

## Guidelines for Tackling Student Attrition in Open and Distance e-Learning Environments: Admin and Support Insights

Rendani Sipho Netanda and Madidimalo Richard Moila

*University of South Africa, Department of Communication Science,  
College of Human Sciences, Pretoria, South Africa  
E-mail:<sup>1</sup><netanrs@unisa.ac.za>, <sup>2</sup><moilamr@unisa.ac.za>*

**KEYWORDS** Open and Distance E-learning. Governance. Student Attrition. Student Support Services. Student Retention. Student Success

**ABSTRACT** Open and distance e-learning (ODEL) institutions leverage technological advancements and digital pedagogies to enhance accessibility and flexibility in higher education. However, student attrition remains a significant challenge, impacting students, institutions, governments, and societies. This study examines how governance and support services can reduce attrition rates in ODeL institutions. By integrating literature perspectives and empirical research findings, the study proposes guidelines for effective governance to improve student retention and success. The research is guided by an integrated student support services process model, social contract theory, in-depth interviews with lecturers, and thematic analysis. Findings indicate that both institutional and external environments contribute to high attrition rates. The study emphasises the importance of supportive learning environments, effective governance structures, preventive measures, and blended pedagogical approaches to enhance student engagement and collaborative learning. The proposed guidelines aim to help policymakers, educators, and ODeL administrators plan and implement responsive support programs to mitigate attrition.

### INTRODUCTION

Since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic in 2019, there has been an increase in the adoption rate of digital technologies to facilitate online learning (Ayoko and Ayoko 2024). Research shows that the pervasiveness of digital technologies in higher education has changed how teaching and learning occur and has made institutions attract more students whose expectations and needs must be met through a range of support services (Simpson 2018). This has been due to the benefits of technology-mediated pedagogy that increases accessibility to higher education and offers, inter alia, flexibility in learning to students. Despite the numerous benefits that the ODeL form of higher education delivery presents to teaching and learning styles, a higher student attrition rate remains a concern to ODeL institutions as they strive to reach high productivity levels such as improved student success and generate funds through government subsidies. Attrition may affect the image and reputation of the institution. Not only do ODeL institutions and students who dropped out suffer from the dire consequences of attrition, but also governments and societies. As for students, they lose the costs incurred for tuition and reg-

istration fees, among other things. Some may leave with debts, yet they have not completed the qualification program. The government often invests in education, providing subsidies to students so that they can further their studies. The state and local governments, as asserted by the American Institute of Research, lost nearly 3 billion dollars to subsidise the costs of education incurred by students who dropped out of colleges (Schneider and Yin 2011). This responsibility that the government discharges is particularly significant as an educated society can stimulate economic growth and combat poverty in society. The preceding studies show that universities face financial penalties when students drop out. Since universities are expected to retain students to demonstrate their institutional excellence, attrition may adversely affect forthcoming funding (Harris et al. 2016) that, for instance, comes from governments when students graduate. Attrition in higher education, as contended by Madai et al. (2025), affects institutional performance, social progress, and student outcomes, and they threaten the effectiveness of the entire higher education system, affecting student outcomes, institutional performance, and social progress. Attrition leads to loss of finances incurred by funding institu-

tions for students who have dropped out, and human trafficking (Letseka and Maile 2008; Mills 2015). Highly complex even further, while attrition leads to a gruesome proportion of unemployment in society, it is also influenced by unemployment itself. In line with this assertion, Wood et al. (2017) contend that attrition is determined by, among other factors, an increase in the unemployment rate in the country. Attrition represents a loss of revenue in the private sector, wasted resources injected by the public sector, and academic, economic, and social waste.

To address this ubiquitous challenge and increase student retention, ODeL put into place various support services for those students who need them. Attrition is not only a loss to students who leave the course or program prematurely. Ensuring increased student retention is vital for ODeL as it improves the reputation of the institution, throughput rates, and sustained enrolment (Osman et al. 2024). ODeL is a type of academic institution that is commonly characterised by open access to higher education and flexibility in learning, and it delivers education to a diversified student population using online tools and software. It is a product of a shift in instructional practices from conventional methods of teaching and learning associated with open and distance learning (ODL) to a landscape in which education is delivered largely digitally. However, as the discourse on ODeL continues in the production of knowledge, the concept of ODeL has attracted different views, suggesting that a universal definition does not exist yet, and there are other concepts used to refer to the same pedagogical approach, such as open online distance learning (OODL) (Osman et al. 2024), e-distance education (EDE) (Pertry et al. 2014), e-learning (Alwerthan 2025), open and distance education (ODE) (Qayyum and Zawacki-Richter 2019), and open online higher education (Xavier et al. 2022). Some scholars see ODL as having the same traits that constitute ODeL. For instance, Karagianni's (2025) ODL is a pedagogical approach that has begun as a global response to the universal impact of digital technologies on contemporary learning environments and strategies.

Student attrition is a multifactorial challenge for higher education institutions' managers, and due to several factors accounting for it, it re-

mains difficult to understand it as it is a multilayered problem (Pacheco et al. 2024). Due to its multifactorial reality, defining it is as difficult as trying to curb it (Silva and Mariano 2021). Despite the sufficient plethora of research on student attrition in the documented literature, most investigated the phenomenon for high school learners and undergraduate students at first-year level, examining the factors accounting for attrition. Little has been done to date on the role of ODeL management and governance to reduce attrition. Nor has there been an adequate volume of studies on the relationship between management, leadership, and governance, and the attrition rate. There are also insufficient exploratory studies on the role played by universities and colleges on student persistence (Barefoot 2004).

Literature shows that attrition is influenced by various factors that fall within societal, academic, or personal ambits. In another study, academic and personal reasons were featured as major factors deterring the success of ODeL programs. Such factors, as reported by Mwaniki et al. (2020), incorporate issues falling within technical, instructional, institutional, and personal environments. The major institutional challenges were a lack of student support services and the delayed delivery of learning materials (Mwaniki et al. 2020).

Through an integration of analysis of past research, philosophical positions held by the student support services process model, and the findings uncovered by this study, understanding the type of support services, the phase or time at which they are supposed to be offered, and strategic approach followed by management and governance of ODeL institutions to offer them is enhanced.

### Study Objectives

The study was aimed at achieving the following objectives:

1. Identify the main governance-linked issues that lead to student retention, success, and attrition rates in ODeL.
2. To explore student support services that can be offered to meet the ODeL students' needs and interests and ultimately reduce attrition rates.
3. Develop guidelines to help ODeL reduce attrition through effective governance.

## Research Questions

The study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What support interventions can be offered to meet the ODeL students' needs and interests to reduce attrition rates?
2. What are the main governance-linked issues that impact student retention, success, and attrition rates in ODeL?

## METHODOLOGY

### Theoretical Frameworks

#### *Inclusive Student Services Process Model (ISSPM)*

The ISSPM was developed by Floyd and Casey-Powell (2004). While the inclusive student services model has been used for decades as a framework to study student support services and the time they were given to needy students, scant attention has been paid to the impact of institutional management, leadership, and governance on student attrition. Providing support services is an important strategy to promote student success, and its effectiveness depends on the time it is provided (Rotar 2022). However, literature has documented a mixture of views towards support services. Student support services, as defined by Floyd and Casey-Powell (2004), are non-academic interactions that are exchanged between students and higher education institutions, and include, *inter alia*, financial support, pre-admissions, technical support, recruitment, promotion, registration, emotional support, academic support, orientations, career counselling, library support services, degree, and academic record auditing. Forbes-Mewett (2013) added other services such as housing, and language and learning support services in the conceptual definition of student support services. The stage at which support services should be given is also flagged in the literature as something significant to be captured in the definition by seeing it as a proactive response to creating a supportive learning environment (Jacklin and Le Riche 2009).

Floyd and Casey-Powell's (2004) ISSPM was pioneered to assist in developing programs and

processes, which will help provide students with support services in modern and traditional pedagogical approaches. The ISSPM advocates for the process to offer students support services which is characterised by five stages, namely, learner intake, intervention, transition, support, and measurement of effectiveness. To ensure that the ISSPM becomes effective, Casey-Powell (2004) argued that various approaches could be developed and implemented for each stage. For instance, in the student intake juncture, services may include pre-enrolment diagnostic tests, admission, orientation, financial support, helping students to register, providing technical skills to effectively use information and communication technologies used for learning, diagnostic tests, and orientation (Floyd and Casey-Powell 2004).

### Literature

#### *Learner Intake: Student Attrition and Support Services*

In terms of the ISSPM, the first stage at which the institution can offer support services is the intake. Services at this stage include assistance with admission. Wingate (2007) postulates that a pre-induction should be offered between the admission period and the start of the term. Bournemouth University's web-based course, as an example of a pre-induction, is taught in the School of Design, Engineering and Computing, and was introduced to reduce the information overload during the actual induction program, to arrange a meaningful sequence of events for the Induction Week, to urge students to reflect on learning trajectories and to relieve fear and engage students at an early stage (Keenan 2005). In the learner intake juncture, support services to be incorporated in the intervention strategy may comprise financial assistance, helping students to register, using information and communication technology, admission, pre-enrolment diagnostic tests, and orientation (Floyd and Casey-Powell 2004). Offering bridging courses to students who do not meet admission requirements has, for decades, been used as a strategic approach to support students and make them prepared and ready for the enrolled program. This type of support service is crucial

during the intake stage, and is meant to address, among other challenges, student unpreparedness that is a result of inadequate foundation offered at a level below the post-higher education level. Ssempebwa et al.'s (2012) study found bridging programs to be effective in preparing students for higher education. This is particularly vital for first-year ODeL students as this type of academic institution delivers education through online technologies, the educator's pedagogical approach is to provide facilitation in learning, and not be authoritative or dictate learning. Heift's (2006) study uncovered that first-year students need more support than intermediate students. This academic support for these students emphasises frequent communication and constructive feedback (Lee et al. 2011). To reduce the attrition rate at the first-year level, Di Pietro and Cutillo (2008) argue that internship programs should form part of the university curriculum and base the admission requirements on high academic achievements, including students who come from low-income families, which can ensure an effective attrition mitigation approach. The literature presents evidence of the importance of offering support services at the intake stage. Cabus (2013) shares one of the preclusive practices of Dutch for learners transiting from pre-vocational school to vocational school, stating that the Dutch follow at-risk students with a higher probability of dropping out during summer, going through the admission process, and transferring a file entailing information about the student, and that, eventually lead to vocational school improving. Ssempebwa et al. (2012) investigated the disparity between the academic performances of Kampala International University students enrolled through the bridging programs and those who met the admission requirements straightaway and divulged no significant difference between the two admission routes. This contradiction highlights the complexity of attrition and the resources that can be wasted through bridging courses.

Diagnostic tests for admission purposes to identify students' weaknesses, lack of skills, and competency levels, and tailor-made support services they need are important in improving the retention rates and reducing attrition. In their research to find out the kind of support stu-

dents need to cope with the university academic demands, a particular cohort seeking support intervention, and to check students' readiness, Sharif et al. (2007) found a significant relationship between the diagnostic tests and examination results.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The study employed an integrative theoretical approach, in which the integrated student support services process model (ISSPM) and the social contract theory (SCT) were amalgamated to provide a more complementary framework to analyse and integrate the literature and the generated data into the study. The Social Contract Theory is a political theoretical lens that studies the idea of an agreement between individuals and the government or government institutions, highlighting the shared obligations of the citizens and their governments (Vande 2025). In the context of the ODeL institution, such as the University of South Africa, while the university expects students to behave in certain ways, including avoiding plagiarism, students expect the university to offer quality educational services. Two research questions guided the study, namely, what student support services can be offered to meet the needs and interests of ODeL students and ultimately reduce attrition rates, and what are the main administrative issues that influence student retention, success, and attrition rates in ODeL. The analysis process consisted of two layers.

In the first layer, the following predetermined themes based on the canons of the theoretical frameworks applied in this study guided the analysis of data, namely, Student Support Services through the lens of an ISSPM, and the role of ODeL administration and impact on attrition through the lens of an SCT model.

In the second layer, after an exhaustive analysis of the qualitative data from the lecturers, gathered through in-depth interviews, an impression of their views was formed. Two major themes representing groups of attrition factors were developed following a proper coding and categorisation of the data, namely, institutional environment (academic and non-academic environments) and external environment.

### Student Support Services Through the Lens of an ISSPM

#### *Intake Stage: Attrition and Support Services*

Using the theoretical lens of ISSPM, one of the key determinants of student attrition that this study has found was unpreparedness. One of the participants remarks, *"There are many reasons which include a lack of academic preparedness. That is to say that students are ill-prepared for the module given the fact that there is little or no training in research methodology at the undergraduate level."*

This finding confirms the postulation made by ISSPM that unpreparedness can lead to attrition. However, while this study focused on attrition of the lower-postgraduate students, the ISSPM has been widely used to study students who are at the first-year level and identified support services such as admissions, pre-enrollment assessment, registration, information and communication technology, orientation, and financial aid. Its weakness is its focus on first-year students. This finding indicates the need to broaden the scope of understanding intake to include enrolment in a course or program at the next level. To address this challenge, the same participant proposed the following, *"To address the intervention, as we advance, I think one of the things that we need to do is re-curriculate our undergraduate offerings to ensure that they are biased toward research methodology. Research methodology should be a full module of an undergraduate BA degree. If possible, we can introduce basic stats as part of the undergraduate program to prepare students for post-graduate training."*

The study also revealed that financial constraints are a key influence on student attrition, as can be seen in the statement below from one of the participants.

*"Most black students are from poor family backgrounds, and they are unable to look after their families and pay for their study fees even if they are already employed, because they must start looking after their siblings. This has harmed their studies, forcing some to discontinue their studies."*

Suggesting addressing the lack of financial support for honors students, another participant

remarked, *"Government should find means to have a balanced distribution of financial aid to all educational levels, either through NSFAS or other sources."*

The meaning inherent in this view is that the government is also the cause of the lack of financial aid for honours students by not, fairly, assisting students at all levels. Without financial assistance, many students fail to register. This finding agrees with the ISSPM's position that students need financial support during registration and financial resources.

#### **Intervention**

#### ***Attrition Influences in an Institutional Environment (Academic and Non-academic Environments)***

##### *Academic Environment*

One of the key findings uncovered by this study relates to the ISSPM's intervention stage. However, this finding suggests that lecturers need intervention to enable them to manage the workload, confirming Manik's (2014) study, which found attrition factors, that emanate from the institutional environment, divulging challenges, such as high academic amount of work, career derailment and non-availability of counselling, to mention a few. This study contradicts the ISSPM, which only sees students as stakeholders that require intervention. Below are statements from lecturers that show that workload is a challenge in the context of the lecturers.

L6: *"I think another factor is that there is little support from the supervisor or the lecturers because most lecturers have heavy teaching loads. As a result, you find that they supervise and teach undergraduate students. Others are also involved in re-curriculation projects, which means they have limited time to attend honors."*

L9: *"...to achieve that we need to reduce the amount of intake to be on par with the departmental capacity to supervise or we have to hire more externally qualified supervisors if we have the necessary resources because supervising more than five is a huge responsibility. That, to me, will also reduce the dropout rate of students from advanced communication research modules."*

This finding supported Terentyev et al.'s (2016) study that investigated factors that account for dropout in Russian Universities and found that, among the factors, professors and administrative officers are the reasons for student attrition. It also supported Lumadi's (2021) finding that difficulty in accessing support services was a major reason for a high attrition rate. Lumadi's (2021) study suggests that ODeL institutions must strengthen the administrative system and make support services accessible and more responsive to students' needs.

#### *Attrition Influences in a Student Environment*

Guided by the principles of ISSPM, data analysis identified different categories of attrition influences, and those that were related were grouped into a theme. The study revealed that the 'students' environment' is one of the major themes that leads to attrition. Under this theme that has emerged, the study has found that, among other concerning issues, ODeL student attrition at a lower postgraduate level is influenced by students' lack of emotional support, inadequate awareness of support services available, lack of financial support, lack of self-directedness, and inability to manage time. A brief expansion on each of the factors that are associated with student environments is provided below.

#### **Lack of Emotional Support**

This has also established a lack of emotional support as one of the major challenges that lead to attrition. The following remark from a participant serves as evidence, *"A student can regain an interest in continuing with studies if professional counselling services were given, but the problem is that they rarely share personal problems like death in the family with lecturers. You will only realise that something is not right when the submission deadlines have long passed, or the exam has already been written."* This finding supports Mohangi and Olivier (2023) study, which found a lack of emotional support for postgraduate students to be a reason for the high attrition rate.

#### **Lack of Awareness of Available Support Services**

*"Many of our students only know about NSFAS and Eduloan, but there are other re-*

*sources through which they can receive financial aid, and, unfortunately, they are not aware of them."* Supporting this, Mohangi and Olivier (2023) examined students' experiences with counselling and found that many students were unaware of the support services offered by the institution. Additionally, Omari and Kefiloe (2022) concluded that increasing awareness of existing support services is crucial for reducing student attrition.

#### **Lack of Financial Support**

Murray (2014) argues that students' financial challenges causally influence student attrition. This study confirms Murray's (2014) findings and emphasises the importance of promoting messages about bursaries and scholarships to lower-postgraduate students. It establishes that students' financial constraints are among the main reasons for the high attrition rate among postgraduate students. More recently, a study by Madai et al. (2025) identified students' poor economic backgrounds as the primary factor behind attrition. To address this issue, the participant suggested, *"The government should find means to have a balanced distribution of financial aid to all educational levels, either through NSFAS or other sources."* In contrast, Myburgh (2020) found that attrition remained a challenge even when students received bursaries. Therefore, financial support alone does not guarantee a reduction in attrition rates. These differing views show that tackling attrition is a complex problem that cannot be solved by a single type of support.

The lack of self-directedness confirms Moore's (1993) transactional theory of distance, which highlights the importance of students' ability to be self-directed in learning through distance education. Communication plays a key role in bridging the transactional distance between students and the institution. The greater the transactional distance, the more students need to become self-directed learners (Moore 1991). This requires a certain level of maturity, as shown in one participant's (L11) remark, *"Because in open and distance learning students must be in charge of the learning process, determining how to study and at what speed, it is important to design the modules in such a way*

*that they become usable. They should contain, for instance, a lot of examples and scenarios and never use jargon, allowing students to interact with the contents.*" The challenge with Moore's (1993) transactional theory of distance is that it mainly addresses conventional distance education and not the modern forms of educational delivery that are heavily based on digital technologies. A responsive approach to the lack of self-directedness, Gokool-Ramdoo (2008) suggests, can be achieved through technology-based pedagogy, dialogues that improve when programs and courses are less structured, and by enhancing student self-control and autonomy.

### **Inability to Manage Time**

This study uncovered a lack of time management as one of the major causes of attrition for postgraduate students in ODeL. One of the participants remarked, *"Some students lack time management skills and have little or no time to refine the research product since the university deadlines for submission are tight."* While this study has unveiled a lack of time management to be among the factors causing attrition for postgraduate students in an ODeL environment, attrition was significantly determined by academic, personal, and institutional issues rather than by lack of time management skills (Omari and Kefiloe 2022). Studying the experiences of PhD candidates' trajectory in the first year of enrollment to predict possible attrition later, Glorieux et al.'s (2025) divulged that a correlation exists between time pressure and student attrition.

### **Learner Support**

Guided by the ISSPM's 'learner support' aspect, issues leading to ODeL student attrition were found to be a lack of digital technologies for learning, poor relationships with lecturers, a lack of subject library support, a lack of interactions between students and lecturers, untailored messages, and poor academic performance.

These findings support the view of not only the ISSPM, but also Lee et al.'s (2011) framework of student support learning, which sees support interventions as services that include instructional, peer, and technical support. According to the ISSPM, the types of support ser-

vices at the learner support stage include, inter alia, tutoring, academic support, and resources. These are services provided during the actual learning trajectory. This finding blames the institutional environment as the space that accounts for the attrition of postgraduate students.

### **Lack of Digital Technologies for Learning**

*"Although as a country we are improving at a higher pace with internet connections, I have heard many of my rural honours students saying they were unable to submit assignments because they had no gadgets connected to the public internet network and that they are no internet cafes and WiFi where they reside and have decided to leave the module as a result."* This finding is in contradiction to Omari and Kefiloe's (2022) study, which found that access to technologies does not lead to student attrition unless sufficient awareness of support services is made.

### **Poor Student-lecturer Relationship**

Concerning poor relationships between lecturers and students, the finding supports Golde's (2005) study, which reported that the ability of lecturers to build positive relationships with students, characterised by frequent interactions, academic support and trust, can enhance learning experiences. It also confirms that the lecturer-student relationship is one of the significant factors behind attrition, as was found in Madai et al.'s (2025) study. However, Mphekgwana et al. (2020) have reported that although student relationships can help diagnose possible attrition, compared to financial constraints, gender, age, and accommodation, it is less significant.

### **Lack of Subject Library Support**

Among other reasons for attrition of lower-post graduate students that this study revealed is the lack of course library support, as one of the participants remarked as follows, *"It is pity because some students enter an honours level with little or no basic theoretical foundation on research and they struggle to back up their arguments with sources when writing a literature review chapter. A librarian is necessary to*

*train postgraduate students to search for study materials.*" This finding supports Floyd and Casey-Powell's (2004) contention that library support services are essential in retaining students and reducing attrition.

### **Lack of Interactions Between Students and Lecturers**

Moore's (1993) transactional distance theory posits, among other philosophical dimensions, that interactions between students and lecturers are crucial to bridging the transactional distance. Thus, the finding of this study accedes to Moore's (1993) dialogue component that regards communication as important between lecturers and students.

### **Poor Academic Performance**

Breier (2010) reported, in the study that was focused on student dropout at the University of Western Cape, that 18 percent of 159 students dropped out because of having achieved poor academic results.

### **Untailored Messages**

The need to tailor teaching messages in tutoring and academic support is highlighted in the statement below as an important strategy to reduce attrition. *"Few workshops do not take into account that human beings are multifaceted earthlings who differ in cognitive strengths and therefore do not learn at the same pace."* However, Murray (2014) argues that personalised education is less impactful on attrition as compared to focusing on the student and institutional challenges that lead to attrition. Moodley and Singh (2015) contend that support services focusing on high-failure-rate courses are more effective than simply concentrating on tailoring education to students.

### **Learner Transition**

Regarding the 'learner transition' component of the ISSPM, the study revealed that a lack of career counselling also influences student attrition.

In terms of the ISSPM, the transition stage involves support services to ensure a smooth

transition from one course to another, from one program to another, or from one educational level to another. While the ISSPM provides the framework to study stages where support services must be provided, its philosophical view does not cater to transferring programs from one institution to the other. Students voluntarily and involuntarily drop out of the educational program (Murray 2014). Voluntary student dropout is exemplified by what Reisel and Brekke (2009) define as the act of transferring the educational program to study at another higher education institution. Involuntary attrition happens, for instance, when the institution deregisters students who academically perform below the standards following a failure to complete it within the prescribed time frame. The study did not support findings made by Hovdhaugen et al.'s (2013) investigation, which reported that of the 17 percent of students who dropped out of their university studies, 50 percent of them transferred their studies elsewhere for completion.

### **Measurement of Effectiveness Phase**

Despite the variety of support services models that have proliferated in the discourse of student attrition in higher education, the global problem remains a major concern. Once bridging programs have been offered as a support to address students' unpreparedness and make them ready for the program they want to enroll in, the ISSPM posits that the next step is to evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention. Contemporary evaluation strategies still rely largely upon various traditional models, including Wiggins and McTighe's (1998) model for evaluating the effectiveness of bridging programs.

Wiggins and McTighe's (1998) model for evaluating the effectiveness of bridging programs measures the bridging programs' effectiveness and comprises three underlying stages. The first one enhances the admissibility to the program, and a set of desired outcomes is given to which students must conform. If students perform well, it implies that they are ready to be enrolled in the program and get admitted to it. The last stage involves the design of the bridging program that contains the teaching mode, the content, and the structure of the program.

The finding suggests that to reduce drop-out rates of honors students in ODL institutions, the undergraduate curriculum must include research modules in which students will have to engage in practical research projects. The finding further implies that admission criteria into the program should seek a research module at an undergraduate level and offer an introductory module to those who did not do a research module at an undergraduate level. This will boost students who have the required theoretical foundation.

### **Role of Odel Management and Impact on Attrition Through the Lens of the SCT Model**

There are few studies that used the social contract theory in education, especially in the context of ODeL, to study student attrition, support services needed, and the role of and impact of institutional leadership on attrition. This theory was adopted in this study because it provides a framework for studying student attrition by using implicit and explicit contracts that regulate the conduct of ODeL leaders and students. The life continuity of an institution depends on the enrolled students, and students receive education from the institution. Thus, the institution and the student depend on each other to achieve the goals each sets. The implicit or explicit contracts connect these two parties, making the social contract theory relevant to this study. This is, partly, the reason why this study employed the social contract theory to analyse and synthesise literature and to analyse data on student attrition and support services in higher education in pursuit of best practices and strategic solutions. Another reason for integrating social contract theory with the inclusive student support service process model is that higher education institutions, including ODeL, and students are part of society, and attrition not only negatively affects the academic institution and students alone, but also the society and government. Obedience to the social contract, whether explicit or implicit, is important. There is a high possibility for students to discontinue their studies and go to work in illegal jobs (Tas et al. 2013), which leads to them getting arrested and staying in prison (Christle et al. 2007). Student attrition also leads to, among others, drug

dealings (Mensch and Kandel 1988), being criminals, and taking part in gangsterism (Berlin and Sum 1988). Participation in criminal activities is a societal issue that may increase government spending in trying to combat crimes. Christle et al. (2007) have identified additional attrition consequences, including joblessness, seeking public help, begging for money, receiving social grants, and netting far fewer financial rewards than those who have completed their studies. The receipt of social grants highlights the significant role that the government must play in addressing attrition, as the problem can raise demand for social help and support initiatives. Mgwebi et al. (2017) assert that labour markets are adversely affected by students' attrition. Inherent in Mgwebi et al.'s (2017) is that attrition contributes to the poor economic growth of the country, as both the private and public industries require educated staff. Premature attritions from studies generally cause students' financial debts and living expenses (Harris et al. 2016). These consequences of attrition to students, higher education institutions, governments, and society demonstrate the wide scope of the problem and that attempts to reduce attrition in higher education institutions demand the collective efforts of various stakeholders and a range of services to support students.

This study has divulged an *institutional environment* (consisting of factors associated with academic and non-academic environments) as the major theme that largely contributes to student attrition in an ODeL context. The academic environment was found to account for more attrition than the non-academic environment. Those that are associated with the academic environment were inadequate academic support, lecturers' workload, self-reflection of lecturers on teaching pedagogies, lecturers' poor relationships with students, and lack of lecturers' interactions with students. These findings contradict Valencia's (2012) finding that academics and policymakers account for students' failure and attribute the academic achievements of the institution to themselves.

From the social contract theory perspective, it is the responsibility of the higher education institution, through its academics, to provide academic support to students, interact with them, create a good relationship with students,

use effective pedagogical approaches, inaccessibility/unavailability of lecturers, taking longer time to provide students with feedback, and continuously reflect on teaching methods. The lack of these services, as has been found in this study, reflects the bridge of the social contract of the institution, influencing students to drop out.

### Effective Pedagogical Approaches

*“Because in open and distance learning, students must oversee the learning process, determining how to study and at what speed, it is important to design the modules in such a way that they become usable. They should contain, for instance, a lot of examples and scenarios, and never use jargon, allowing students to interact with the contents.”*

### Reflect on Teaching Methods

L1 says, *“... if we can develop a habit to thoroughly check how we teach, it can enhance the quality of our teaching methods.”*

Regarding attrition factors associated with a *non-academic environment*, the study found a lack of subject library support, awareness of support services, a lack of financial support programs, and a lack of emotional support. These findings reveal that both academic and non-academic staff must play their different roles to retain students. From the social contract theory perspective, they have not fulfilled their roles as expected. The institution is obliged to offer subject library support, increase awareness of the support services available for the students, assist students with bursaries, communicate information regarding where bursaries can be sourced, and give emotional support to those who need it. The following remark from one of the lecturers (L12) confirms the importance of providing emotional support, *“I believe counselling, especially when a student has just had a problem such as the death of a family member, can help.”*

The social contract theory was historically used in the 1960s century in the interest of religious minorities, and it asserts that people, having agreed to set up rulers over them to realise certain purposes, have the right to resist or remove them if they persist in courses that are

outside the confines of explicit or implicit agreements, which ultimately defeat the purposes. In the context of higher education, higher education leaders, managers, and councils can be seen as rulers of these institutions, and students as stakeholders being ruled by these leaders. Agreements between these parties happen in the form of policies (explicit rules), and implicit rules, actions that are seen as morally and socially acceptable. There are several instances where students (as the ruled population) waged resistance against the institutions' decisions they deemed socially unacceptable, defeating social justice and depriving them of their right to education.

For instance, the 1976 Soweto uprising that took place in South Africa, and as observed by Koen (2007), the 1980s political struggle against apartheid in South Africa led to many students at both elementary, secondary, and higher education institutions ceasing their studies. These historic political protests exemplify that transgressing either the social explicit or implicit contracts can lead to turmoil and student attrition. The nationwide students' protests about the high costs of higher education in the South African higher education landscape unfolded in 2015 and were demonstrated under the struggling title “FeesMustFall”. Through the FeesMustFall protest or political language, students were communicating their frustration with high costs for higher education and the need for financial support, which, in the view of Mgwebi et al. (2017), accounted for increased attrition rates in South African universities. The South African university system consists of 25 universities. The “FeesMustFall” movement commenced in the middle of October 2015 at the University of Witwatersrand (Wits), and it was locked down for three days. Soon, many universities' “FeesMustFall” movements, such as at the University of Pretoria, Cape Peninsula University of Technology, University of Cape Town, Stellenbosch University, Rhodes University, Fort Hare University, Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, and the University of Limpopo, followed suit. Many of the protesters were suspended, and others were expelled from their universities for the defilement of the universities' properties. Others were put in prison. For example, 25 students who participated in the Rhodes University “FeesMustFall” movement were ar-

rested. In the context of social contract theory, these protests (the Soweto uprising and Fees-Must-Fall) are responses to the violation of the social contract implicitly or explicitly agreed upon, and the high costs for education are seen as action denying students to exercise their right to education, preventing student success and defeating their educational goals. The ruler rules to protect the interests of the ruled (Plamenatz 1963). Thus, leaders of educational institutions must consider the needs and interests of the students and provide support services in response to those needs and interests. NSFAS was allocated more funds to support financially needy students. Commenting on the South African popular "FeesMustFall" protest, Mgwebi et al. (2017) suggest that the problem of student dropout can be successfully dealt with by involving researchers and experienced policymakers who have a considerable level of expertise and judgment. Social contract theory is significant and suitable in the studies on attrition because higher education leaders are expected to create a supportive learning environment by providing students with a variety of support services, while students are expected to actively engage and participate in learning.

### CONCLUSION

The study emphasises the importance of providing diverse support services to ODeL students to reduce attrition at different stages of their learning journeys and by managers at various hierarchical levels within the institutions. Since attrition is a complex challenge affected by many factors, effective strategic approaches require the involvement of multiple stakeholders, such as governments, ODeL administrative officials, managers at different levels within the organisation's structure, and students themselves. Additionally, customised support programs tailored to address the specific interests and needs of different students are essential.

### LIMITATIONS

Future research could explore the relationships between factors that lead to attrition, as this study did not cover that aspect. It would also be very helpful for ODeL institutions to

investigate attrition causes from the students who dropped out to identify not only the reasons but also to develop a more comprehensive and responsive support program.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

ODeL institutions should ensure regular interactions with students to strengthen the social contract. This can be achieved by clearly communicating the institution's expectations and available support services. Since ODeL academic institutions deliver their education entirely online, issues related to students' lack of technical skills can be addressed through various strategies, including expanding access to technology and ensuring students are prepared to use it effectively. Combining online teaching methods with traditional pedagogical strategies can also foster a more conducive learning environment. Governments, policymakers, and academic institutions must facilitate a smooth transition from basic education to higher education to prevent unpreparedness among students at the tertiary level. As ODeL institutions require students to be self-directed learners, it is crucial to promote social integration by encouraging students to take ownership of their learning and fostering a sense of belonging. To address students' emotional needs, reduce attrition, and promote success, ODeL institutions must provide counselling services.

### REFERENCES

- Alwerthan TA 2025. Time efficiency as a mediator between institutional support and higher education student engagement during e-learning. *PloS One*, 20(1): e0315420.
- Ayoko VO, Ayoko O 2024. Open, Distance and e-Learning (ODeL): A panacea for the administration of education in emergencies in Nigeria. *IJMGS*, 4(1): 128-151
- Barefoot BO 2004. Higher education's revolving door: Confronting the problem of student drop out in US colleges and universities. *Open Learning: The Journal of Open, Distance and e-Learning*, 19(1): 9-18.
- Berlin G, Sum A 1988. Toward a More Perfect Union: Basic Skills, Poor Families, and Our Economic Future. *Occasional Paper 3*. ERIC Number: ED297037, Ford Foundation, New York, NY 10017.
- Breier M 2010. From 'financial considerations' to 'poverty': Towards a reconceptualisation of the role of finances in higher education student drop out. *Higher Education*, 60: 657-670.

- Cabus SJ 2015. Does enhanced student commitment reduce school dropout. Evidence From two major dropout regions in the Netherlands. *Regional Studies*, 49(4): 599-614.
- Christle CA, Jolivette K, Nelson CM 2007. School characteristics related to high school dropout rates. *Remedial and Special Education*, 28(6): 325-339.
- Di Pietro G, Cutillo A 2008. Degree flexibility and university drop-out: The Italian experience. *Economics of Education Review*, 27(5): 546-555.
- Floyd DL, Casey Powell D 2004. New roles for student support services in distance learning. *New Directions For Community Colleges*, 2004(128): 55-64.
- Forbes-Mewett H, Nyland C 2013. Funding international student support services: Tension and power in the university. *Higher Education*, 65(2): 181-192.
- Glorieux A, Spruyt B, Minnen J, van Tienoven TP 2025. Calling it quits: A longitudinal study of factors associated with dropout among doctoral students. *Studies in Continuing Education*, 47(1): 155-173.
- Gokool-Ramdoos S 2008. Beyond the theoretical impasse: Extending the applications of transactional distance education theory. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning*, 9(3): 1-17.
- Golde CM 2005. The role of the department and discipline in doctoral student attrition: Lessons from four departments. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 76(6): 669-700.
- Harris PJ, Campbell Casey SA, Westbury T, Florida-James G 2016. Assessing the link between stress and retention and the existence of barriers to support service use within HE. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 40(6): 824-845.
- Heift T 2006. Context-sensitive Help in CALL. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 19(2-3): 243-259.
- Hovdhaugen E, Frølich N, Aamodt PO 2013. Informing Institutional Management: Institutional strategies and student retention. *European Journal of Education*, 48(1): 165-177.
- Jacklin A, Le Riche P 2009. Reconceptualising student support: From 'support' to 'supportive'. *Studies in Higher Education*, 34(7): 735-749.
- Karagianni GK 2025. Integrating metacognitive skills and connectivist principles in open and distance education. *European Journal of Open Education and E-learning Studies*, 10(1): 1-15. 10.46827/ejoe.v10i1.5774
- Keenan C 2005. *Stepping Stones 2HE: Students Working to Bridge the Transition Gap*. Unpublished manuscript. England: Bournemouth University.
- Koen C 2007. Postgraduate Student Retention and Success: A South African Case Study. *HSRC Mono-graph*, Cape Town: HSRC Press.
- Le Lee S J, Srinivasan S, Trail T, Lewis D, Lopez S 2011. Examining the relationship among student perception of support, course satisfaction, and learning outcomes in online learning. *The Internet and Higher Education*, 14(3): 158-163.
- Letseka M, Maile S 2008. *High University Drop-Out Rates: A Threat to South Africa's Future*. Pretoria: Human Sciences Research Council.
- Lumadi RI 2021. Enhancing student development through support services in an open distance learning institution: A case study in South Africa. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 35(1):113-126.
- Mada TB, Chand RB, Sapkota SP, Pant DR 2025. Student dropout trends and causes in higher education: The case of Kailali Multiple Campus. *KMC Journal*, 7(1): 234-249.
- Manik S 2014. Shifting the discourse: Student departure in the context of relative deprivations. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 28(1): 148-163.
- Myburgh JS 2020. Investigating the impact of postgraduate student drop-out rates at a higher education institute, Doctoral Dissertation, North-West University, South Africa.
- Mensch BS, Kandel DB 1988. Dropping out of high school and drug involvement. *Sociology of Education*, 95-113.
- Mgwebi T, Kruger L, Maoto S, Letsoalo M 2017. Sixty Percent Dropout Rate of South African Students at Universities. From <<http://www.sfsa.co.za/session-summaries-and-bios/sixty-percent-dropout-rate-of-south-african-students-at-universities/>> (Retrieved on 11 February 2025).
- Mills J 2015. Learning Management Systems must evolve to curb student attrition. *Journal of Applied Learning Technology*, 5(4): 41-46.
- Mohangi K, Olivier H 2023. Counselling support for postgraduate open and distance e-learning students in South Africa: A case study. *Transformation in Higher Education*, 8: 265.
- Moodley P, Singh J 2015. Addressing student dropout rates at South African universities. *Alternation*, 17(17): 91-115.
- Moore MG 1991. Distance education theory. *The American Journal of Distance Education*, 5(3): 1-6.
- Moore MG 1993. Theory of transactional distance. In: D Keegan (Ed.): *Theoretical Principles of Distance Education*. Routledge, pp. 66-85.
- Mphekgwana PM, Mabila TE, Tirivangasi HM, Makgopa HM 2020. Analysis of survival rates among postgraduate students at a historically disadvantaged university in South Africa. *Gender and Behaviour*, 18(3): 16208-16221.
- Murray M 2014. Factors affecting graduation and student dropout rates at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. *South African Journal of Science*, 110(11-12): 1-6.
- Mwaniki E, Ireri A, Chege F, Njihia M 2020. Obstacles to successful uptake of open distance and E-Learning (ODEL) programmes: A case of Kenyatta University, Kenya. *African Multidisciplinary Journal of Research (AMJR)*, Special Issue, 12-22.
- Omari S, Kefiloe AM 2022. Postgraduate students in an Open Distance Learning Institution: Student support services' awareness and utilisation. *African Perspectives of Research in Teaching and Learning*, 6(2): 151-173.
- Osman Z, Ali A, Aziz RC, Yusoo F 2024. Determinants of students' retention in open online flexible distance learning higher education institutions. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business & Social Sciences*, 14(8): 3166-3181.
- Pacheco ASV, Tete MF, Monsueto SE 2024. Actions to combat student dropout in higher education. *Avaliação: Revista da Avaliação da Educação Superior (Campinas)*, 29: e024026.
- Plamenatz J 1963. *Man and Society: A Critical Examination of Some Important Social and Political Theories from Machiavelli to Marx (Vol. 1)*. London: Longman Group Limited.

- Pertry I, Sabbadini S, Goormachtig S, Lokko Y, Gheysen G, Burssens S, Mezzetti B 2014. Biosafety capacity building: Experiences and challenges from a distance learning approach. *New Biotechnology*, 31(1): 64-68.
- Qayyum A, Zawacki-Richter O 2019. The state of open and distance education. In: Olaf Zawacki-Richter, Adnan Qayyum (Eds.): *Open and Distance Education in Asia, Africa and the Middle East: National Perspectives in a Digital Age*. Singapore: Springer Singapore, pp. 125-140. 10.1007/978-981-13-5787-9\_14
- Reisel L, Brekke I 2009. Minority dropout in higher education: A comparison of the United States and Norway using competing risk event history analysis. *European Sociological Review*, jcp045.
- Rotar O 2022. Online student support: A framework for embedding support interventions into the online learning cycle. *Research and Practice in Technology Enhanced Learning*, 17(1): 2.
- Schneider M, Yin L 2011. *The High Cost of Low Graduation Rates: How Much Does Dropping Out of College Really Cost?* American Institutes for Research.
- Sharif S, Moran A, Huson SM, Iddenden R, Shenton A, Howard E, Evans DGR 2007. Women with neurofibromatosis 1 are at a moderately increased risk of developing breast cancer and should be considered for early screening. *Journal of Medical Genetics*, 44(8): 481-484.
- Silva LBE, Mariano AS 2021. The definition of dropout and its implications (limits) for higher education policies. *Educação em Revista*, 37: e26524.
- Simpson O 2018. *Supporting Students in Online, Open and Distance Learning*. Routledge.
- Ssempebwa J, Eduan W, Mulumba FN 2012. Effectiveness of university bridging programs in preparing students for university education: A case from East Africa. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 16(2): 140-156.
- Tas A, Selvitopu A, Bora V, Demirkaya Y 2013. Reasons for dropout for vocational high school students. *Educational Sciences: Theory and Practice*, 13(3): 1561-1565.
- Terentyev EA, Gruzdev IA, Gorbunova EV 2016. The court is now in session: Professor discourse on student attrition. *Russian Education and Society*, 58(1): 44-68.
- Valencia RR (Ed.) 2012. *The Evolution of Deficit Thinking: Educational Thought and Practice*. Routledge.
- Vande PT 2025. Perspectives on the origin and essence of the modern state. *Kashere Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 3(2): 87-102.
- Wiggins G, McTighe J 1998. What is backward design. *Understanding by Design*, 1: 7-19.
- Wingate U 2007. A framework for transition: Supporting 'learning to learn' in higher education. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 61(3): 391-405.
- Wood L, Kiperman S, Esch RC, Leroux AJ, Truscott SD 2017. Predicting dropout using student- and school-level factors: An ecological perspective. *School Psychology Quarterly*, 32(1): 35.
- Xavier M, Meneses J, Fiuza PJ 2022. Dropout, stopout, and time challenges in open online higher education: A qualitative study of the first-year student experience. *Open Learning: The Journal of Open, Distance and e-Learning*, 1-17.

**Paper received for publication in April, 2025**  
**Paper accepted for publication in February, 2026**