Library Philosophy and Practice (e-journal)   Libraries at University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Spring 5-11-2022

Staying safe while teaching and learning online in Library and Information Science training schools in Uganda: The case of Makerere University

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Staying safe while teaching and learning online in Library and Information Science training schools in Uganda: The case of Makerere University

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Theme: Promoting awareness of and developing tools for Digital Wellness

Abstract

Purpose: This purpose of the paper was to determine the perceived safety Ugandan LIS students and academics in electronic learning spaces and recommend strategies to promote safety for LIS scholars in online spaces.

Methodology: An online questionnaire with structured questions was sent out to undergraduate and graduate LIS students at Makerere University attracting over ninety (91) responses. Two (2) academic staff members were interviewed to obtain staff perspectives. Secondary data were collected from documents that have been drafted to guide online learning in Makerere University and Uganda.

Findings: Findings of the study indicated that LIS academics in at Makerere University and students were able to quickly adopt e-learning even before mandatory shift caused by COVID-19. This was partly because of early university effort to encourage blended learning. Whereas the University had adopted its own e-learning platform and official zoom licenses to all LIS academic staff other electronic tools and online resources to enhance their teaching experiences. academic staff were given lee way to However, there was no evidence of institutional framework to encourage safety for both staff and students on any of the learning platforms.

Practical implications: The implications of the results are that

(1) Ugandan LIS academics are well fairly well prepared to engage in continuous pedagogy even in the dace of epidemics that force closure of physical classes.
(2) Universities that adopt e-learning should include safety for both staff and students in when designing and running of online learning spaces.
(3) LIS departments should design subject own tools for orienting staff and students when any new e-learning tool is adopted.

Key words: Online learning, LIS education, Safety, Digital Wellness

1. Introduction

Xue.. et al (2019) note that the survival and thriving of Library and Information Science (LIS) education depends on a healthy interest and number. LIS education in Africa has witnessed the expansion and growth in the number of students enrolled, academic programmes, mode of study

and curriculum diversification (Ocholla & Bothma, 2007; Kacunguzi & Samuel, 2016). In Uganda since the first LIS school opened in 1963, there has been evidence of the number of library schools has growing with an equally notable changes in LIS curricular (Okello-Obura and Kigongo-Bukenya, 2011). Perhaps there is no single factor that changed the way LIS pedagogy has been delivered in the most recent years as the sudden adoption of electronic learning in the wake of COVID 19 (Majanja, 2020).

This purpose of the paper was to determine the perceived safety Ugandan LIS students and academics in electronic learning spaces and recommend strategies to promote safety for LIS scholars in online spaces.

2. Background

Reimers … et al (2020) postulated that owing to COVID 19 and education institutions around the world had to speedily develop responses to enable learning continuity. For many institutions, these responses were done initially developed to save the academic year (Hassan and Islam, 2020; Ramrathan, 2020).

In the wake COVID-19 in March 2020, education institutions in Uganda at all levels including universities were closed. The opening of the same was initially pegged on the readiness of the capacity of the institutions to engage learners in online spaces. Therefore, there was an increased demand of open, distance and electronic learning enable the different academic departments complete their respective academic programmes whilst observing the health guidelines.

2.1 Application of electronic learning in LIS education

The term electronic learning (e-learning) has a variety of meanings in different studies. Earlier studies defined this concept as learning that adopts the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) (Kumbhar, 2009). However, with technological developments in ICT to more complex systems the definition of e-learning has been expanded (Tsabedze, 2020, Majanja, 2020).

Kumbhar (2009) urges that in a LIS pedagogical framework, e-learning has got the following characteristics; remote Learner-Teacher, electronic course material, learner centered thinking, electronic communication platforms, anytime learning, anywhere learning, just in time learning, use of the Internet, collaborative and active learner participation.

Now, the extent of adoption of this may vary from one institution to another. In fact, Hazeri & Farzin-Yazdi (2015) note that e-learning systems are more applicable for particular courses in LIS while achieving less effectiveness in others (Hazeri & Farzin-Yazdi, 2015).

Today, education which adopts little or no form of technology is regarded as Education 1.0, while that which adopts some degree of technology Education 2.0, and that which adopts a significant amount of technologies Education 3.0 who projections even made for a more complex shift that will lead to Education 4.0 (Salmon, 2019).

Technologies adopted for e-learning for LIS education may vary from course management systems, e-mail platforms, messaging technologies, live meeting systems and blogs (Kumbhar 2009); to adoption of artificial intelligence systems, virtual reality, gamification, and mobile learning systems (Salmon, 2019).

2.2 The case for electronic learning in LIS education

Recent studies have largely presented a relatively favorable attitude of electronic learning in LIS education. Some studies even suggest that electronic learning may be in-person classes, with student learning measured in terms of grades, teacher perceptions of learning, and student perceptions of learning (Swan 2003).

Electronic learning can be beneficial to both the institutions and learners involved in in LIS education.

E-learning may provide different ways to deliver the course information to the online student (Finch, Burrel & McAfee, 2012: Majanja, 2020). This is especially through the adoption of multimedia add-ins which enhances the overall learning experience (Kumbhar, 2009).

Specialists in any field of study can be coopted to facilitate learning sessions as e-learning reduces the costs for accommodation and travelling instructors and speakers (Finch, Burrel & McAfee, 2012).

E-learning has makes it possible for training institutions to reach more distant learners that could not be served by traditional learning methods (Finch, Burrel & McAfee, 2012).

For students; benefits may include enabling learners to access the content multiple times (Kumbhar, 2009); learners learning at their own pace instead of the speed of the whole group; easier and quicker group collaborations with fellow learners and saving time learners of commuting time to learning centres (Finch, Burrel & McAfee, 2012).

Defining safety in online learning spaces

2.3 Safety concerns in e-learning for teachers and learners

While the technology revolution has presented great opportunity to not only reinvent the LIS education experience but also extend education opportunities to the last mile, simply accumulating education technologies in LIS education as opportunities may arise may have its own issues.

The International Federation of Library and Information Associations (IFLA) in its initial statement on adoption of artificial intelligence (AI) tools in library spaces recommended on ethical use of AI technologies in libraries (IFLA, 2020).

Despite the obvious advantages associated with e-learning there are studies that have presented e-learning as somewhat inferior in quality in comparison with learning conducted traditional classroom settings (Tamm, 2019). The critics often argue that the lack of personal contact causes low motivation of students (Swan, 203). There are also questions of suitability of e-learning in some of the practical courses across different programmes including LIS programmes (Swan, 2003; Halder, 2012). Some institutions that have adopted distance and e-learning have been noted to lack clear quality assurance mechanisms to ensure quality online education. Others have been noted not to take note of quality and equity of access by different staff and learners owing to connectivity and socio-economic factors (Tsabedze, 2020; Hasan & Islam, 2020).

It can be argued that electronic learning like the traditional classroom is evolving with new tools and methodologies. As such, issues of quality can be improved with time. Even with issues of accessibility attributed to costs are reducing around the world, including third world.

However, researchers and educators are beginning to get concerned with the issue of online safety in e-learning environments. The Department of Education of the United Kingdom (2020) online safety as institution's "ability *to safeguard, protect while teaching learners and teachers pupils and staff in the acceptable use of technology and communications, internet technologies as well as having established mechanisms in place to identify, intervene in and escalate any incident where appropriate."*

Newman (2017) notes that debates on who is responsible for online safety with some policy makers requiring that education institutions be responsible while others suggesting parents and learners.

There are three areas of risk to both learners and teachers. These include; the nature of the content that is used in learning and how appropriate it is, the nature of contact between learners and teachers and amongst fellow learners, and the nature of behaviour of individuals which may be disruptive or even harmful (Department of Education, 2020). Each of these three areas has subsets of issues that may affect the safety of learners and teachers in varying degrees.

Deloite and EDUCAUSE (2019) note that higher education institutions deal with and possess house a wide variety of data which is sensitive and lucrative data. Such data includes student and staff personal data including social security identity information, financial information, medical information, intellectual property, and cutting-edge research. At the same time higher education institutions generally run open-access culture and conduct decentralised departmental and as well as federated access to data and information makes it a particularly soft targets for unauthorized access, risky Internet usage (Deloite and EDUCAUSE, 2019).

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3   Methodology

The study was underpinned by the pragmatic world view, which allows a researcher to choose a combination of methods, techniques and procedures that best meets the needs and purposes of the study. Based on the purpose of the study, and the type of data needed, a quantitative approach, employing the descriptive survey design was used.

An online questionnaire with structured questions was sent out to undergraduate and graduate LIS students at Makerere University attracting over ninety (91) responses. Two (2) academic staff members were interviewed to obtain staff perspectives. Further data was obtained from policy document regarding Open, Distance and electronic Learning (ODeL).

Data were analysed quantitatively using online survey tool analysis tool, while the unstructured answers were aggregated under themes.

4   Findings and discussions

An existing policy to guide electronic learning

In 2015, Makerere University passed its first policy to guide learning in online spaces. The major items covered in the policy include establishment of an independent unit to oversee the implementation of ODeL related activities, the terms of reference of the said unit, and adoption of electronic learning across university programmes including those under LIS.

An analysis of the content of the policy however revealed that there is no evidence of components that relates to protection of staff and students in this policy. Whereas the University has included components of safety in its IT policies, these are mostly about safety of IT assets and data with no focus on the safety and wellness of learners.

### Access to Internet by staff and students

The data revealed that both staff and students of LIS at Makerere University had high degree of access to Internet. All staff in particular accessed Internet resources on a daily basis Figure 1 below shows at least 81 students out 91 respondents accessed Internet at least on a daily basis. All staff and student respondents accessed Internet using mobile data connectivity. However, as shown in Figure 2 below the students either had own mobile data while others shared with peers or family members, while community centres and Internet cafes used the least by students.

Figure 1: of internet access by students

Figure 2: Mode of access to Internet by students
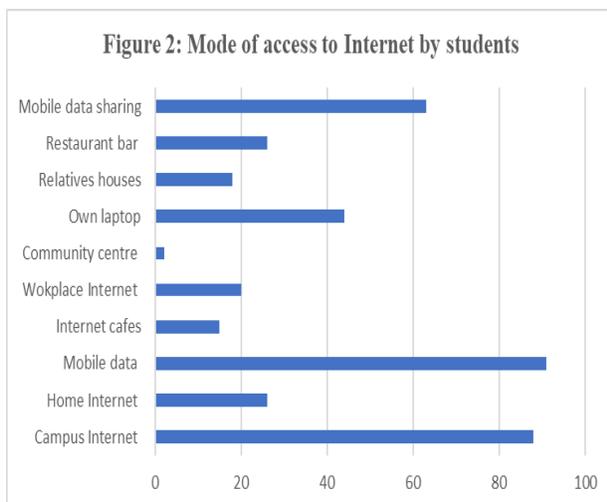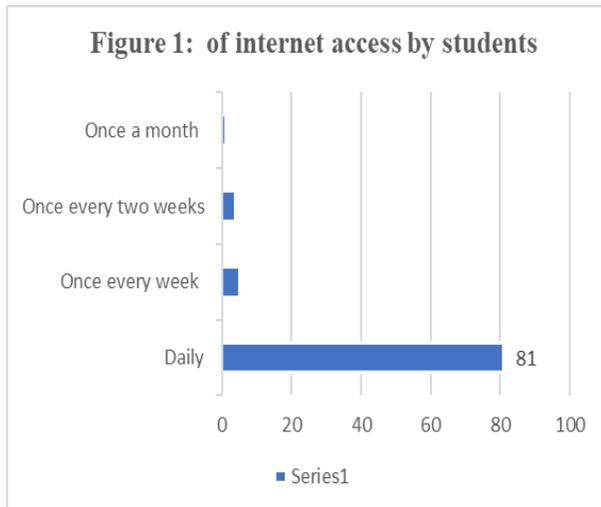
It can therefore be deduced that LIS students and scholars had recognised the place of Internet in their personal and scholarly lives. Therefore, in planning academic programmes among LIS students the Internet and its affordance of e-learning would face little or no resistance owing to accessibility. However, laptop coverage among students was relatively low which presents a challenge which may limit access to scholarly work and conduct of scholarly assignments which requires relatively computers (Majanja, 2020).
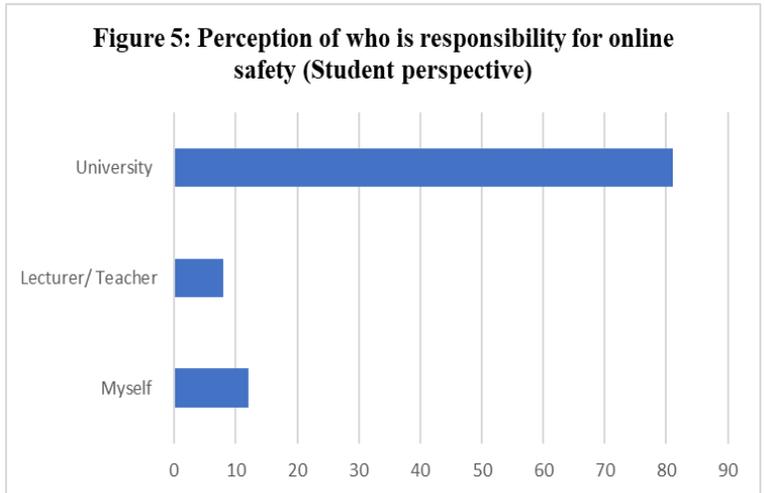
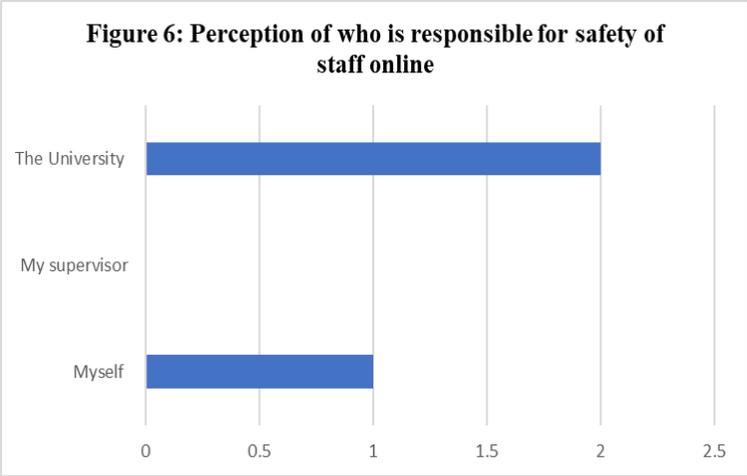**Perception of safety online by students and staff**

The data revealed that both students and staff had a concern for their online safety while they engaged in online activity including e-learning.

Figure 3: Perception of safety online by students

Figure 4: Perception of safety online by staff
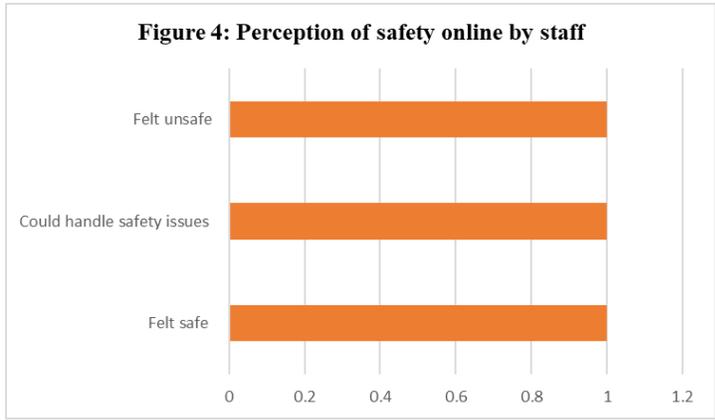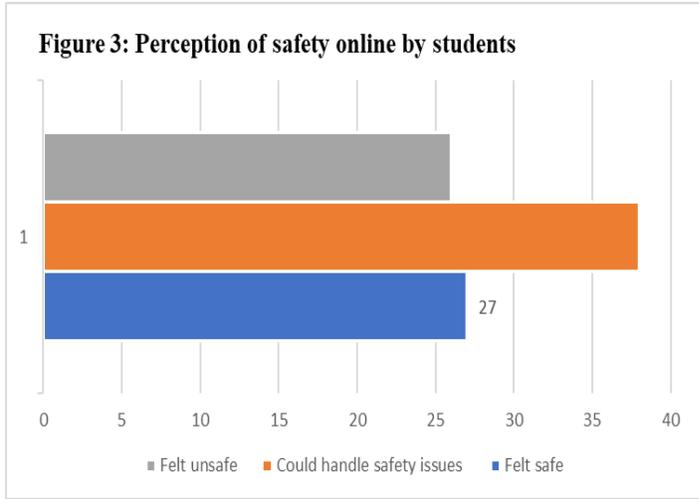
While, there was perceived safety concerns by both learners and teachers, both largely indicated that they could handle issues of safety that they would encounter.

Student and staff perception of who is responsibility for online safety

Figure 5: Perception of who is responsibility for online safety (Student perspective)

Figure 6: Perception of who is responsible for safety of staff online

The University

My supervisor

Myself

0   0.5   1   1.5   2   2.5

As shown in Figures 5 and 6 both LIS students and academics largely placed the responsibility of ensuring online safety in academic spaces on the University itself. This indicates that although in figures 3 and 4, they had expressed that they could handle safety situations, there was a need for the University to take charge of the safety function and design mechanisms to prevent, detect, and respond to safety situations in online spaces for both staff and students.

Perception on whether the University has done enough to enable online safety

Figure 7: Student Perception of whether the University had done enough to enable online safety

No

Yes

0   10   20   30   40   50   60   70   80
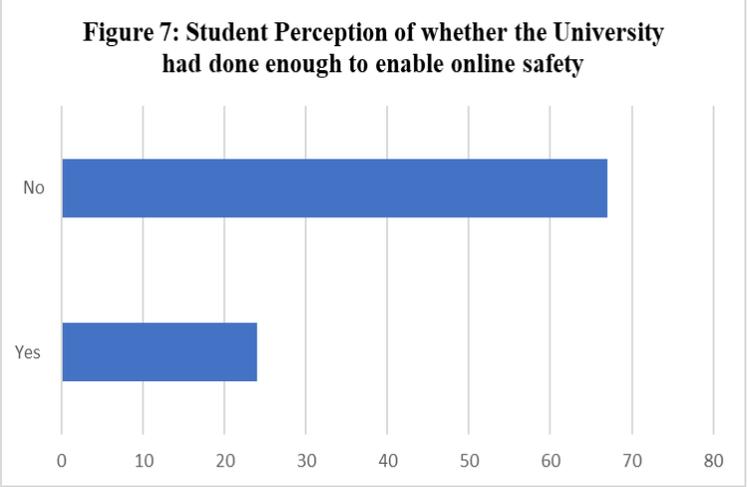
The data revealed that a large section of LIS students and all academic staff surveyed perceived that the University had not done enough to enable online safety in academic spaces. It can therefore be deduced that the University has left it to the students and staff to go about safety in

online spaces to individual effort of those that consider it a concern while creating vulnerable online spaces.

5 Conclusion

In this short study, I set out to determine the perceived safety Ugandan LIS students and academics in electronic learning spaces.

This study confirmed that indeed LIS trainers at Makerere University have actively adopted online learning to instruct LIS students at both undergraduate and graduate levels. However, there is no evidence of any guidelines to ensure safety for students and lecturers (instructors) in the online spaces.

With the adoption of ICTs in education especially newer innovations in education and the increased demand for online pedagogy, wellness cannot simply be left to teachers and students. As institutions like Makerere aim at fulfilling their core mandates and finishing "the academic" calendars, issues of wellness and safety in online spaces have got to be incorporated in the culture of staff and student orientation. Whilst studies on discipline specific safety in online learning spaces are still scanty different academic units should be required to produce safety guidelines for e-learning in their respective disciplines. These should be coordinated by a central unit.

Practical implications: The implications of the results are that

(1) Ugandan LIS academics are well fairly well prepared to engage in continuous pedagogy even in the dace of epidemics that force closure of physical classes.
(2) Universities that adopt e-learning should include safety for both staff and students in when designing and running of online learning spaces.
(3) LIS departments should design subject own tools for orienting staff and students when any new e-learning tool is adopted.

Availability of data and materials

All of the relevant raw data of this study will be available from Francis Ssekitto (corresponding author) for scientists who wish to use them for non-commercial purposes.

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