

Staff and Students' Opinions on the Role of E-Learning in a Comprehensive South African University

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KEYWORDS university; academics and students; views; e-learning; comprehensive

ABSTRACT The paper focuses on an investigation of staff and students' opinions on the role of e-learning at the comprehensive University of Zululand (UNIZULU). The objectives of the study are: to determine the extent to which staff and students made use of e-learning as a means of teaching and learning; to explore challenges experienced by lecturers and students in using e-learning; and to investigate the role of the university's management in supporting the use of e-learning by both staff and students. The qualitative study, in particular, a case study was conducted by means of face-to-face interviews in the Faculty of Education. In-depth information was gathered from 65 students of B.Ed. at levels 3 and 4, from Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) students and 15 of their lecturers. The findings reveal that most staff and students at UNIZULU were optimistic about the possibilities offered by e-learning, yet remained antagonistic to its use. The participants identified key

problem areas that they felt ought to be overcome, and both staff and students expressed the need for training, exposure and more support from management to enable them to utilize e-learning successfully. The study further suggests that these needs should be addressed at the highest management level.

INTRODUCTION

The use of educational technologies to improve e-learning services, quality and opportunities has been evolving steadily in higher education. Since the 1980s, when such forms of educational technology started to develop exponentially in America to improve staff' delivery modes and students' performance, e-learning worldwide has grown remarkably through diverse technologies and a variety of pedagogies. Globally, evidence of the implementation of e-learning in higher education may be found in India (Koehler and Mishra 2009); in Australia (O'Reilly, Lefoe, Philip, and Parrish 2010) and in Swedish universities such as Karlstad University (KaU), Mälardalen University (MdH) and the University of Gävle (HiG) (Olsson 2011). In Africa implementation has been slower. Chitanana, Makaza and Madzima (2008), for example, report some implementation of e-learning by staff in universities in Zimbabwe and also in Tanzania, where its adoption of e-learning has been limited, with the University of Dar Es Salaam being the only one out of the country's ten universities to implement such methods.

In South Africa, all the three types of higher education institutions (HEIs), have also shown serious interest in the use of e-learning to keep abreast and take advantage of the evolving pedagogical possibilities; the traditional universities are pure academic institutions that offer degrees; universities of technology offer career-focused diplomas and degrees; and comprehensive universities offer both pure academic and career-focused diplomas and degrees.

According to the then Department of Education (2004) (now the Department of Higher Education and Training), the role of the University of Zululand (UNIZULU), like other comprehensive universities, is to strive towards "access, articulation, the strengthening of applied research, and responsiveness". In their study, Kinuthia and Dagada (2008) found that e-learning provided much needed flexibility in teaching and learning activities at the University of South Africa (UNISA), a distance e-learning institution and one of the largest universities in the world; at the University of Johannesburg (UJ), a comprehensive and residential university; and at the University of Pretoria (UP) the largest residential university

in the country. Following the trend, UNIZULU, one of the country's six comprehensive institutions, located in rural northern KwaZulu-Natal, is also in the process of implementing e-learning (University of Zululand 2009).

The concept of e-learning has been defined in terms of the media it uses, that is, as a means of teaching and learning using digital media computers, web pages, video conference systems, intranet and internet (Kinuthia and Dagada 2008). (Giardina 2011) states that educational technology provides conducive learning conditions, increases access and flexibility to teaching and learning, improves communication and collaboration.

Considering the literature and the studies at UNIZULU, this study combines the two definitions and views e-learning as an approach that makes use of electronic media to achieve intended outcomes in teaching and learning. Although e-learning offers advantages to lecturers and students such as internet accessibility, learning at individual's own pace and innovative teaching strategies, opinions held by academic staff and students may can affect the implementation (Thomas 2008; Oh and Park 2009; Fresen 2010). Some opinions about factors that affect the implementation of e-learning include to computer-related infrastructure, time, workload, lack of faculty support, computer illiteracy and lack of policy on e-learning.

According to (Bensona, Andersona, Ooms 2011) preparation of e-learning activities demands a lot of time. Oomen-Early and Murphy (2009) attribute for poor or lack of use of e-learning by staff and students in Zimbabwe to inaccessibility of resources, unavailability of computers, lack of confidence in students and staff to use ICT, computer illiteracy among students and staff, field of study in which a student or staff specialises, institutional policies, workload and administrative support. For example, Chitanana (2008) noted that most universities in Zimbabwe had strategies for e-learning, but these were not supported by systems that ensured its implementation aligned for implementing it. The academic staff positive beliefs and perceptions should inspire them to develop learning materials that help students to engage and utilise e-learning services Emelyanova and Voronina (2014). For students to achieve the envisaged positive learning outcomes, they have to be guided by lecturers who appreciate their technological and e-learning capabilities Dlodlo and Isabirye (2014).

This paper focuses on the opinions of staff, administrative staff, management and students on the role of e-learning in the Faculty of Education at UNIZULU. The concern directing the present study was that academic staff, administrative staff, management and students were still struggling to access electronic teaching and learning resources, even as high student numbers and unfavourable staff student: ratios indicated the need for e-learning, particularly

within the understated Faculty of Education. According to (Ocak 2011) e-learning offer a smooth interaction between internet based technologies and face-to-face lecturer facilitated teaching. Moreover, there is a need for staff to be able to impart e-learning skills to students in achieving expected outcomes in teaching and learning. Thus, it was crucial in our study to explore both staff' and students' opinions of e-learning as a tool for teaching and learning so as to address the question of how best UNUZULU can work successfully towards accelerated implementation of e-learning. Exploring and analysing the opinions of staff and students could contribute towards developing e-learning knowledge at UNIZULU would provide effective strategies towards implementing e-learning by other comprehensive universities.

METHODOLOGY

In this paper, we employed a qualitative design, specifically a case study which affords a researcher with a chance that focuses on actors to provide a rich understanding of their situations and experiences (Cohen *et al* 2010). This was chosen on the basis of the nature of problem being investigated and to address the following study concern: There is an uncoordinated implementation of e-learning in the Faculty of Education at UNIZULU. Mayisela (2014) also used the case study design in an investigation of how e-learning can be utilized in academic staff teaching practice. We sought to determine the extent to which staff and students made use of e-learning as a means of teaching and learning; to explore challenges experienced by lecturers and students in using e-learning; and to investigate the role of the university's management in supporting the use of e-learning by both staff and students. Semi-structured and focused group interviews were used to collect data from staff and the students in the Faculty of Education. Vos, Strydom, Fouche and Delport (2011), state that participants with common characteristics that relate to the research aim to explore factors that influence perceptions may form a focus group. They were designed to obtain in-depth views and obtain first-hand information, and to allow participants to express their views freely. Physical lecture halls and computer laboratories were observed in detail. Interviews were tape-recorded. The qualitative data obtained from both semi-structured and focus-group interviews were coded to enable extraction and analysis of common themes. The UNIZULU as a comprehensive university was selected as a case study as it represents similar conditions to the other comprehensive universities in the South African education system. The sample was composed of 65 students of Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) at levels 3 and 4, Post

Graduate Certificate in Education students, 15 staff, 1 specialist in the ICT unit at UNIZULU and 1 personnel in managerial position.

A formal letter requesting permission to conduct the research was submitted to Executive Dean of the Faculty of Education and ethics research committee. Informed consent was gained from the participants and they signed the consent forms. A letter of response was obtained to confirm that permission for the study was granted. Participants were made aware of ethical issues such as voluntary participation, confidentiality, anonymity and informed consent.

FINDINGS

The research results presented here are based on the two different sets of interview questions as indicated. By virtue of their leadership roles, the ICT specialist and the DVC received an interview schedule that was different from that given to the remaining participants (lecturers and students). In an effort to obtain an overall view of the state of e-learning at UNIZULU in relation to the faculty, the data were also collected through semi-structured individual interviews. For the purpose of clarity, the source of every quotation was denoted but the identity of the respondent remained anonymous.

Insert figure 1 here

The Figure 1 (Students) shows that most respondents were Faculty of Education females. The age range was within 21-50 years old. The academic levels reveal that most of the respondents registered for Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) level four. The majority belonged to the Department of Early Childhood Studies (ECS).

Insert figure 2 here

Furthermore, the results, Figure 2 (lecturers), indicate that the majority of the respondents were Faculty of Education females. The age ranged from 30 to 55 with the majority falling between the ages 46 and 50. Most lecturers hold a master's qualification and the majority were from the Department of Educational Social Sciences (ESS).

Staff and Students' opinions on teaching and learning tools

With regard to the first question, “What are opinions of UNIZULU staff and students on the role of e-learning in higher education?” The majority of staff and students viewed the tool as useful, easily accessible, economical and flexible. One staff participant stated that *“this is an appropriate tool for teaching and learning as students can learn independently without physical and direct contact with lecturers.”* A student concurred, indicating that *“one can easily adapt to this system and it is user friendly.”* Another said in support: *“...it is most beneficial to both lecturers and students and can limit plagiarism.”* This item revealed that both staff and students acknowledged the benefits and importance of e-learning in the faculty.

E-learning usage

Participants were asked whether they used e-learning as a tool of teaching and learning. Nearly all the staff did not use e-learning because they lacked understanding of e-learning-related activities and were not computer illiterate. One lecturer asked *“How can I use e-learning because I don’t even know what is e-learning and I am lacking computer skills.”* Nonetheless some students reported using e-learning to access teaching materials. One said *“I use e-learning to submit assignments and as a tool of social networking.”* Another said *“I only used it to write the EPLO test”*. The information gathered that there was limited use of e-learning resources in teaching and learning in the faculty. The data revealed that technology was used by individual staff and students mainly through activities such as module guides, social networking, PowerPoint presentations, research and e-mailing.

Challenges in using e-learning

Responding to the question “What challenges do staff and students experience in using e-learning?” A staff member commented: *“It is not easy because equipment has been stolen from the classrooms.”* Another lecturer added *“the faculty must have its own computer lab to accommodate our students.”* A student cautioned that although e-learning is useful and needed to advance learning, there are many challenges: *“we have a network problem and shortage of computers in computer labs.”* Another student supported this statement: *“some of the computers are not working in the labs.”* Another added: *“even if I would love to use e-learning but computers are insufficient.”* Both lecturers and students cited lack of resources such as computer laboratories, data projectors and supplementary ICT equipment.

Strategies to encourage e-learning usage

When participants were asked, “What role could the university management play in encouraging both staff and students to utilize e-learning in teaching and learning”, all felt that there was a need for the institution to improve the infrastructure and other university facilities. They also felt that for effective implementation of e-learning, support and maintenance of equipment, training and staff development are essential. In support of this view a student said: *“...I think the university needs to provide us with laptops, maintaining network facilities and build more computer labs.”* A member of staff stated: *“Technical staff should maintain the internet connection so that it will be always be effective.”* *There is also a need to maintain the proxy server”.* Another lecturer raised the concern that of training and direction: *“I think regular workshops are needed on e-learning and the faculties must develop e-learning policy.”* One lecturer observed that UNIZULU students lack sense of ownership of the university property hence the missing of necessary equipment in the lecture rooms. *“I think our students need to change their mindset concerning the university property since computers are disappearing, data projectors are vandalized.”* *Motivation and encouragement from staff to demand the use of e-learning are also essential.* Another lecturer gave a different view: *“as staff and students we need to change our attitude towards e-learning and computer usage.”*

The lecturers’ opinions reflected a continuum on the issue of e-learning. All supported e-learning and none had totally rejected it. They expressed their concerns that individuals did not use e-learning in this institution because of limited support, inadequate training and lack of infrastructure. Others were irregularly using e-learning.

E-learning specialists

The second set of interviews conducted with one specialist from the ICT unit and one staff member in a managerial position offered further information about e-learning. From responses to the question *“Do you think that the Faculty of Education at UNIZULU has an enabling structure for the implementation of e-learning? Why and why not ?”* it emerged that there were opposing opinions regarding the ability of Faculty of Education to implement e-learning. The personnel in managerial position stated that the institution did not have sufficient working structures commented: *“In all honesty, I don’t know. I am aware that*

institutionally the enabling structure is poor, and I therefore presume that the same applies to the Faculty of Education.” By contrast, the ICT specialist was optimistic about the Faculty of Education’s implementation of e-learning because of the continuous training and development conducted by the Academic Development Unit (ADU). He stated that: “I’m not aware of what enabling conditions are in the Faculty of Education regarding e-learning, but there are driving forces in the Faculty where lecturers are teaching computer literacy modules, that exposes students to e-learning component and also financial support from National Department of Education.”

Lecturers are assisted through ADU, running workshops on e-learning and also a grant from the Department of Education nationally through Deputy Vice Chancellor (DVC) - Research and Academic Development. This grant will assist to revive e-learning committee to drive the initiative.” The different opinions on enabling structures about the Faculty of Education’s position to implement e-learning reflect the intermediate state of e-learning in the faculty.

In answer to the question: “What do you perceive to be the benefits of using e-learning at UNIZULU?” the participants perceived e-learning as most beneficial at UNIZULU. In a similar vein, the personnel in managerial position declared that: “It is a convenient alternative method of conveying knowledge to a large number of students, and also in assessing large numbers. Students can access materials in their own time and at their convenience. It familiarizes students with electronic skills. In many instances students will receive the learning through a medium that enhances learning. More learning resources are easily available.” Supporting these comments, the ICT specialist indicated that: “to ascertain quality assurance, e-learning maintains a certain standard of education according to the National Qualification Framework (NQF). It also allows lecturers to develop module templates and promote students’ accessibility of teaching and learning materials.” These views reflected the commonly held view that e-learning in higher education institutions is the future effective teaching and learning.

Participants were also asked: “What challenges do you think may hinder the implementation of e-learning in the Faculty of education?” All highlighted a number of challenges that can hinder e-learning implementation in the Faculty of Education and across the institution. The DVC cited: “Insufficient infrastructure; poorly trained staff with little or no knowledge of e-learning methodologies.” In addition, the ICT specialist observed that “there is lack of students’ quality access to e-learning resources versus to a number of students.” He also opined that “communication systems are not good, no decent lecture facilities and high student lecture ratio.” We concluded that management was aware of the challenges posed by

poor infrastructure, lack of skills in e-learning, student-lecturer ratio, 52:1 (University of Zululand 2010) and communication.

Responses varied regarding acceleration of the implementation of e-learning. We asked the question: *“What do you think should be done to accelerate the implementation of e-learning in the Faculty of Education?”* The personnel in managerial position responded as follows: *“There are budget constraints. Firstly, the faculty must develop an e-learning vision and e-learning culture. Train staff so that they are not scared of electronic service delivery. Re-curricularise. One can’t teach current materials electronically. It requires a major overhaul of curriculum and methodologies.”* The respondent from the ICT unit attested that: *“we need to prioritize our resources and determine that all students are knowledgeable, support from the management side needs to be strengthened.”* These responses outline important steps that could be translated into a feasible implementation framework.

Responses to the question: *“What policies and systems are in place regarding e-learning at UNIZULU?”* acknowledged the presence of numerous policies at the university but none specifically on e-learning. This came out from the comment from the personnel in managerial position. *“There are a number of general policies that are related to e-learning. I think an e-learning policy is currently being developed.”* The ICT specialist also confirmed that *“There is no policy specifically on e-learning.”* These participants acknowledged the importance of policy on e-learning as a driver of implementation. The absence of such a policy at UNIZULU resulted in what the ICT specialist called an “island approach” with lecturers practicing uncoordinated individual e-learning activities.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study revealed that e-learning may be used to improve teaching and learning, encourage learners’ commitment and also achieve envisaged learning outcomes. These findings concur with Emelyanova and Voronina (2014) on their investigation on “university’s students and teachers perceptions of learning management system” in Russia.

. Our study also exposed that both staff and students were optimistic regarding the role of e-learning as a tool of teaching and learning, even though its implementation was uncoordinated and individualistic. The study also reflected the fact that students were better acquainted with e-learning than staff. For instance, students were more attuned to e-learning but not aware of its usefulness, whereas staff lacked e-learning methodologies. In line with our findings, Dlodlo and Isabirye (2014), cite lack of institutional support, uncoordinated e-

learning activities, lack of e-learning culture as some of the factors that affect the use of e-learning in universities. In the light of the foregoing discussion, this is indicative that e-learning is still in a developmental stage in most HEIs, therefore one should expect shortage of resources with regards to e-learning.

All participants in this study advocated for regular staff development training on e-learning. When respondents were asked whether they used this tool, most indicated that they did not. Both staff and students viewed e-learning as suitable for teaching and learning because it is very convenient, increases the level of understanding to students, promotes creativity and independent learning, and caters for huge student numbers. Our findings further revealed that staff' and students' computer illiteracy and lack of infrastructure put obstacles in the way of implementation of e-learning in the institution. These findings are similar to those of Awidi (2008), who stated that institutional and organizational culture affects the implementation of e-learning. Staff needs to undergo training in computer skills and ICT in order to bolster their confidence in operating computers and ICT.

There were challenges that militated against the implementation of e-learning in the Faculty. According to Chitanana (2008), proper, fully operational and adequate infrastructure is a prerequisite for the implementation successful e-learning. Chitanana (2008), as well as our study revealed that most lecturers had access to computers in their offices and use them for emailing, research and PowerPoint presentation, but did not apply e-learning pedagogics and methodologies. Some of the challenges enunciated in our study were low computer-student ratio, lack of computer access, lack of policy on e-learning, poor and inadequate e-learning facilities, lack of training for staff and lack of funding.

The successful implementation of e-learning at UNIZULU and in the Faculty of Education in particular, will depend on various strategies that are "supplementary, complementary, and independent" Chitanana (2008). Some key issues emanating from the findings represented the determination of UNIZULU in implementing e-learning, such as the establishment of an e-learning committee, funding from the Department of Higher Education, crafting of policy on e-learning and determination by stakeholders to embark on e-learning. These issues are expected to form the basis of the strategy towards implementing e-learning.

CONCLUSION

The study revealed that e-learning is very important in helping academic staff and students to achieve intended teaching and learning outcomes in higher learning institutions. For

instance, it facilitates teaching and learning because academic staff and students can interact online to reduce physical contact. In other words, teaching and learning can be more effective if e-learning is appropriately utilized. However there is still more challenges that still need to be addressed to enhance its implementation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In response to the recommendations and suggestions made by participants, a strategy could be developed that sets in motion processes leading to a successful intervention programme.

It would include:

- Development of an e-learning all-inclusive policy in the Faculty;
- Maintain positive personnel attitudes and develop a sense of ownership towards e-learning resources
- To protect e-learning resources security should be tightened up
- Provision of special software for disabled people in the university library;
- Formation of an e-learning committee to fast-track e-learning implementation;
- Provision of adequately resourced computer laboratories and technical support;
- Development and training of lecturers through regular workshops (with an action plan for skill development programmes);
- .

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Figure 1. Distribution of students (n = 65)

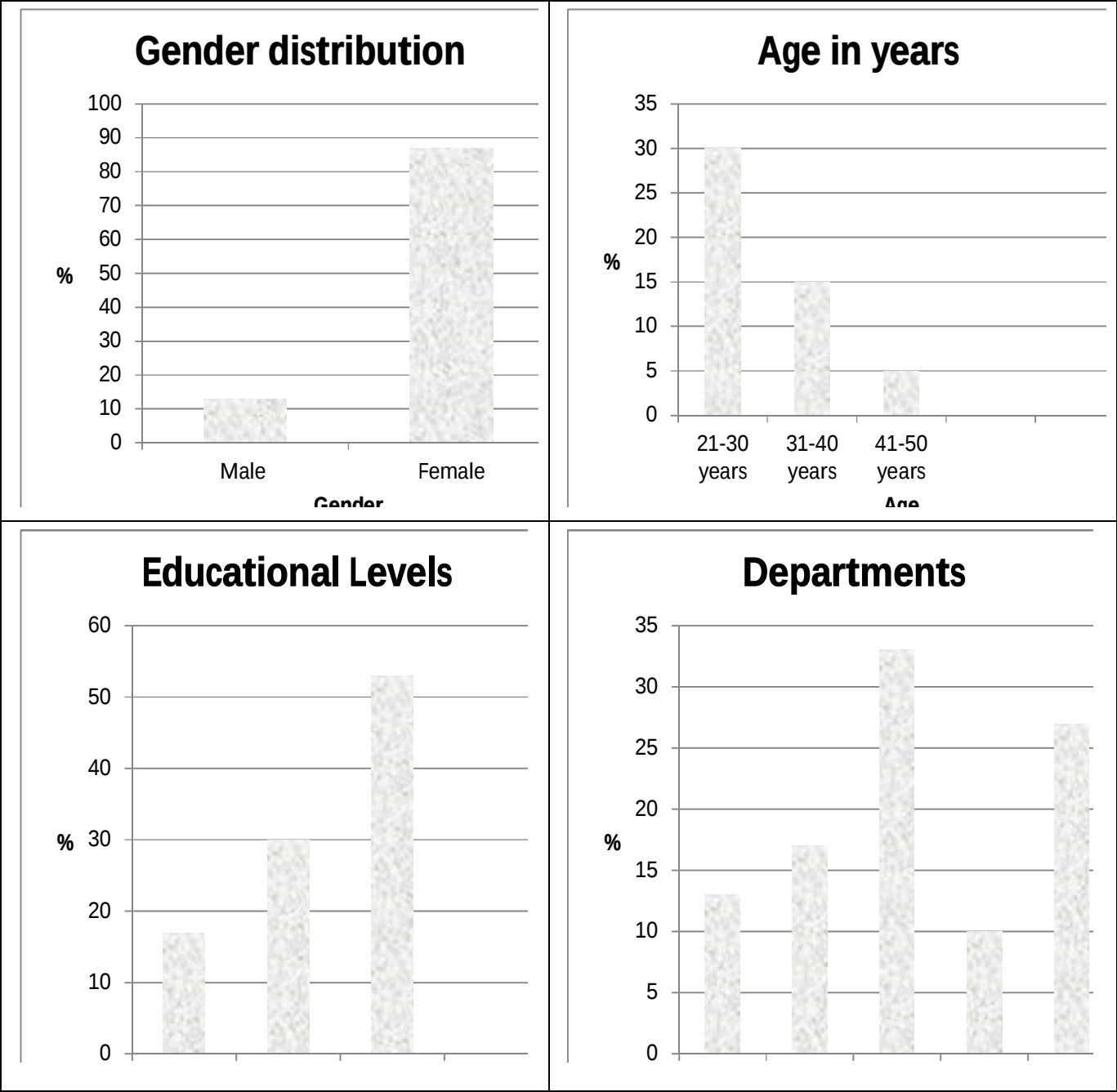
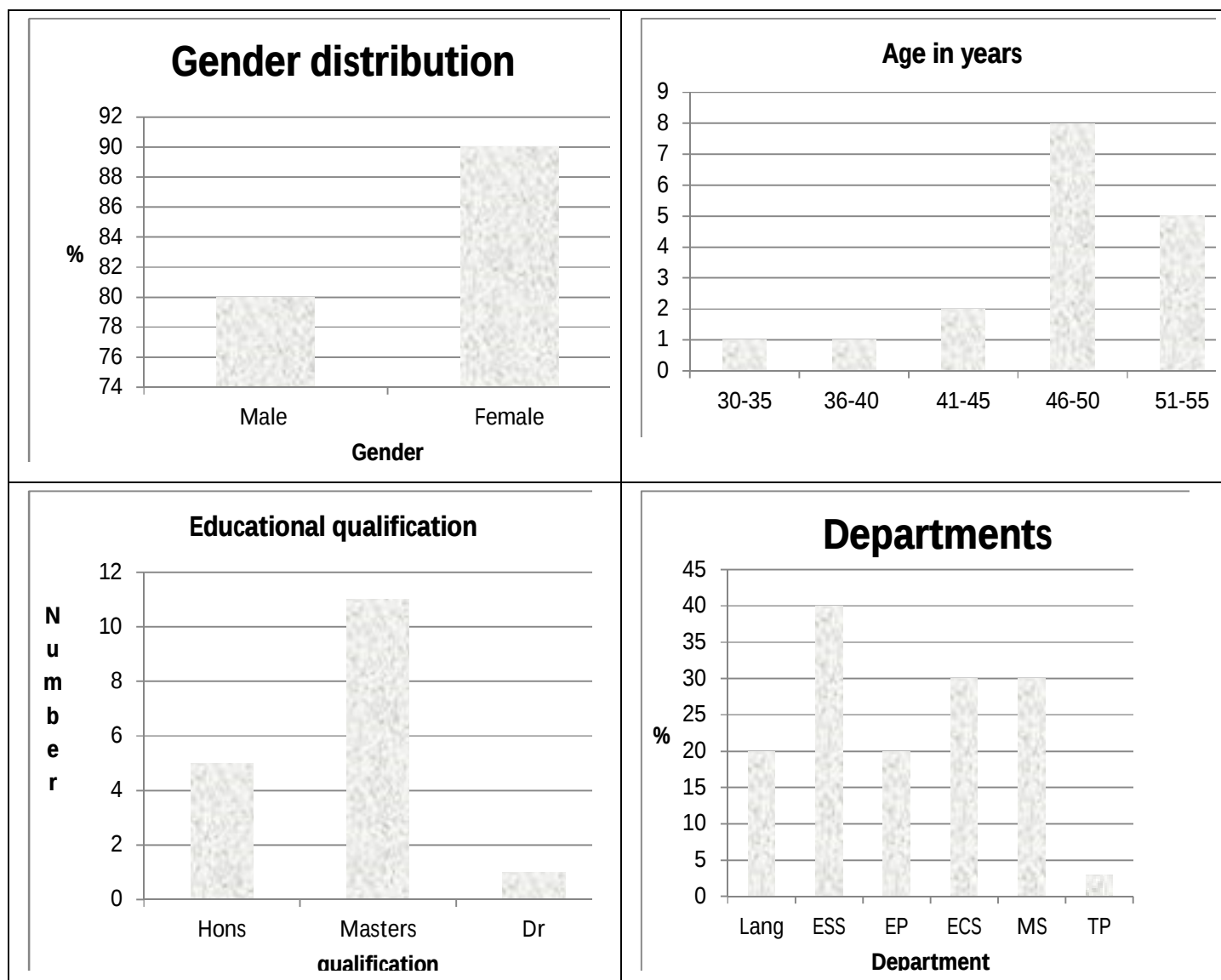


Figure 2. Distribution of staff (n = 20)





03/06/2014

Administrative Editor

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Dear Administrative Editor

RE: SUBMISSION OF MANUSCRIPT

We hereby submit a manuscript entitled “Staff and students’ opinions on the role of e-learning in a comprehensive South African university” to be considered for publication as a research article in the journal **International Journal of Educational Sciences (Int J Edu Sci)**. There are three files in all: the main manuscript, names of the reviewers and 1 file of figures (containing eight figures).

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This article reveals that most staff and students at UNIZULU were optimistic about the possibilities offered by e-learning, yet remained antagonistic to its use. The participants identified key problem areas that they felt ought to be overcome, and both staff and students

expressed the need for training, exposure and more support from management to enable them to utilize e-learning successfully. We believe these findings will be of interest to the readers of your journal.

We declare that this manuscript is original, has not been published before and is not currently being considered for publication elsewhere. All authors of this paper have read and approved the final version submitted for review.

Sincerely

Mr. M.G Tshabalala

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