Promotion of online discussion forums as a key support to learning. The experiences of Uganda Management institute.

By

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Discussion Forums are part and parcel of distance learning programs. Uganda Management Institute therefore runs discussion forums for the distance learners twice a semester. The usefulness of discussion forums is yet to be established. Much as discussion forums have come to stay, Key questions raised by the tutors' learners and administrators' kind of challenge their continual use as learning tools and support to learners. The essentials of discussion forums kind of irritate users. As per the requirements of the UMI, discussion forums ought to be structured in such a manner that allow for active learning, there should be evidence of creation of a community of practice and they act as a major feedback to the learners on the essentials of a course. This paper is drawn from an ongoing survey, an action research that is concerned with the implementation of discussion forums with the objective of supporting learning in the process. The study is anchored in the Theory of Connectivity put forward by Siemens (2000) and Anderson model of interactions (2015). The survey takes place every outgoing semester. A sample of 28 participants drawn across the post graduate diplomas of Project Planning and Management and Monitoring and evaluation is participating in this study. The results of the survey are passed on to tutors before the next semester to enable them learn from their experiences and produce better discussion questions in the upcoming semester. The preliminary findings from the survey so far indicate elements of participants increased interaction among themselves and with facilitators, leading to deep learning among participants. The discussion forums link participants to fellow participants and thus increase motivation on the part of the participants, there is also evidences of built up communities of practice. A paradigm shift from traditional assessment that was dominated by use of a case study accompanied with some questions, to a more thorough assessment leading to critical thinking and creativity is in formation. Overall the discussion forums are proving to be an authentic support to the learners though with challenges in the implementation

Key words discussion forums, feedback, support to learning,community of practice

Introduction

Online discussion forums are part and parcel of most if not all ongoing online courses. As Croft. N, Dalton.A &, Grant.M (2015) note the physical and temporal separation of tutor and student, and between students themselves, can lead to feelings of isolation. They also note the lack of interaction and discussion between students on non-cohort based courses (ie distance learning)which lessens the richness of the learning experience and omits a significant element of

the constructivist approach to learning. Constructivism in teaching and learning is the order of the day in the 21st century. Constructivism views as put forward by Vygotsky (1978) in his theory of constructivism, are that; the learners create/ construct knowledge as they attempt to understand their experiences and become creative, critical and innovative. Those are some of the underlying assumptions that prompted Uganda Management implementers of distance learning to operationalize the online distance learning discussion forumBackground

Background.

Online distance learning is emerging from the traditional distance learning that featured in the 19th and 20th century, characterized dominantly with print modules, sent to learners to study on their own, accompanied by coursework questions. The print modules had, embedded within them the in-text exercises and quizzes to enable the learner be as active as possible. The one to one interaction be it asynchrounous or synchronous, varied from institution to institution. In some institutions like the Open University of UK, it was accompanied by Radio and TV broadcast, others had some limited computer based interaction, such as computer teleconferencing and audio teleconferencing. Others not so much endowed environments where courses run, supplemented print modules with face to face sessions periodically run, whereby learners met each other, and met their facilitators as well. To that effect distance learning came to be defined as a process whereby tutor and student are separated spatially and by time (Liu, 2008 Liu S. (2008).

Distance learning therefore is an evolving discipline. Nipper, 1989 Nipper S. (1989). clearly puts it that prior to the use of the Internet, two approaches to distance learning were developed and used alone or by combining the two. One is a paper-reliant approach, where the student receives a package of material through the post, completes the package and returns it via the post and then receives feedback. The other approach uses instructional videos or television programmes, when the student views a pre-recorded lecture usually enhanced with documentary style material and visual aids; completes the task, returns it via the post and then receives feedback. More recently distance learning is being delivered through placing course material online, using e-mail and social networking media as support on a learning management system(LMS) using moodle, or blackboard platform.

Interraction as a way of studying and learning is being emphasized of recent. Bude Su Curtis J. Bonk R. J. Magjuka X. Seung-hee Lee(2005) are of the view that interacting with others and with learning materials seems vital for learners to construct the knowledge internally. and according to him, in effect, the mind, according to social constructivists, extends beyond the skin. They conclude that the instructor's role is to use various technologies and instructional activities that will deepen learner understanding of the subject matter as well as critical reflection and analysis skills. On guiding the discussion forum, activities for interaction, case-based learning is considered to be an instructional method that uses real or hypothetical cases to help students develop critical thinking skills and analytic ability for later use in real world contexts.

This one method can have many instructional activities to help accomplish these instructional goals. Bonk and Kim (1998), for example, outline a number of instructional activities that could be used to help scaffold cased-based instruction and generally assist in the learning process. The instructional activities they outline include, questioning, feedback and praise, encouraging articulation and dialogue, and management, to name a few. There can be any number of instructional activities used to promote course interactions, thereby creating an environment more conducive to learning as Bude Su Curtis J. Bonk R. J. Magjuka X. Seung-hee Lee(2005report.It is under such auspices that the research is going further to evaluate the ultimate expected end result of discussion forums, and how learning by the participants is supported. In all those endevours the key issue is; do participants learn? And to what extent then, and how do they learn?. This brings us to the issue of community of practice,

The concept of CoPs can be used to guide knowledge sharing and knowledge creation in online environments., as quoted by Zhang.W and Watts. S(2008)The concept of communities of practice (CoPs, was first introduced by Wenger, 1991. It is one way of knowledge management. CoPs are ''groups of people informally bound together by shared expertise and passion for a joint enterprise'' (Wenger and Snyder, 2000, p. 139). In these communities, individual experiences are shared, new knowledge is created, and problems are solved through interactions between community members (Brown and Duguid, 1991, 1998, 2001; Wenger, 1998). Recognizing the inherent capabilities of CoPs in handling knowledge, organizations are applying this concept to their knowledge management practices, attempting to cultivate such knowledge-embedded communities (e.g. Liedtka, 1999; Wenger et al., 2002). Furthermore the history of an online community is recorded as the practice is enacted. This recorded history helps members to learn not only about past community practice but also about the identities of individual members because it is their participations that were recorded. This way, the recorded history becomes a great learning resource in online communities.

Some key challenges of discussion forums over the years that they have existed are; Discordant expectations are a major source of frustration to students, instructors, and preceptors and cause significant interference with learning. Clear objectives assist both the faculty and the students to realize their expectations of each other with the resources that are available. For many instructors there is a need for upskilling, to be able to give meaningful feedback and setting aunthentic discussion forum questions.

The Problem

Though discussion forums have always been part of the delivery package in DL of UMI, their expected role has not been so well defined to the stakeholders .The participation has not been so vibrant as is the expectations of the managers. 50% of participants even completed the course

without engaging in discussion forums for the years of 2013 -2015 and the challenges were not established. Though all participants on postgraduate distance learning participants since 2018 are obliged to participate in discussion forums and are graded, no study has been undertaken to find out the usefulness of the discussion forums, and the challenges thereof, and the drive to improve them is not based on any impirical study. Consistently the discussion forums are effected per delivered module per semester with the intention of effecting learning and support among distance learning participants, and their support role ought to be clearly spelt out to all the stakeholders.

The Objectives of the study

The objectives are:
- ✓ Establish the quality of discussion forums among tutors & participants
- ✓ Find out the extent to which discussion forums support learning
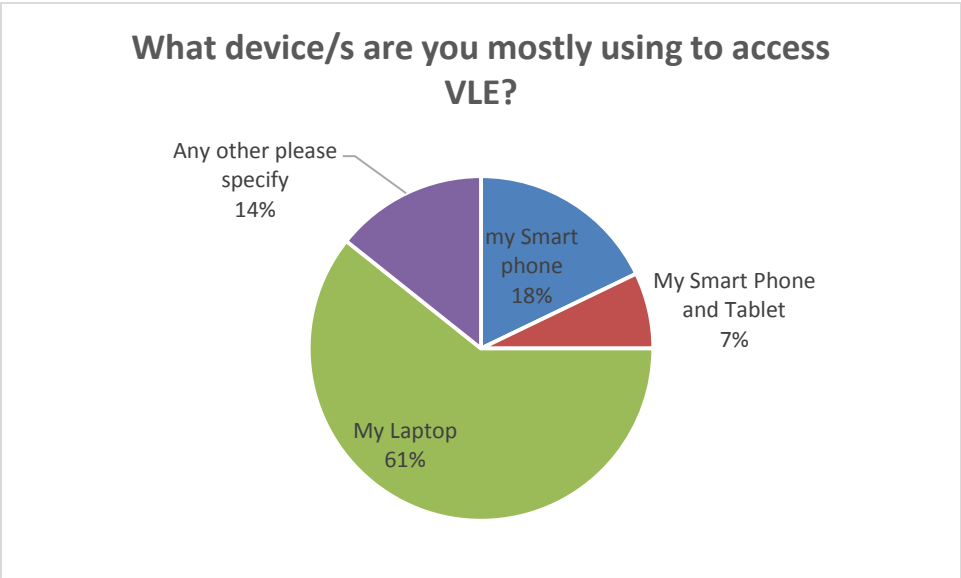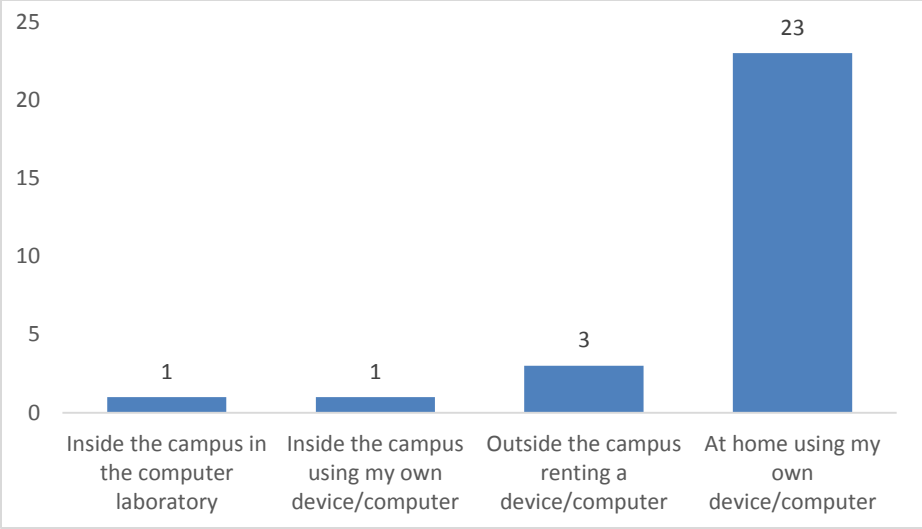- ✓ Determine how best discussion forums can be run to enable learning among participants
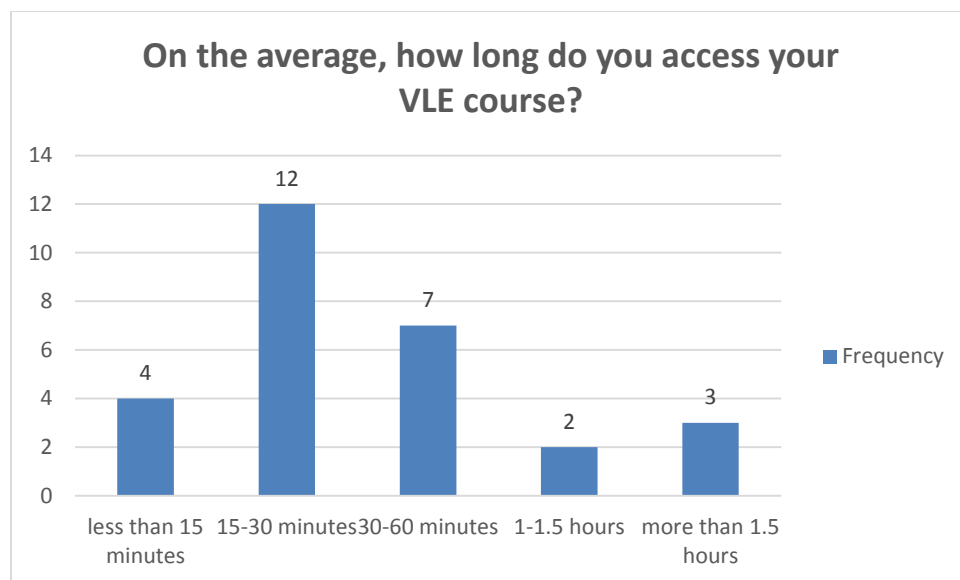
The Methodology
This is an action research, and the survey takes place every outgoing semester. A sample of 28 participants drawn across the post graduate diplomas of Project Planning and Management and Monitoring and evaluation is participating in this study.   The results of the survey are passed on to tutors before the next semester to enable them learn from their experiences and produce better discussion questions in the upcoming semester. Action research method is applied, whereby findings of the occurances on Discussion forums are shared and fed into the next level of discussion forums in following semester to improve practice. Interviews and questionnaires are employed as research instruments as well as observation of what goes on on the vle as discussion forums proceed.

The preliminary findings from Interview with the facilitators

Interviews with participating facilitators show that the Quality of participation is generally good, as learners quote and show evidence of some research
Creativity, innovation and variety of response is evident,Forum support learning But, there are challenges for there is need to document how to access the forum on vle, so as not to waste   time some resistance from facilitator who think it is not their duty to be on forumfacilitators are yet to realise that as in   the conventional system three levels exist ie   three levels exist in distance learning ie coursework, discussion forum and examinations

On how best to run discussion forums, facilitators are of the view that Facilitators ought to be up-skilled and guided on how to carry out the exercise Facilitators should buy the practice of migrating from one space to another for it is the way to go Should invest time by commenting on individual posts, through scheduling themselvesFacilitators should build faith in the practice and if convinced, they can greatly assist the participants

Inside the campus in the computer laboratory	1
Inside the campus using my own device/computer	1
Outside the campus renting a device/computer	3
At home using my own device/computer	23

What device/s are you mostly using to access VLE?

Any other please specify 14%

my Smart phone 18%

My Smart Phone and Tablet 7%

My Laptop 61%

On the average, how long do you access your VLE course?

Category	Frequency
less than 15 minutes	4
15-30 minutes	12
30-60 minutes	7
1-1.5 hours	2
more than 1.5 hours	3

Rate the following items in relation to your distance learning course/s and VLE discussion forums

	Needs improvement	Satisfactory	Excellent
Ease of using VLE	9	15	2
Value of using online materials available(lectures and handouts	9	11	7
Relevance of online activities (assignment and quizzes)	12	15	1
Level of Online interaction with teacher (teaching presence)	22	6	0
Level of online interaction with other students (social presence)	18	9	1
Performance of students assistance(SAs)	20	8	0
Availability of devices/computers	7	16	3
Access to computer laboratory use	14	11	1
Internet connection speed	10	13	2
Overall satisfaction	9	18	0

	This is not applicable in the module	This was not done	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
Reply to forums of students	3	4	5	16	0	0
Chat with students	0	5	9	10	1	1
Update the module	3	5	3	3	6	4
Orient and encourage students to the upcoming online session	1	4	3	9	7	0
Discuss in the classroom the performance of the students during the previous online session	4	8	8	2	4	2
Discuss in the classroom the level of participation of the students during the previous online session	2	7	7	5	3	2
Clarify in the classroom the misconception/misunderstandings of the students with the online content	1	6	6	7	7	0
Connect the online content/activities to the classroom lessons	2	6	4	11	1	2

Themes were identified to analyse qualitative data obtained from open ended questions, for each of the question posed, on the question; What was the most effective aspect of DL course and VLE discussion Forums of late?, For the most effective aspect of DL course and VLE, Four themes were identified namely, Convinience, interaction, feedback and support to symbolize some most effective aspects of Distance Learning and VLE.

On What was the least effective aspect of this distance learning course and VLE discussion forums of late? For the least effective aspect of DL course and VLE, Four themes were identified namely, system issues, noncompliance of participants, noncomplaiance of management, and no feedback

On suggestions on how to help strengthen this distance learning course and VLE discussion forums
Four themes were identified namely, Convinience, interaction, feedback and support to symbolize some most effective aspects of Distance Learning and VLE. Technical, More Support for Learners, and feedback,

The detailed responses are shown in the attached tables

Conclusions

The discussion forums are worthwhile, and give both participants and the facilitators a good experience to engage in teaching and learning. Both participants and facilitators are slowly picking interest in the forum and perfecting the skill of working on the forum.

Recommendations
It has been recommended that training for participants and facilitators should be ongoing. It is important to consolidate whatever has been learnt. And that UMI should continue using VLe and perfecting the use so as to make it a major source of support for all participants.

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Appendix 1

summarises the responses per theme

	Interraction	Feedback and Support	Convenience	Compliment	Negative
	It allow continuous support and interaction with	Used as ameans to keep each member updated	Easy to access model reader Easy to login and	The distance learning course has enabled me	None- we need the VLE

and between facilitators and participants.		use"	to put immediately into practice what I acquired during face to face and during my personal readings	Discussion forums well planned and managed
Sharing the online reader, discussion groups moderation, coursework submission and feedback were all forms of interraction	Participants were able to access reading materials and coursework results with comments on them online	More convinient to participants whose work schedules couldn't allow them to move more frequent to face to face.	The course managers care a lot and always want to get the best out of every participant. They make sure every participant's challenge is solved as soon as possible.	
Participants are able to share their knowledge with other colleagues regarding any other challenges his/her colleagues faces with respect to the vle..	The ease it could access learning information	E-reading modules uploaded on time, previous as well as previous performance results	The VLE is a great platform that unites the distance learners where it is easier to view the ideas, and contributions of colleagues which improves the learning process however sometimes it crushes for days and in moments when students are in the middle of course works to submit	
Face to face interactions with	Uploading course modules and	Distance learning gives time for		

facilitators	coursework	people who are working from far places or outside the country has access to studies since it's convenient		
	Follow up reminder by Dr. Bbuye			
	Having a smaller groups for discussion forums			
Sustainable Development Strategies- facilitator gave regular feedback to students work DL models "	Some efforts being geared towards improving VLE discussion			
	Presenting topics for discussion a new skill			

				Negative
				None- we need the VLE Discussion forums well planned and managed
	Having a smaller groups for discussion forums			
Sustainable Development Strategies- facilitator gave regular feedback to students work DL models "	Some efforts being geared towards improving VLE discussion			

What was the least effective aspect of this distance learning course and VLE discussion forums of late?

System Issues	Non compliance of Participants	No feedback	Non complianc of Management	Negative
. VLE did not give feedback straight on our email.	Participants are not engaging themselves in using the vale. Time is very limited to many participants.	Less or no comments from some facilitato Delay in giving feedback on the discussion forum rs -	Mix up of results, missing results, mix-up of mark awarding, much delayed release of exam results, late marking of papers, mute facilitators on the VLE platform;	we need the VLE Discussion forums well planned and managed

			absence of video conferencing or sharing recorded clips from facilitators face and during my personal readings	
Absence of video conferencing or sharing recorded clips from facilitators	Sometimes group members don't respond in time when a topic is posted on the discussion forum in other words few contribute and others totally don't	Results not updated on time and missed marks not being handled	Coordination with participants and guidance, introduction of new things without proper guidance and poor timing on results release	. Doesn't add any meaning to my learning because facilitators doesn't guide or critic the discussions
. The vle also seem to breakdown at times	Lack of participation of some participants of the discussion groups makes the discussion forum less interactive	Discussion with Management on line or out of school	The VLE is a great platform that unites the distance learners where it is easier to view the ideas, and contributions of colleagues which improves the learning process however sometimes it crushes for days and in moments when students are in the middle of course works to submit	It doesn't add any new knowledge because things done on hurry has its own disadvantages
Face to face	The group	Less or no	Some of the	

interactions with facilitators	discussion, I would prefer individual discussions and submission because most participants in groups are non-responsive.	comments from some facilitators since it's convenient	information agreed upon during the face to face is not being fulfilled e.g. sharing of slides presented on group work	
	Handing work in collectively is sometimes difficult	Response to discussions by Facilitators is not so frequent	Confusion brought about by discussion groups	
	Online group discussions with fellow classmates is sometimes a nightmare to some of the participants	Some facilitators do not provide feedback on students' discussion forum	Delay in releasing Coursework and Examination results which affects performance.	
Sustainable Development Strategies-facilitator gave regular feedback to students work DL models "			Our interaction with the module facilitator's end in class. We never hear/read from them again. They must be made to actively participate in our daily VLE discussions.	
		Reminders on upcoming events e.g. exams, discussions and coursework Group discussion is not so frequent	Our interaction with the module facilitator's end in class. We never hear/read from	

			them again. They must be made to actively participate in our daily VLE discussions	

Appendix2

What suggestions can you provide to help strengthen this distance learning course and VLE discussion forums?

	Technical	More Support for Learners	Feedback		
	Improve the VLE because it breaks out every other time	It has to be facilitators guided otherwise, we can't correct ourselves yet in a distance places	Discussion forums be made more relevant by having facilitators give instant feedback to participants.		
	Grouping should be done early enough not to bring confusion	More communication from both the facilitators and the students	Feedback has to be one on one and guided by the facilitator's		
		Enforce policy on distance learning to commit both students and lecturers/consultants	Facilitators should give comments that give direction to participants on what did not go on well		
		Encourage Facilitators to have online presence and give feedback on contents presented by participants	More responsiveness form the facilitators as far as participants` are concerned and also		

		giving proper feedback on the course works to enhance better performance.		
Facilitators should keep visiting the platform whenever they can	Facilitators need to participate in the forum hence guiding participants. This way, will encourage and keep participants active in the forum			
The DL course need to be strengthen through servicing it constantly.	Regular feedback from the facilitators on discussion forum,			
The DL and vale need to allow a bigger file size."	timely marking and submission of students' coursework			
, make use of turnitin to check students coursework to avoid plagiarism,	facilitators to respect the participants as their customers so they too respect you,			
students' coursework and exams marks must be posted on the VLE not on WhatsApp, facilita	transparency in awarding marks to students by facilitators			
VLE need to be improve especially in area of (course work submission)	exams that seem to have not been checked in the department for quality as they portray to the participants that the facilitator is setting hard questions just to fail students not based standard educational criteria			

		of assessment.			
		Management should work hard and be available to students most time			
	We really need the sharing of video clips from facilitators while lecturing in normal classes.	There has to be two discussion questions in the discussion forum so that the students get 10 marks in the DISCUSSION not just 5 marks when the discussion is meant to earn 10 marks			
	Discussion forum groups should be displayed out way before the discussion forum questions are posted. This will give ample time for mobilization and easy coordination of the groups	The discussion should not have deadline since we have different schedules for studies/ reason			
		Staff should improve on direct communication to individual student for making everyone active			
	UMI should provide students with tablets loaded with course materials	Adhere to coursework submission deadlines because unnecessary extension of submission deadlines disadvantages those who submit within the timeline			
		Needs proper			

		guidance to participants, ensure proper timing			
		Facilitators to give clear instructions about coursework questions. e.g., answer one or all the questions but not to set questions and let the students to decide whether or not to answer all the questions			
	Video conferencing or Webinar sessions				
	Strategies of making sure every student is able to know his cumulative results (coursework, discussion forums and exams) always for prior planning in case of retakes or poor performance	We need facilitators to be active in the VLE. Exams should be marked and results released on time			

Facilitators themselves don't like getting involved in the VLE discussions. Some have confessed in class before. For the VLE discussions to gain meaning, all the facilitators must be empowered to actively get involved in the discussions otherwise the issue of group discussions will remain as simple as the course manager uploading a discussion question, 1 or 2 participants out of a group of 5 compiling and posting what they think are the answers, into the critique section for the award of marks to everyone even if they never participated. I know of a member who got 5 marks in every module yet they were not aware we had group discussions. The only facilitator who is actively engaged in discussing with students is Mr. Okware Beric and Mr. Kambugu. My groups always request me to lead our discussions but trust me it's boring discussing stuff without anyone to guide us. We are never sure of our answers.

The facilitators should understand us when we pose series of questions or when in need of help, we have learnt that some facilitators have resorted to name calling and belittling personalities from other countries, this is damaging to the distance learning department and UMI

Appendix 3
Other comments about your experience of the distance learning course/s and VLE discussion forums so far:

General Management	Shortcoming of discussion groups	Technical	facilitators	Complement
Continue grading the discussion forum participation	Some group members are lazy	System availability should be worked on"	I would like to propose that the facilitators who are supposed to guide us to be present in doing their work.	. Yeah, its quiet good that it gave us at least an enough period of time to read and commit at the work places respectively
request we do individual work, and may be critique each other, because doing it as a group has many disadvantages, for example	After submission, another student can access your work and just edit and hands in	Quick and frequent checkup of the system especially around deadline time		The course is manageable, one only has to allocate time for the course
Administrators should be supportive and do proper planning in handling the DL for effectiveness	The discussion forums were stressful as many people did not participate in the groups thus leading to only individual submissions			This is a good flat form for learning but not conducive to participants whose access to the internet is problematic
Additional support to learning materials	Enough time to be given for discussion forum			It's a convenient approach to learning for busy students (employed)
I think we need regular participation in the VLE both on participants and	The discussion forums are a bit stressful especially when the group			This is a good course that can be strengthened

facilitators to exchange views on challenging topics. We need regular video uploads of facilitators in normal classes.	members don`t respond			
There should be flexibility in course submission datelines.				Marks should be availed as soon as possible but it's generally not bad
Overwhelming complains on missing coursework and exam results is quite disheartening				So far all is good. The WhatsApp group keeps us updated and many issues are solved on that platform.
The IT department should ensure that the vale is always working. Many participants faces challenges in accessing the vale especially in their respective places of work even with good internet access.				Let there be other courses introduced for example PGD in Financial management
Would require the administration to best handle the missing results and update all the past results on VLE				

including course-works, exams marks inclusive			
Issues of course works and missing marks are usually not adequately addressed I have suffered this and I don't know whether to keep following or to give up it is just very frustrating			
Some of the scenarios given in the discussion forum topics does not seem to align well with the module at hand. To aid better learning the facilitators should ensure discussion forum topics and scenarios must be tailored to the module at hand.			

				Negative
				None- we need the VLE Discussion forums well planned and managed
		Having a smaller groups for discussion forums			

MAKERERE UNIVERSITY

Dr Julian Bbuye

Room: Rwizi
Time: 11.55 – 12.50
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