***ukuFUNda virtual school* (UVS)[[1]](#footnote-1)**

The *ukuFUNda virtual school* (or UVS) is an innovative m-learning service, conceptualized in 2013 and launched in September 2014 by a partnership comprising the South African Department of Basic Education, UNICEF, and the Reach Trust (formerly known as Mxit Reach). It was the DBE’s first attempt to develop and mobile-learning portal.

This overarching expected outcome was to be attained through three outputs:

* Output 1: A virtual school mobile application that provides learners, teachers, and parents with quality educational tools is developed and deployed.
* Output 2: Educators, learners and parents use virtual school.
* Output 3: UVS is utilised for collecting and dissemination of strategic information.

The UVS is a portal that uses a social-networking platform (Mxit) – on feature phones - to provide access to learning resources and content, counselling and safety services and other value-added services and programmes via mobile technologies. The platform, hosted on a server making use of a SQL database, aggregates pre-existing learning and psycho-social applications (‘apps’), but also new, bespoke apps developed specifically for the UVS. The UVS makes applications available to users through three views: a learner view, a teacher view, and a parent view.

Several applications were included in the UVS to contribute to achieving these objectives. However, there are differences between: (1) what was planned; (2) what was initially included; and (3) what was visible at the time of the evaluation. It must be noted that although the identities of the specific applications changed over time, the focus of the apps (viz. psycho/social and academic support) did not change. Based on data measuring messages to and messages from the service for the evaluation period, 1,048,576 users interacted with the service in some way, sending and/or receiving at least one message on the service. Of these, 179,074 (17.1% of the total) individuals - 150,321 learners; 7,290 teachers; and 21,463 parents (from 8,809 different schools) - took the additional step of registering for the service during the evaluation period.

In total, users at least touched the service during the period under evaluation. Of the 1,048,576 users, 807,491 had touched the service more than once (as measured by more than one message being sent/received), approximately 50% had sent/received 11 or fewer messages. There was a small number of 1,301 users (0.16% of the total) with exceptionally high usage, who sent/received more than 10,000 messages.

There were almost 3.5 million sessions over the 16-month period, but a bounce rate of over 70%, which means that, in over two-thirds of the sessions, the user did not progress beyond the landing page.

The following issues and weaknesses were identified by at least three stakeholder groups.

1. The UVS needed to be accessed via Mxit, a declining platform.
2. It was reportedly not easy to download and use.
3. Once downloaded, the interface/navigation process was not user-friendly, involving too many steps and menus to locate specific services and apps.
4. Although the service was relatively affordable to use, it still required paid-for data, and it was observed that not everyone could afford data bundles.

**Questions for group work**

1. As a Consultant hired by UNICEF to help DBE design ‘ukuFUNda 2.0’, you are tasked with coming up with strategies, based on the lessons learnt to address: a). effectiveness; b). efficiency; and, c). equity of M-Learning solutions.
2. A major weakness of ukuFUNda was the lack of a coherent theory of change. What would be your proposals for a robust theory of change on ICT and equity in education?

1. *ukuFUNda* is a Zulu word meaning 'learning to grow' [↑](#footnote-ref-1)