The Impact of Early Exposure to ICT on The Academic Performance of Students.
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Executive Summary

The aim of this project is to provide an answer to the question '' could exposure to learning technologies before online studies determine the performance of students''?   To do this, research was carried out in the Faculty of Science and Technology (FST) at the University of Westminster where by online questionnaires were sent to students studying by distance learning to generate their responses on certain variables such as, exposure to ICT, ICT competency skills and their perception on the impact of ICT skills on their studies. Moreover, it is evident that the University of Westminster has a partnership with the Medical Research Council Unit, The Gambia and students from this unit frequently enrol on the distance learning foundation degree in Biomedical science course. Therefore we deemed it important to assess the ICT skills of this group of students' in-order to provide an idea on how ICT knowledgeable they are before taking up a distance learning course. We decided to design a paper version of the same questionnaire sent to the Westminster students for distribution at the University of Gambia.

Data collected was analysed separately for both UK students and Gambia student to answer the research question. Results show the similarities in the early exposure to ICT between the UK and Gambia component of the research. Both populations also exhibit similar perception about the influence of ICT on their academic performance. 71.4% of the UK students agreed that their ICT skills affect their academic performance while 59.5% of the Gambian students agreed.

Methods

The researcher designed an online questionnaire of 16 questions using Google Forms and shared the link to the questionnaire on Blackboard from where distance learning students within the Faculty of Science and Technology can access it. Project team members also visited the University of the Gambia's administration to discuss the project with them and to obtain permission to carry out the research. The same team meets with the students to explain to them the motives behind the project and what their participation will mean. Data from the questionnaires were entered on a database and later exported in a spreadsheet followed by the rearrangement of the data in such a ways that analysis will be easy.

Using Microsoft Excel, we calculated the number of students who had access to computer at home, high school and work. We then categorized the competency skills of the students using grade system whereby Grade 1 represents (Introductory), Grade 2 (Basic), Grade 3 (Intermediate) and Grade 4 (Advanced) respectively. Furthermore, the responses from the questions assessing the students' perception on the impact of ICT on their studies were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Finally, we compared the ICT competency of the different years of study (year 1,2,3,4, or more).

The figures below are data collected on students exposure to technology and their level of competence in ICT.
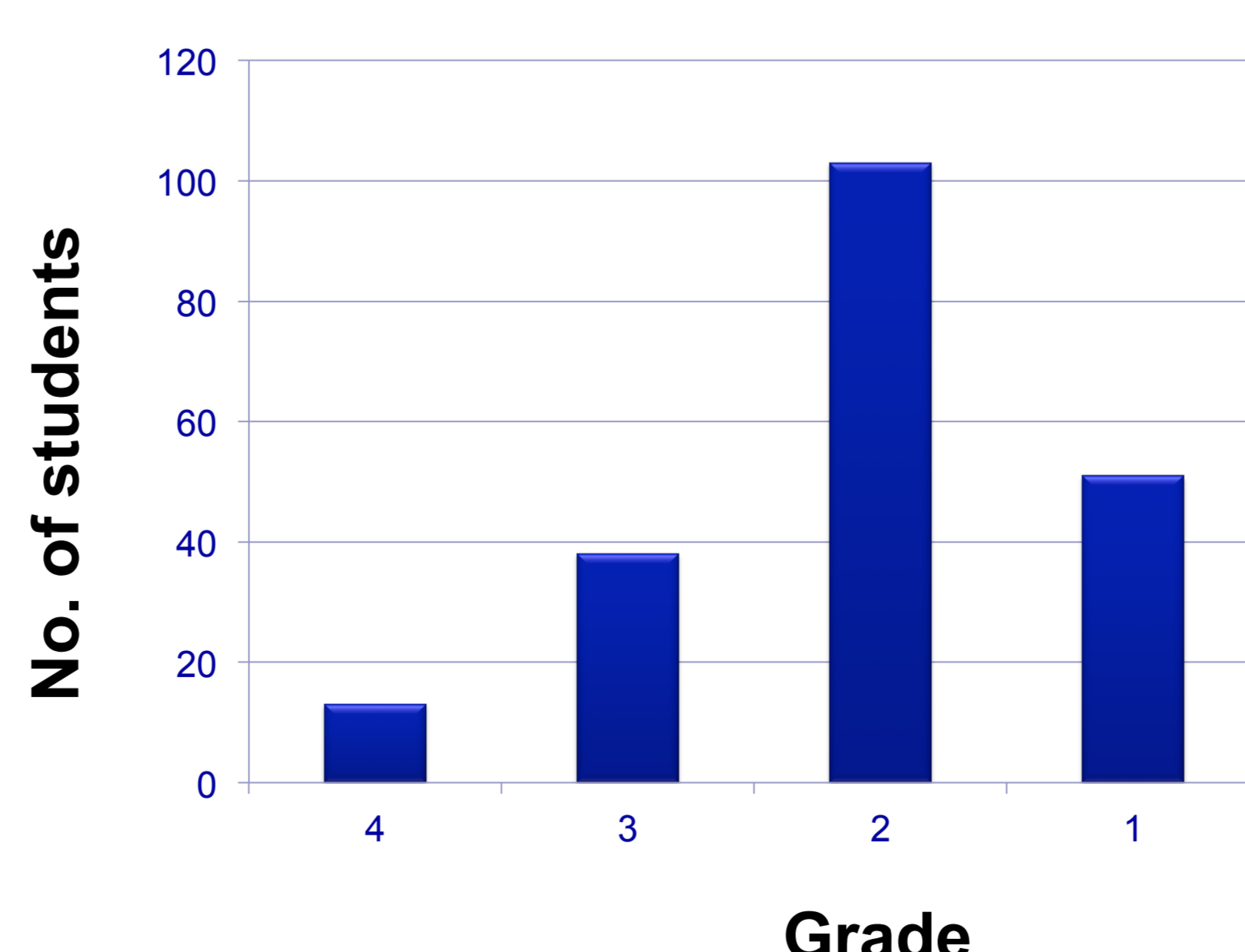
University of Westminster's Results

Table 1. UK Students' exposure to ICT.

	High School	High School, Home & Work	Home & Work	Work
No. Of students	2	8	2	2
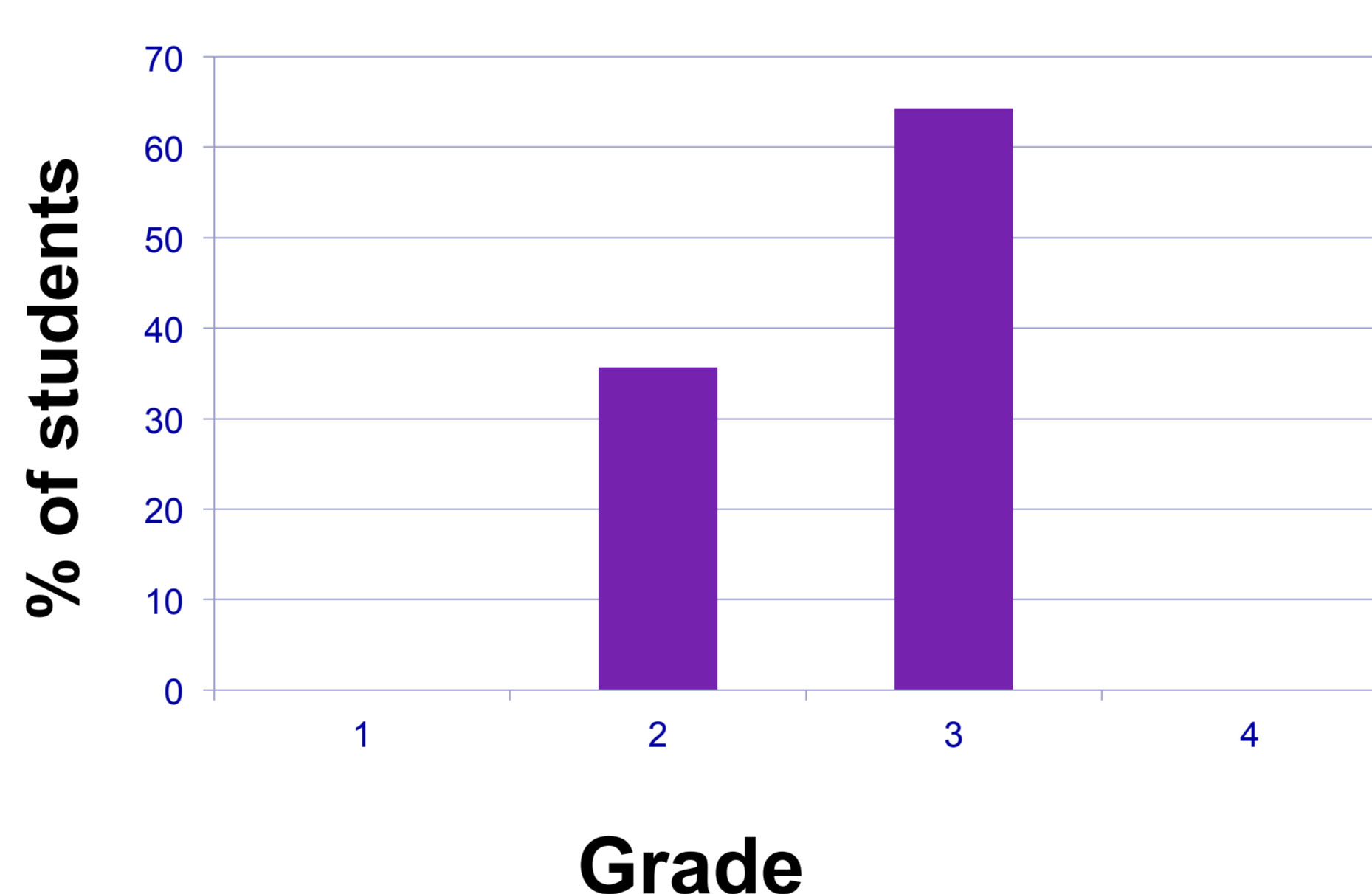
Graphical representation of UK students' ICT competency level

University of Gambia's Results

Graphical representation of Gambia students' ICT competency level

Discussion

This data shows that considerably a high number of UK students studying by distance learning has been exposed to ICT prior to enrolling in their course of studies. This group's ICT competency skills fall under grade 2 and 3 of the competency grading designed for this study.
On the other hand, the Gambia data shows similar trend in the early exposure to ICT prior to university studies. However, majority of the Gambian students in this studies fall under grade 2 (Basic) of the competency grading system.

Recommendations

There is a need to know the ICT competency skills of students enrolling on distance learning courses so as to know if they need special technical help or education on ICT tools they will be using during the course of their studies.
Although beyond the capacity of the University of Westminster, learning institutions (high schools most especially) should ensure thorough teaching of ICT to students so that they will acquire the necessary skills before entering University for either distance learning of the traditional form of learning.
There should be a follow-up study that will include distance learning students from all the faculties.

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