Exploring Partnerships between Unisa and Education Stakeholders in Supporting Adult Learners at a Distance

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ABSTRACT Educating adults through distance education, provides opportunities for those who for one reason or the other cannot attend full time studies. Inadequate support for distance learners across the world has prompted some commentators to question the effectiveness of using distance education as a tool for addressing the legacies of the past and as a skills development strategy in South Africa. The present research explored how partnerships between education stakeholders can be used as a way of addressing the gaps in learner support systems among students in general and adult learners in particular. The author of the present study is of the view that and distance education providers such as Unisa can tap into the support structures of the stakeholders to address the gaps in the system to enable students to have enduring distance education experience. The study uses document analysis and literature review to identify stakeholders and some of the best practices some distance providing institutions across the world are using to support their adult learners studying through distance.

INTRODUCTION

A stakeholder is an individual or group with an interest in the success of an organisation in fulfilling its mission-delivering intended results and maintaining the viability of its products, services and outcomes over time (Healey et al. 2014). Some of the key education stakeholders include students, parents, school staff, and education officials at different levels, school boards, tax payers, the business community, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and other community members. Distance education provides opportunities for those who, for one reason or the other, cannot attend full time studies. The apartheid system prevented a large section of people from the previously disadvantaged groups from accessing education in general and tertiary education in particular. Zuhairi et al. (2013) intimate that open and distance learning has been touted by many governments as one of the most effective means for expanding access and engaging community participation in quality higher education that can be afforded by a large segment of society. Meanwhile the current South African economy is knowledge-based which requires people to have the necessary education and skills for them to be able to participate in. A lot of the previously disadvantaged individuals (PDIs) have decided to acquire tertiary education to upgrade their qualifications or acquire skills through distance learning

through the University of South Africa, which is one of the largest distance education providers in the world. Despite the numerous opportunities distance education offers for adult learners, it faces serious challenges as it is not easy to afford the learners the needed support for most of them to succeed in a developing country such as South Africa. Quan-Baffour (2005) argued that logistical, learning, family/social and economic challenges take a lot of the time and efforts of adult learners, leaving them with limited time for their studies. Zuhairi et al. (2013) argued that, despite the fact that ODL institutions offer wider opportunity for students in the widest sense, retention and guiding them successfully to develop the competencies that are relevant and useful to the world of work continue to be challenges for almost all ODL institutions. These reasons are compelling for support structures such as face-to-face tutorials, peer support, in-text support, administrative support etc. to be used to help adult learners who study through distance. The views of Lowry (1989) and Quan-Baffour (2005) point to the difficult positions and challenges adult learners find themselves in as learners, workers, parents etc.

A lot of institutions that provide distance education sometimes do not have the necessary support structures in place which is 'recipe' for learner attrition (Quan-Baffour 2005). It is, therefore, important for institutions such as UNISA which are mainly distance education pro-

viders to give the needed support to its learners who happen to be adult learners in most cases. The lack of the needed support for distance learners across the world has prompted some commentators to question the effectiveness of using distance education as a tool for addressing the legacies of the past and as a skills development strategy in South Africa. A lot of learners are opting to study through distance in most countries including South Africa these days for diverse reasons and a lot of institutions are offering some form of their programs through distance. Connick (1997) points out that distance education has become one of the most powerful emerging trends in education. He adds that most countries have established distance education institutions in their countries. Cliath (2000) intimates that the principal aim of learner support is to optimise the teaching and learning processes in order to enable pupils with difficulties to achieve adequate levels of proficiency in literacy and numeracy before leaving school. He adds that the subsidiary aims for the provision of learner support services for students with low achievement and/or learning difficulties are to enable these learners to participate in the curriculum for their class; develop positive self-esteem and positive attitudes about school and learning; to monitor their own learning and become independent learners; provide supplementary teaching support resources for pupils in English or mathematics; involve parents in supporting learners in their learning through effective parent-support programs; promote collaboration among teachers in the implementation of whole-school policies on learning support for these learners; and to establish early intervention programs and other programs designed to enhance and to prevent/reduce difficulties in learning.

The present study explored that the use of partnerships between education stakeholders as a way of addressing the gaps in learner support so that learners in general and adult learners in particular can tap into the support structures the identified stakeholders have that will enable them to have enduring distance education experience. The study uses document analysis and literature review to identify stakeholders and some of the best practices some DE Institutions across the world are using to support their adult learners studying through distance.

Theoretical Framework

The study is underpinned by Huxham and Vangen's (2005) notion of collaborative advantage which alludes that both the common goal and individual goals of companies or organisations are forwarded by collaborating – in particular, they referred to the ability for partnerships between public sector organisations and those of non-profit organisations to address social issues that would otherwise fall between gap. Williams and Sullivan (2007) aver that the necessity for partnerships and collaborations can be viewed at both, the individual and organisational levels. They add that the main driving forces and key motivations are most often generated from within individuals and organisations, and as a result of factors and influences in the external environment. The need for partnerships and collaboration for learner support in the Unisa context is very important as the institution has over 300,000 registered students with diverse backgrounds with different needs. There have been public outcries on the quality of both basic and higher education in South Africa in recent years. Unisa, as the main ODL institution in the Southern African region has been criticised from different sectors of the society for not providing the needed support to enable her students to achieve their goals. The need for the education sector to address the problems of poverty, unemployment, inequality, the HIV/AIDS pandemic, skills shortages etc. as well as remedying the past policies of apartheid has put focus on the education sector. Meanwhile, a lot of the people who need to be assisted happen to be adult learners who for one reason or the other cannot attend full time study. Adult learners face serious learning challenges which include economic, social, psychological issues which call for support. Pityana (2010) noted that the dropout rate from registration to graduation was 10 percent in 2009 and the pass percentage at 55.75 percent.

There is no way Unisa will be able to accomplish and meet the learner support needs of its diverse learners without some form of collaboration and partnerships with the different stakeholders in the education enterprise. Huxham and Vangen's (2005) theory of collaborative advantage is relevant and applicable to the need for partnerships and collaborations between Unisa and other institutions and organisations to work

together to provide the needed support for its learners studying through the ODL mode of delivery.

Problem Statement

Unisa uses ODL as the main delivery mode to all its students who are over 300,000 across the globe. The physical separation between the students and the institution calls for effective learner support systems to ensure that the students realise their educational goals. There are different support systems in place at Unisa which include face-to-face tutorials and mediated support. Moore (1993) categorised learner support systems as cognitive/academic support; administrative/systemic support and affective support. Despite the existence of all these support structures, a preliminary interview with a number of students especially in the rural areas revealed that they are not able to access the support services for their studies which leads to high dropout rates and impacts on the completion rates of students. Meanwhile, there are a lot of community/private and state resources and institutions that are scattered across the country that can be used by Unisa through collaboration and partnerships with organizations at the local level to assist students to realise their goals. The question that arises out of the problem statement could be posed thus:

In which ways can education and other stakeholders collaborate through partnerships to support Unisa and other distance learners for them to achieve their educational goals?

Research Questions

1. What are the learner support needs of Unisa's adult learners?
2. What challenges do the students experience in accessing Unisa's support services?
3. Which organisations can Unisa partner with to render learner support services to its adult learners?
4. In which ways can the identified organisations render the support services to Unisa students?

Objectives of the Study

The prime objective of the study was to find out how Unisa can partner/collaborate with oth-er organisations and institutions to render learner support services to its learners. The secondary objectives were:

- To determine the learner support needs of Unisa's adult learners
- To find out the access challenges to the support services Unisa offers to its learners
- To identify possible organisations Unisa can partner with to render support services to its learners
- To find out how the identified organisations can render the support services to the students

DISCUSSION

Necessity for Learner Support

The purpose of learner support is to provide warm and supportive atmosphere for learners which will help them to develop self-confidence and in so doing help them to realise individual academic success and life goals by providing different variety of resources, services, and referrals (Ipaye 2007). He points out that ODL and distance learning institutions often put more emphasis on the development of study material and different strategies of getting the content to their learners. He adds that institutions most often focus on the use of technology to try to bridge the geographical/physical distance or on the personnel to develop the courses or instructional methods for designing technology-based programs. It can be argued that producing study materials through mass production as well as making technology available does not necessarily guarantee that the learner will be able to use them appropriately to ensure their success in the long run.

The different approaches to learner support are supposed to carter for the physical and geographical barriers that are experienced by students in most cases but there are other barriers and distances which are equally important that are not often taken care of by open and distance (ODL) institutions. Some of these distances and barriers go all the way to negate the efforts ODL institutions make in trying to support learners. Ipaye (2007) notes that there are other important "distances" that confront learners which include some socio-psychological factors that may hinder learning or result in learners dropping out of and ODL program.

Some other challenges learners' face included difficulties in understanding study materials or what the technology is leading or asking them to do. Another challenge could be that learners feeling of marginalisation emanating from his/her not seeing the face of a teacher or hearing from him/her. Johnson (2005) for example identified alienation as contributing to poor learner achievement. She defined alienation as the state of experience of being isolated from a group activity to which one should be involved. Some aspects of alienation were identified by Johnson (2005) as powerlessness, normlessness, meaninglessness, and social isolation. Other barriers that may negatively impact on an ODL learner could be linguistic, including language of the study material and its reliability; culture, including the culture of reading and studying; motivation; inadequate skills or preparation; anxiety; time; and work or family constraints (Ipaye 2007).

These barriers and challenges that are common to ODL learners are enough to discourage a learner from pursuing his/her studies or becoming de-motivated. There is, therefore, the need for a well-designed learner support system to take care of any form of barrier or distance so that students can be on course and maintain the motivation they had in registering for the study or program. Ipaye (2007) points out that learner support services do not only bridge the socio-psychological distance, but they also facilitate the personal development and the realization of learning goals.

In effect, an effective learner support system has the potential to assist all ODL learners to achieve their study goals but for this to happen the system should be reviewed all the time to address any new challenges that crop up to ensure its sustainability.

Institutions that provide distance education have to identify the support needs of their learners for them to be able to use the available services to address those needs. Hayes (2006) argues that it is important that special support needs are identified as early as possible. She maintains that although, a lot of institutions have systems in place to enable them to identify support needs, some of these needs are not picked up early enough to help the learners with their problems. Some of the support needs are classified under:

- induction
- tutorial and supporting academic work
- tutor, model and advocate
- study skills and time management
- support from peers and friends

Access Challenges for Learners in the ODL System

Irrespective of a country's level of development, institutions offering distance learning have some form of barriers and access challenges for their learners. The problem is more pronounced in the developing economies that have serious economic and infrastructural challenges. Creed et al. (2005) point out that institutions that have been in ODL delivery such as the Open University of the United Kingdom (OUUK) have the resources and the experience in learner support but they still have problems in learner support in the area such as matching the resources they possess on material production and tutoring (learner support). In the developing world Bbuye (2006) argues that learner support in Uganda as a developing country impacts on the learner support systems of the institutions that are involved in it.

Further, it can be argued that in most instances, institutions and countries' ability to offer support to their distance learners have budgetary and infrastructural constraints. Some of the general access problems and challenges are social and economic she maintains. Duhaney and Duhaney (2006) concur with the views of Bbuye (2006) that the access and cost constraints faced by most developing countries in the ODL system calls for blended education or technology integration. The path a lot of ODL institutions are adopting is by trying to move in the direction of information and communication technology (ICT) which is good but it is going to take a lot of time for institutions in the developing world to develop their infrastructure in remote areas to support their learners.

Some of the specific challenges and barriers to accessing learner support are discussed below. It should be noted that learner support challenges are directly related to most of the barriers and challenges experienced in accessing education through distance. This argument is supported by Galusha (1998) who intimates that for over a century, distance education has been in existence and regardless of the medium used, programs offered in distance education and the traditional systems have the same fea-

tures as well as experience the same challenges. Institutions enrol learners from different cultural, economic and educational backgrounds but most of the services that are used to support them in their learning are general. Gujjar et al. (2010) point out that there is the need for a paradigm shift in institutional support for learners which are based on institution production to customer–oriented service. They add that learners in a networked environment should use the participative, collaborative and situated approach which focuses on the networked community. This community may include connections between institution and learners, learners and learners, learners and teachers (tutors) and learners and resources.

Tones et al. (2009) note that the backgrounds of mature-aged students from low socio-economic and family impacts on their academic success in a distance learning environment. In the South African and Unisa context, most of the ABET students happen to be people from the previously disadvantaged groups. Tones et al. (2009) add that the Australian higher education system, for example, considers people from low socio-economic backgrounds as equity groups as they face challenges which impact on their access, participation, retention and success in education when compared to students from medium socio-economic backgrounds.

Access to infrastructure is another major challenge that confronts ODL learners on day-to-day basis. Different infrastructure is needed which may include physical infrastructure such as buildings, roads, electricity and ICT just to name a few. In a networked learner support environment, Gujjar et al. (2010) argue that ICT infrastructure enables learner support to be integrated in networked learning environment. Meanwhile, Hung and Chen (2001) identified the three dimensions of infrastructure as:

- rules and processes that enable people to engage in tasks and activities
- accountability mechanisms which deal with self-regulation
- facilitating structures through coordination and communication

Another challenge in the learner support system relates to the anxiety and frustrations learners have to go through when they have to be part of a group where contributions and collaborations have to be made towards work and activities according (Gujjar et al. 2010). The ability to fully access learner support services in ODL which is used by most adults has to do with the fast changing technologies.

Besides the content learners have to grapple with, they are at the same time required to learn and master new skills to be able to adapt to fast changing technologies. In addition to that, their ability to locate and access the information resources online can be very tedious, frustrating and time-consuming for learners who are not conversant with ICT technology. Galusha (1998) points out that the learners who reside outside towns and cities most especially in the developing countries do not have access to reliable ICT and postal infrastructure. If institutions provide learner support services but learners cannot access those services it poses serious problems. This is the situation most ODL learners experience in the developing world including Unisa.

Creed et al. (2005) observed that getting qualified tutors from local communities pose a serious challenge to ODL institutions in the developing countries. In the case of Unisa, the size of the country, as well as the way learners, a sparsely dispersed, make it impossible to appoint enough tutors and counsellors as it is in the case of the Open University of UK (OUUK) where a tutor is appointed for a group of 25 students. The resource constraints do not allow institutions to appoint individual counsellors in the developing countries to assist learners in their studies as required so that they receive the needed support and motivation to carry on with their studies.

Access to tutors and counsellors is a major challenge to effective learner support. Brindley and Kell (2007) allude that evidence shows that academic support engagements of tutors correlated positively with learners' perception of academic quality and levels of their satisfaction. As has been explained, Unisa and most other institutions in the developing world cannot afford to appoint many tutors and counsellors in this regard.

Lephalala and Pienaar (2007) identified other challenges which impact on access to learner support services as financial, material and emotional. At times, people who are poor cannot afford to transport themselves to study centre and regional centres to access the available services. Another important barrier to accessing learners support relates to language difficulties.

A lot of students from the developing nations use foreign languages to access support. Sometimes, the language of instruction can be a second or third language which can impact on accessing learner support services. Creed et al. (2005) have drawn attention to learners from multilingual societies where the culture of reading and access to libraries are limited. South Africa falls within such a society where learners study in English and Afrikaans which happen to be third and second languages for most of the learners at the institutions of higher learning. Language barriers can, thus, pose serious barriers to some learners in dealing with study materials and accessing administrative support services.

Tones et al. (2009) note that the two main barriers that prevent students' ability to access support services offered by institution are what they termed responsibility conflicts and adjustment to university life. Responsibility conflicts normally relate to work and family responsibilities. In the Unisa context, majority of the ABET students happen to be females who have to squeeze their studies around many other responsibilities. Adjusting to university life after breaks and studying mostly through the traditional contact route by most students becomes a major challenge for students in distance education. Tones et al. (2009) add that adult learners find it difficult to cope with academic work after long breaks in their studies as gaps are notices between their own expectations and the perceptions of their lectures and institutions regarding their academic work.

In addition to the above, Lephalala and Pienaar (2007) found the following as impacting on access to learner support which contributes to success or failure:
* the open and uncontrolled student enrolment which has not been matched with increase resources
* the high student-lecturer ratios
* different competence levels of students
* limited interaction between students and lecturers and tutors

The geographical distribution of learners across South Africa and beyond with students in remote rural areas, informal settlements and towns and cities pose serious learner support challenges for ODL Institutions. Sonnekus et al. (2006) intimate that the large and diverse student body of Unisa, for example, impacts not only on the provision of the needed infrastructure for learner support activities in these areas but also the feel of exposure, availability of modern technology to provide the technical support learners need in a learner support system.

Learner support is operationally defined in this study as *comprising the entire academic and non-academic activities institutions use to support their learners in a learning environment that helps them to achieve their goals in education*. Some of the access challenges discussed above include institutional, economic, cultural, social and technological factors. All these factors impact on learners' ability to access the available learner support services ODL institutions are able to provide. Some of the notable and more pronounced challenges include finance; access to technology; support from teachers, other learners, family and friends; accessing administrative support from the institutions; and the insufficient physical infrastructure by ODL institutions.Unisa as an ODL institution in South Africa can form partnerships and collaborations with some of the organisations below to address the challenges pertaining to access to learner support.

Possible Partners for Cooperation with Unisa

Municipal Libraries

The new dispensation in South Africa after the fall of apartheid has opened education and education infrastructure to many South Africans especially the previously disadvantaged. The state has built new schools and community libraries in a lot of towns across the country. Hart (2004) note that there is shortage of school libraries; therefore, a model that looks at school library/community library is put forward as an "alternative and achievable model".

The Post Office and Telkom

The South African Post Office is a key player in the country's distance education programs since a large percentage of students mostly in the rural areas depend on it for the delivery of their learner support material, communication between them and the institution, feedback from lecturers as well as sending their assignments for assessment with the university. Unisa should find a way to strengthen the partnership with

the Post Office to avoid the persistent strikes by the workers almost semester that impacts negatively on the delivery of materials and assignments. Telkom is also the main provider of telephone services to the University which academics rely on when they have to call their students.

Internet Service Providers (ISPs)

Unisa just like most other ODL institutions are moving towards the ODeL mode where the use of the internet and ICT is becoming increasingly prominent. The challenges in bridging the physical distance is being narrowed through e-learning and ISPs can help a lot in wireless technology to reach a lot of students who leave in remote areas. The collaboration between ISPs in lowering cost of access and extending their services to rural areas can go a long way in addressing the distance in ODL. The Department of Higher Education (2014) acknowledges the importance of access and use of appropriate technology for learning purposes most especially in ODL context. It adds that universities should be careful to link the use of supporting ICT, if relevant to improving quality and realities of students' context of learning, taking particular note of and access for remote students.

Other Institutions of Higher Learning

Institutions of higher learning are scattered across the breadth and length of the country but they hardly cooperate in assisting students from other institutions from accessing their facilities and resources for learning. The institutions of higher learning can agree among themselves and allow students from the other institutions to have access to their libraries, internet facilities and other educational resources to support students. The DHET (2014) notes the importance of high quality resources which are part of any high quality distance education and encourages universities to agree to tap into each other's resources to support students and avoid unnecessary duplication.

Schools with Audio-Visual Facilities

There are schools in the basic education sector which have libraries, internet and audio-visual facilities which Unisa and other distance providing institutions can enter into agreement with, where it can place some materials and internet and other facilities for its students.

Education Offices

The district and area offices most often have well qualified and educational practitioners who can be approached to serve as facilitators and student counsellors in their localities and districts. Some of the students in distance education, at times need additional support in the form of counselling, face-to-face tutorials etc. which such people can be contracted to do on behalf of the university.

NGOs and Faith-based Organisations

Faith-based and NGOs operate across the length and breadth of the country and they are mostly involved in development work in the communities. These organisations have asset bases that can be used to support distance students in various ways. Some of the resources include human capital, accommodation etc. ODL institutions such as Unisa can identify such organisations in local communities and assess their asset bases and agree on how their facilities and resources can be used to support distance students around their areas. Nishimuko (2009) acknowledges that tapping into the different sources of services that are available to NGOs and FBOs and collaborating among themselves, government and the private sector helped in making progress towards achieving Education for All in Serra Leone. Such collaboration between education stakeholders can in the same vein render useful learner support services to distance students through partnerships and collaborations.

Open Education Resources (OER)

Butcher (2011) is of the view that OER's value lies in the idea of using resources as an integral method of communication of curriculum in educational courses (that is, resource-based learning) where its transformative powers lies in the ease with which such resources, when digitized, can be shared via the internet.

National and International Partnerships

The call for collaborations and partnerships between ODL institutions is growing louder and

louder every day. Primrose et al. (2013) point out that collaborative partnerships are crucial for ODL providers as they reduce the cost of introducing new technologies as well as improve the quality of developing new programs. They add that ODL institutions can form and improve their collaborative partnerships by exploring creative ways to share resources and expertise. Some ODL institutions such as Unisa, the Open University of United Kingdom, Maryland University and others have been in the field for a long time and developed competencies, technologies and experiences which they can share among themselves and with others.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that learner support is very crucial for any effective ODL provision but ODL institutions in the developing world such as South Africa face many challenges due to the lack of resources and technical advancement. Meanwhile, there are stakeholders in the field of ODL both nationally and internationally who can through collaborative partnerships pull resources and share experiences to ensure that students who use the ODL model for their studies can have enduring learning experiences and succeed in their endeavours. Unisa should endeavour to identify stakeholders and partners who can contribute positively towards achieving this noble objective.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The present study aimed at exploring how Unisa can support its adult learners studying through ODL through collaborative partnership. On the basis of the findings and discussions from the paper, the following recommendations are made:

- It is acknowledged that the cost of internet in South Africa is very high which makes it difficult for the poor students to access it in most cases. It is recommended that Unisa uses its position as one of the leading clients with the Post Office which falls under Telkom to get a deal at affordable rates for its students. The other Internet Service Providers (ISP) should be invited to compete for the huge business opportunity that Unisa offers for internet services.

- It came out that a lot of students are not able to attend tutorial classes and have no access to tutors in their local areas to assist them in their studies when the need arises. It is recommended that Unisa identifies, train and appoint qualified people in the districts as tutors and academic counselors.
- Unisa should identify stakeholders who have the capacity in communities such as municipal libraries, multi-purpose centers, schools, other institutions of higher learning, NGOs and ISPs and explore how they can collaborate to support students in communities.
- Unisa should also try and explore the possibility of forming collaborative partnerships with institutions such as OUUK, Maryland University College and other institutions in ODL to share their experiences.

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