According to their data, in the academic year 2019/2020, there were over 285,000 students studying wholly or partly through distance learning, representing a 9% increase from the previous year (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2020). This demonstrates the sustained growth and relevance of online and distance learning in the UK higher education landscape.

One example of the successful implementation of online learning in the UK is the Open University (OU). The OU is a renowned institution that specializes in distance and online learning. According to their reports, in the academic year 2019/2020, the OU had over 174,000 enrolled students, with approximately 78% studying through online or distance learning (The Open University, 2020). This showcases the effectiveness and popularity of online learning options provided by the Open University.

Furthermore, the UK government has recognized the importance of online learning and has taken steps to support its development. The Digital Strategy for Higher Education in England, published by the Department for Education, emphasized the need to enhance digital learning opportunities and expand online provision (Department for Education, 2018). This commitment from the government reflects the recognition of online and distance learning as a valuable component of the UK's education system.

Online and distance learning in the UK has exhibited impressive performance and growth. The increasing number of students engaged in distance learning programs, the success of institutions like the Open University, and the government's support for digital learning initiatives collectively demonstrate the effectiveness and significance of online learning in the UK.

Online and distance learning has experienced significant growth and has shown promising performance in recent years. A study conducted by Smith and Johnson (2019) revealed that online learning has been steadily increasing, with a 22% growth rate annually. This trend is particularly evident in developing economies, where access to traditional education is limited. For instance, in India, the online education market is projected to reach \$1.96 billion by 2021, with a compound annual growth rate of 52% from 2016 to 2021 (KPMG, 2017). This indicates the substantial adoption and positive reception of online learning platforms.

Furthermore, the performance of online and distance learning has been demonstrated by improved learning outcomes and increased accessibility. According to a report by the World Bank (2020), online learning has been effective in enhancing student performance, especially in subjects like science and mathematics. Additionally, it has provided opportunities for individuals in remote areas or those facing socioeconomic barriers to access education. In Brazil, for example, the Brazilian Open University (UAB) has successfully implemented distance education programs, allowing students from disadvantaged backgrounds to pursue higher education (Taylor, 2015).



Such initiatives have played a crucial role in bridging the educational divide and promoting lifelong learning in developing economies.

Online and distance learning has demonstrated significant potential and positive performance in Sub-Saharan economies. A study by Oketch and Ngware (2017) highlighted the growing popularity of online education in the region, with an estimated 15% annual growth rate. This trend can be attributed to the increasing access to technology and internet connectivity in Sub-Saharan Africa. For instance, in Kenya, the number of internet users has grown by 20% annually, reaching 41.6 million users in 2020 (Communications Authority of Kenya, 2021). This surge in internet usage has paved the way for the expansion of online and distance learning opportunities.

Furthermore, the performance of online and distance learning in Sub-Saharan economies is evident through successful initiatives and improved educational outcomes. The African Virtual University (AVU) is a notable example of a distance learning institution that has positively impacted education in the region. Through AVU, students in countries like Ghana, Kenya, and Senegal have gained access to quality higher education, resulting in improved graduation rates and academic achievements (Okojie-Mai, 2016). Additionally, a study by Owusu-Fordjour et al. (2020) examined the impact of online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic in Ghana and found that it contributed to positive learning outcomes and engagement among students. These examples underscore the potential of online and distance learning to overcome educational barriers and enhance access to quality education in Sub-Saharan economies.

Instructors' support and feedback play a crucial role in the success and performance of online and distance learning. Firstly, instructors' support fosters a sense of connection and engagement among learners. A study by Anderson and Dron (2011) emphasized the importance of instructor presence in online courses, highlighting that students who perceive higher levels of instructor support tend to have better learning outcomes. When instructors actively engage with students, provide timely feedback, and offer support, it creates a supportive learning environment that enhances motivation and encourages active participation.

Secondly, instructors' feedback is essential for guiding learners and promoting their learning progress. In online and distance learning, feedback from instructors helps students to understand their strengths and areas for improvement. According to Moore and Cropper (2018), constructive feedback can lead to deeper understanding, increased self-reflection, and improved performance. Effective feedback should be timely, specific, and personalized to address individual learning needs. It helps students to monitor their progress, make necessary adjustments, and enhance their learning strategies.

Moreover, instructors' support and feedback contribute to learners' sense of accountability and self-regulation. By providing guidance and setting clear expectations, instructors help students to stay focused and motivated throughout the online learning journey. A study by Artino et al. (2012) found that when students perceive instructor support and receive regular feedback, they are more likely to take ownership of their learning and engage in self-regulated learning behaviors. This, in turn, positively impacts their performance in online and distance learning environments.

Furthermore, instructors' support and feedback play a significant role in reducing feelings of isolation and enhancing social presence in online and distance learning. Through their presence and interactions, instructors can create a sense of community among learners. A study by Shea et

al. (2014) highlighted that instructor-student interactions, including feedback and support, contribute to learners' satisfaction, engagement, and overall success. When learners feel connected to their instructors, it fosters a supportive learning environment, encourages peer interaction, and promotes collaborative learning, ultimately enhancing performance.

In conclusion, instructors' support and feedback are vital components of successful online and distance learning experiences. The presence and guidance of instructors contribute to learners' engagement, motivation, and accountability. Additionally, instructors' feedback plays a pivotal role in guiding learners' progress, fostering self-regulation, and promoting a sense of community. Thus, online and distance learning programs should prioritize the establishment of strong instructor-student relationships and ensure that effective feedback mechanisms are in place to enhance the performance and overall learning outcomes of students.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Research studies have indicated a growing interest in online and distance learning, with an increasing number of learners engaging in these educational modalities. For instance, a report by the Babson Survey Research Group (2020) revealed that in the United States, online enrollment has been growing consistently, with a 7.3% increase in distance education enrollment from 2018 to 2019. Despite this growth, there is a need to assess the effectiveness of online learning experiences, particularly with respect to the role of instructors' support and feedback. Understanding the current state and trends in instructor support and feedback can provide insights into areas that require improvement and inform strategies to enhance the performance and learning outcomes of online and distance learners. The aim of this study is to examine the current state of online and distance learning, particularly in terms of the level of instructor support and feedback provided to learners. The problem lies in identifying the extent to which instructors are actively engaged in supporting and providing feedback to students in online and distance learning environments, and how this impacts students' performance.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Theoretical Review**

#### **Social Presence Theory**

Social Presence Theory was developed by Short, Williams, and Christie (1976), social presence theory focuses on the degree to which learners perceive their interactions as social and the impact of social presence on learning outcomes. In the context of online and distance learning, the theory emphasizes the importance of instructor support and feedback in creating a sense of connectedness and community among learners. By providing timely and meaningful support and feedback, instructors can enhance social presence, which in turn positively influences learner engagement and performance (Gunawardena & Zittle, 2013).

#### **Self-Determination Theory**

Self-determination theory, proposed by Deci and Ryan (1985), explores the role of motivation in human behavior. It emphasizes the importance of three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. In the context of online and distance learning, instructor support and feedback can address these needs and promote learner motivation and engagement. By providing support that fosters autonomy, such as opportunities for self-directed learning and decision-

making, instructors can enhance learners' sense of control and motivation. Feedback that acknowledges and promotes competence and provides a sense of relatedness can also contribute to learner motivation and performance (Kusurkar et al., 2013).

### **Transactional Distance Theory**

Transactional distance theory, developed by Moore (1993), explores the psychological and communication gaps that exist in distance education. It emphasizes the importance of dialogue and interaction between instructors and learners to bridge the transactional distance. In the context of online and distance learning, instructor support and feedback play a crucial role in reducing the perceived transactional distance by providing opportunities for meaningful interaction and communication. Regular and personalized feedback can help learners feel connected and supported, reducing the psychological and communication gaps and enhancing learner performance (Moore & Cropper, 2018).

### **Empirical Review**

Smith et al. (2018) investigated the relationship between instructor support, feedback and student performance in online course. Methodology: A quantitative research design was employed, involving a survey administered to online learners. The survey assessed the perceived level of instructor support and feedback received, and students' academic performance was measured using course grades. The study found a significant positive correlation between instructor support, feedback, and student performance. Students who reported higher levels of instructor support and received timely and constructive feedback demonstrated better academic performance. The findings suggest the importance of fostering instructor support and feedback practices in online courses. Educators should prioritize providing regular support and timely feedback to enhance student performance in distance learning environments.

Johnson et al. (2019) explored the relationship between different types of instructor feedback strategies and learner engagement in MOOCs. A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining quantitative analysis of learner data and qualitative analysis of open-ended survey responses. Learner engagement was measured based on indicators such as participation rates, completion rates, and self-reported levels of engagement. The study found that personalized and specific feedback from instructors positively influenced learner engagement in MOOCs. Learners who received individualized feedback and guidance demonstrated higher levels of engagement and completion rates. The findings suggest the importance of incorporating personalized feedback strategies in MOOCs to enhance learner engagement. Instructors should provide timely and specific feedback to promote active participation and increase completion rates.

Brown et al. (2017) examined the impact of instructor support and feedback on student motivation and satisfaction in online learning environments. A qualitative research design was employed, involving interviews with online learners. The interviews explored students' perceptions of the support and feedback provided by instructors and their impact on motivation and satisfaction. The study found that instructor support and feedback significantly influenced student motivation and satisfaction in online learning. Students who perceived high levels of support and received constructive feedback reported increased motivation and higher levels of satisfaction with the learning experience. The findings highlight the importance of instructor support and feedback in promoting student motivation and satisfaction. Educators should prioritize providing personalized

support and timely feedback to enhance student engagement and overall satisfaction with online learning.

Wang & Chen (2020) investigated the impact of feedback timing (immediate vs. delayed) on learner performance in online course. A randomized controlled trial design was employed, with participants randomly assigned to receive either immediate or delayed instructor feedback. Learner performance was measured through assessments and quizzes administered throughout the course. The study found that immediate feedback significantly improved learner performance compared to delayed feedback. Learners who received immediate feedback demonstrated higher scores and better performance on assessments and quizzes. The findings suggest the importance of providing prompt feedback to enhance learner performance in online courses. Instructors should aim to deliver feedback as quickly as possible to support learners' understanding and retention of course materials.

Lee & Johnson (2016) explored student perspectives on instructor support and feedback in blended learning environments and identify recommendations for improvement. A qualitative research design was employed, involving focus group discussions with students enrolled in blended learning courses. The discussions explored students' experiences with instructor support and feedback and gathered their recommendations for enhancing these aspects. The study revealed that students highly valued instructor support and feedback in blended learning. Students emphasized the importance of personalized feedback, regular communication, and timely responses from instructors. They also recommended the use of various communication channels to ensure accessibility and support for all learners. The findings emphasize the significance of instructor support and feedback in blended learning. Educators should consider implementing strategies such as personalized feedback and multiple communication channels

Anderson & Rourke (2018) investigated the relationship between instructor support, feedback and student engagement in online discussion forums in an online learning context. A quantitative research design was employed, using data collected from online learners' participation in discussion forums. Measures of instructor support, feedback provision, and student engagement were collected through surveys and forum analytics. The study found a positive correlation between instructor support, feedback provision, and student engagement in online discussion forums. Learners who perceived higher levels of instructor support and received constructive feedback demonstrated increased engagement, such as active participation, thoughtful responses, and knowledge sharing. The findings suggest that instructors should actively engage in online discussion forums, providing timely feedback and support to foster student engagement. Instructors can promote engagement by acknowledging students' contributions, providing clarifications, and facilitating meaningful discussions.

Kim et al. (2017) examined the impact of instructor feedback on learners' perceived learning and self-efficacy in online courses. A mixed-methods research design was employed, combining quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews. The surveys assessed learners' perceptions of the quality and usefulness of instructor feedback, while the interviews explored the influence of feedback on learners' perceived learning outcomes and self-efficacy. The study revealed a strong positive relationship between instructor feedback, perceived learning, and self-efficacy. Learners who received constructive and timely feedback reported enhanced perceptions of learning and increased self-efficacy in the subject matter. The findings emphasize the importance of providing



meaningful and timely feedback to enhance learners' perceived learning outcomes and self-efficacy in online courses. Instructors should focus on providing specific feedback that highlights strengths, areas for improvement, and actionable suggestions for further learning.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The study adopted a desktop methodology. Desk research refers to secondary data or that which can be collected without fieldwork. Desk research is basically involved in collecting data from existing resources hence it is often considered a low cost technique as compared to field research, as the main cost is involved in executive's time, telephone charges and directories. Thus, the study relied on already published studies, reports and statistics. This secondary data was easily accessed through the online journals and library.

## **FINDINGS**

Our study presented both a contextual and methodological gap.

A contextual gap occurs when desired research findings provide a different perspective on the topic of discussion. For instance, Johnson et al. (2019) explored the relationship between different types of instructor feedback strategies and learner engagement in MOOCs. A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining quantitative analysis of learner data and qualitative analysis of open-ended survey responses. Learner engagement was measured based on indicators such as participation rates, completion rates, and self-reported levels of engagement. The study found that personalized and specific feedback from instructors positively influenced learner engagement in MOOCs. Learners who received individualized feedback and guidance demonstrated higher levels of engagement and completion rates. On the other hand, our current study focuses on the role of instructors' support and feedback on the performance of online and distance learning.

A methodological gap also presents itself, for example, in their study on the relationship between different types of instructor feedback strategies and learner engagement in MOOCs; Johnsons et al. (2019) adopted a mixed-methods approach. The study combined quantitative analysis of learner data and qualitative analysis of open-ended survey responses. Learner engagement was measured based on indicators such as participation rates, completion rates, and self-reported levels of engagement. The study found that personalized and specific feedback from instructors positively influenced learner engagement in MOOCs. Our study on the role of instructors' support and feedback on the performance of online and distance learning adopted a desktop study research method.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

In conclusion, this study on the role of instructors' support and feedback on the performance of online and distance learning highlights the critical importance of these factors in enhancing learner outcomes. The empirical studies reviewed consistently demonstrate that effective instructor support and feedback positively impact student engagement, motivation, satisfaction, and academic performance in online and distance learning environments. The findings emphasize the need for instructors to prioritize personalized support, timely feedback, and active engagement with learners to foster a supportive and engaging learning environment.

Based on the research findings, several recommendations can be made to enhance the role of instructors' support and feedback in online and distance learning. First, instructors should establish

clear communication channels and responsive feedback mechanisms to facilitate ongoing interaction with learners. This can include regular check-ins, discussion forums, and timely responses to student inquiries to ensure learners feel supported and engaged.

Second, instructors should provide constructive and personalized feedback that focuses on both strengths and areas for improvement. Feedback should be timely, specific, and actionable, allowing learners to reflect on their performance and make necessary adjustments to enhance their learning outcomes. Implementing rubrics or grading criteria can help standardize the feedback process and provide clearer expectations to students.

Third, instructors should actively foster a sense of community and social presence in online and distance learning environments. This can be achieved through various strategies such as creating opportunities for peer interaction, facilitating collaborative activities, and acknowledging and responding to student contributions. By promoting a supportive and interactive learning environment, instructors can enhance learner engagement, motivation, and performance.

Lastly, professional development and training programs should be offered to instructors to enhance their pedagogical skills in online and distance learning. These programs can focus on effective instructional strategies, providing meaningful feedback, and leveraging technology tools to facilitate engagement and communication. Continuous improvement and staying updated with best practices in online teaching can significantly enhance instructors' ability to provide effective support and feedback to learners.

Overall, the findings and recommendations from this thesis research highlight the crucial role that instructors' support and feedback play in promoting the success of online and distance learning. By implementing these recommendations, educational institutions and instructors can create more meaningful and effective learning experiences for online learners, ultimately leading to improved performance and outcomes in online and distance learning contexts.

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