

Learner Support in Open Distance and E-Learning for Adult Students Using Technologies

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ABSTRACT In this paper, the researcher investigated learner support in the Department of Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) at the University of South Africa (Unisa), the largest dedicated ODL institution in South Africa. A review of literature studies identified the Community of Inquiry model as useful in this context. Thus, this model is used as a conceptual framework for the empirical inquiry. A mixed-method approach comprising two consecutive phases was employed to investigate the research questions. A self-designed questionnaire was used to gather quantitative data from a random sample of 400 students registered for the ABET diploma module (phase 1), followed by face-to-face interviews with selected lecturers and students (phase 2). The scope of the paper was limited to ABET lecturers, ABET diploma students and selected Unisa learner support systems, such as myUnisa, which includes a web-based discussion forum. The themes that emerged from the questionnaire and the interviews demonstrate clearly that learner support using new technologies in the ABET Department is crucial to ensure learner success. The findings suggest that the distance between the university and students needs to be reduced even more to ensure that student support reaches all students equitably. The new technologies have a role to play when considering this problem.

INTRODUCTION

The concept “Open and Distance Learning (ODL)” is very wide and can be defined in various ways. Hence, it is important to point out that it does not have a single all-embracing definition. Freeman (2004: 6) defines ODL as an amalgamation of two approaches, which focus on expanding access to learning. Moonet al. (2005: 218) further define ODL as the open learning approaches, which, when combined with distance education methodologies, are often referred to collectively as open and distance learning. According to the Commonwealth of Learning (2000), ODL is “correspondence, home study, independent learning ... flexible learning or distributed learning”. In the ODL philosophy and practice, ODL represents approaches that focus on opening access to education and training provision, freeing learners from constraints of time and place, and offering flexible learning opportunities to individuals and groups of learners (UNESCO 2002: 7). Common elements on which many authors agree in their definition are the combination of Distance Education (DE) and Open Learning, access and separation between the lecturer and the learner.

Generally, the goal of ODL is to widen participation and to overcome geographical, social and economic barriers (Kelly and Mills 2007: 149). The Ministry of Higher Education and Training (DHET) in South Africa has identified ODL as a system that should extend educational opportunities and provide access to individuals who do not have the opportunity to study full-time. The Education White Paper 3, the national plan for higher education (DoE 2001a), advocates an increase in the general participation rate in public higher education in South Africa. Its aim is to facilitate lifelong learning, develop the skills base of the country and redress historical inequities in providing education. Other policies and reports promulgated to make ODL a reality are included in the Department of Education’s (DoE’s) publications of 1996, Council for Higher Education’s (CHE’s) publications of 2004 and the National Council for Higher Education’s (NCHE’s) publications of 1996. Badat (2005) adds that ODL presents access to people who would not have the opportunity to study full-time. This could be because of work commitments, personal and social circumstances, geographical distance or poor-quality or inadequate prior learning experiences. The South African government aims to

broaden the participation rate in higher education, even in remote rural areas. In ODL contexts, lecturer and learner are physically separated from each other by some distance. Consequently, learners experience isolation due to separation from their institution, lecturers and fellow students (Rumble 2000: 1). ODL has been successful in increasing the number of students, but unsuccessful in obtaining satisfactory throughput rates. Part of the reason is that students are isolated from their teachers and some students are unprepared for higher education studies.

The study investigates the provision of learner support in the Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) programme at a specific university, the University of South Africa (Unisa) in Pretoria. Extensive literature has been reviewed on developing ODL as a mode of higher education provision, the characteristics of ODL, the rationale for ODL provision, the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in ODL, learner support in ODL and the state of ABET in the South African and Unisa contexts.

The Ministry of Higher Education and Training has identified Unisa as an ODL institution that should help to widen students' participation in learning. However, the other ODL institutions are faced with a number of challenges, including dropout and student support. Makina (2008: 1) suggests that although ODL has been acclaimed for providing access to higher education for students previously denied this privilege, this formal admission has not been matched with adequate learner support strategies to ensure success.

The students in ODL often feel isolated as they are studying on their own. Boyle et al. (2010: 122) state that there can be particularly acute issues in the distance learning environment: students often report feelings of isolation, little sense of connection and belonging and are challenged to maintain engagement in and motivation for learning. Perraton (2000) argues that ODL institutions have high dropout and low pass rates. Yet, according to Daniel et al. (2009: 24), ODL is an effective way of reaching out to large student numbers.

Against this background, this paper investigated Unisa's ODL system with specific reference to the provision of learner support and an ABET programme.

One of the critical components in ODL is learner support. Learner support has frequently

been identified as particularly important for student success in ODL. According to Simpson (2002), Tait (2000) and Thorpe (2002), learner support is a broad term referring to the services provided to distance learners so that they can overcome barriers to learning and complete their studies successfully.

Learner support is defined in different ways in the distance and online learning literature (Brindley et al. 2004). It might cover learning materials, teaching and tutoring, and non-academic elements such as administrative aspects, guidance and counselling. In this paper, learner support refers to all kinds of services, including face-to-face teaching during group discussions or tutoring. Dzakiria (2005: 95) and Kelly and Mills (2007: 149) add that learner support has frequently been identified by open learning institutions as being of particular importance for student success in ODL. All these scholars are of the view that learner support is learner-centred and crucial for learner success in ODL.

In 2008, Unisa introduced an ODL policy that changed the focus of tuition to include technology and multimedia interaction. In responding to the global call, Unisa uses various technologies to reach out to its students and provide them with opportunities to learn through the various technologies. Anderson (2008) and Aluko et al. (2011) argue that ICT can enhance traditional learner support systems. However, a number of challenges face Unisa's lecturers in using the learner support systems to reach students.

Conceptual Framework of the Paper

This paper is a descriptive and interpretive case study of learner support in the specific ODL context for the ABET programme. The two theories that have a significant influence on adult teaching and learning are those espoused by Knowles (1979) and Freire (1998). Knowles conceptualised the notion of andragogy and Freire, learner-centredness. The Community of Inquiry (CoI) model, originally proposed by Garrison et al. (2000), served as an additional conceptual framework for the paper.

The Problem Statement

According to Rumble (2000), distance education institutions were instrumental in developing support services that will assist their stu-

dents to perform. The need to address the high dropout rates that were associated with correspondence education led to the focus on providing student support services. The number of students in the ABET Department has dropped since the institute became an academic department. One of the major challenges facing distance education institutions is to provide support for isolated students who are left to fend for themselves (Bridley and Paul 2004: 40). Distance education students are separated from their lecturers and the distance between the students and the institution is a worrying factor. The effects of such isolation on distance learners can inhibit any possibility for engagement with teachers, study material and peers (Simpson 2002). The literature reviewed has shown that such isolation of distance education students can be overcome by providing proper student support.

The ABET diploma students come from mainly rural provinces of the Eastern Cape and Limpopo. Unisa seems to be the only ODL institution in South Africa that caters mainly for students in rural areas. Qakisa-Makoe (2005: 43) says that most of Unisa's African students come from homes where they are first-generation learners in higher education. They are learners who are expected to learn and study new material independently and to adjust to new ways of learning in a distance learning environment.

Based on this, this is the problem that the researcher wanted to address in this paper. The importance of learner support in ODL is crucial and many of the above-mentioned scholars reviewed above argue that learner support has a role to play in increasing the success rate of these students. The relatively low pass rate and dropout rate is a concern for Unisa. The enrolment for ABET diploma students has dropped in recent years. Although there are best practices globally at Unisa, learner support strategies and multiple challenges face the students and lecturers regarding learner support. Unisa uses technology to reach out to its students in both urban and rural areas. However, students and lecturers face problems in using technology for teaching and learning. This situation prompted the researcher to explore the perceptions, views, opinions and attitudes of the ABET diploma students on the use of learner support structures.

The main research question identified in this paper is formulated as follows:

How Does ODL Systems at Unisa Provide Learner Support in an ABET Programme?

To address the research question, it is imperative to answer the following sub-questions as well:

- ♦ What are the attitudes and experiences of Unisa's ABET students and lecturers on learner support?
- ♦ What recommendations can one make to improve learner support at Unisa in general and for ABET students in particular?

Significance of the Paper

On the basis of the background given above, the paper is significant for the following reasons. The literature reviewed indicates that ODL focuses on removing barriers to accessing higher education, particularly regarding students who live in disadvantaged and rural areas where learner support is central to student success (Thorpe 2001; Badat 2005; Dzakira 2005; Kelly and Mills 2007). The paper was informed by ways of learner support through e-learning in general and makes suggestions for the appropriate use of ICT for providing learner support to ODL in all departments at Unisa.

METHODOLOGY

This section gives attention to quantitative and qualitative empirical findings emerging from the paper. The findings are discussed according to the sections of the questionnaire.

In phase 1, the researcher randomly sampled 400 students from the total number of 1808 students enrolled for the Higher Diploma in Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET). They were targeted to participate in the survey to ensure the best possible representation of their experiences of learner support in ABET. However, while the findings represent the views and experiences of the target population, they cannot claim to be representative of the views and experiences of all ABET and Unisa students.

The respondents were scattered throughout the nine provinces of South Africa, with the vast majority of them living in rural areas. There were more female students than male students, which suggest that females have sufficient time to study at home, in spite of their domestic sched-

ules. Interestingly, the researcher would have expected men to have more time available because they have fewer domestic duties.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The majority of respondents (99.2%) were Africans; the remaining 0.8% of the respondents were Coloureds and Indians combined. Africans are found mainly in rural areas and most come from poor backgrounds and a disadvantaged schooling system, resulting in limited proficiency in English as the medium of instruction.

The fact that female students outnumbered male students means that female students are more concerned about the problems of illiteracy in the rural areas than are the male students. The females use the ABET programme to regain the time they lost during the apartheid era. During that era, there was no compulsory education in South Africa, and this affected women more than men.

Learner support is developed so that students can communicate more easily with the university. The question was asked to find out how students communicate with the university. The function of student support entails providing the students with as much assistance as possible so that they can overcome difficulties that are often encountered by distance education students. Student support takes different forms, including the following:

Library Visits

The respondents visit the library weekly as follows: once (62.1%), twice (13.6%), three times (11.1%), four times (3.8%) and five times (9.4%) per week.

Use of myUnisa Website

The students tend to visit myUnisa more regularly. At least 73.5% reported that they visit the website at least once a week, while 10.5% of them visit the website more than five times a week. On a weekly basis respondents visit the Unisa's website as follows: one time (73.5%); two times (7.1%); three times (6.3%); four times (2.5%); and five times (10.5%).

Study Groups

The respondents meet with their study group on a monthly basis as follows: once a month

(36.6%) and twice a month (12.2%). Most students use the library not to get resources but as a place to study. Generally, the students regard the library as a quiet place to study, since quiet places are not available in their home communities.

The majority of the students use the myUnisa website for learning. They also reported that they access Unisa website from their mobile phones.

Most respondents (76.3%) do not have access to the internet; only 22.2% reported having access. The question sought to establish whether the respondents had internet access with particular reference to e-mail, which is the most popular method of communication between the students, the lecturers and the university. The majority of respondents (66.9%) were unable to send e-mails – only 31.1% were able to send and receive e-mails.

The majority of the respondents (72.4%) were unable to download study material from the internet; only 25.7% were able to do so. The majority of respondents (66.9%) were not able to send e-mails; 31.1% was able to send and receive e-mails.

The overall response showed that most respondents had no access to the internet, which would impact their studies and their access to learner support systems. In the Unisa environment, the e-mail method is probably the most popular communication application of the internet. It is fast and conveys messages and files within a very short time.

Since Unisa is looking into the possibility of going fully online, the researcher wanted to find out how many students have access to technologies that will make it possible for them to go online. About 76.3% of students do not have access to internet and they live in the rural areas and registered for this programme. Only 22.4% students have access to the internet.

In the context of this programme, the majority of students do not have an access to the internet and they still rely on the print-based materials. Although Unisa wants to go online and use the e-learning route, this means that the majority of students in rural areas will be excluded from the teaching and learning process.

Students who do have access to the internet use it for downloading study materials and sending and receiving e-mails. They can still use myUnisa to download learning materials, but they are not using it. They seem to use myUnisa mainly for administration purposes, for example receiving and sending assignments.

The findings suggest that although the majority of students do not have internet access, they do seem to recognise its value as a means of providing student support in teaching and learning.

In phase 2, the themes that emerged during the interviews demonstrate very clearly that learner support in the ABET Department is crucial in ensuring learner success. During the analysis of the data, the researcher identified several codes, which were then clustered into code families. Each of the themes and related issues has been analysed to demonstrate its relevance to the research questions and sub-questions.

It was clear from the lecturers' responses that the use of e-learning at Unisa is fairly new to them. Thus, some of the lecturers do not have a comprehensive understanding of e-learning or online learning. This is an issue that Unisa should be aware of and try to remedy. If lecturers do not yet have a good grasp of what e-learning or online learning entails, perhaps it is premature for the university to expect those same lecturers to use e-learning/online learning effectively for teaching and learning.

Of the ten lecturers interviewed, five are currently using myUnisa for teaching and learning activities. Even though some of them have not started using myUnisa, they do have an understanding of what it can do for students – mainly by bringing the students closer to the department. However, these lecturers acknowledge that rural students do not have access to internet and other facilities. Yet they understand the importance and value of myUnisa and see it as a networking tool that helps to reduce the distance between the student and the institution.

Although the lecturers have made claims that they visit myUnisa and attend to teaching and learning activities. Yet 76.3% of students do not have access to internet, which means that they cannot download study materials or send and receive e-mails. Therefore, the lecturers' teaching could be limited to the 22.2% of the students who do have access to the internet. Consequently, the students who do not have access to the internet miss out on these teaching and learning activities. So myUnisa could be a useful tool for teaching and learning, if it is accessible to all students. It would allow the students to network and bridge the gap between them and their lecturers. Since the attitude of lecturers towards myUnisa was positive, they should be encour-

aged to attend the myUnisa training that the university provides for them.

It is clear that most lecturers have not fully utilised myUnisa for teaching and learning. This could be attributed to the fact that the university has not yet gone fully online. Most lecturers are not motivated for various reasons, such as not having the time its use is currently limited to specific functions.

The lecturers indicated that they provided learner support systems through technology. Since the lecturers saw the need to support students who were isolated, the commitment of lecturers to use the myUnisa learning management system would help to increasing their students' success. However, it must be noted that there has been an improvement since 2007 in terms of student support. The lecturers also indicated that they wish to use print and group discussion classes in future to supplement computer facilities, while encouraging students to visit myUnisa.

However, the vast majority of students (76.3%) do not have access to the internet. Unisa has invested much in learner support systems using computer facilities. However, the majority of students have no internet access, or find it too costly to access. This is a cause for concern to students who do not have an access to the internet. The university has invested so much in the internet and there is 22% (which is low) of students who have limited access to the internet. There is a large number of students who do not have an access to the internet. The lecturers interviewed indicated that they still use printed materials to support those students who have no access to the internet. Yet the late delivery of study material is a recurring problem in the distance learning environment – for example as a result of postal strikes – and students often approach their lecturers about this. Therefore, technology is seen as a means of study material delivery.

Those students who do have access to myUnisa use it for downloading study materials, communicating with the university, and so on. myUnisa is used for communications with the students specifically, for example assignment due dates. They communicate with their lecturers about administrative issues, assignment due dates, etc. but there is very little communication about academic activities.

About 90% of the lecturers interviewed did not have formal qualifications in computer lit-

eracy, nor were they exposed to computer facilities during their professional training. Therefore, the use of myUnisa by the lecturers is associated with trial-and-error learning. This has implications for learner support systems.

CONCLUSION

The value proposition of the paper was to find ways to encourage ABET diploma students to complete their studies, thus leading to student success and a reduced dropout rate among these students. The researcher also noted that even in the urban areas, the cost of accessing computer facilities is prohibitive and therefore influences students' access. This situation involves social, political, economic and technological factors. Too many students register for the ABET modules, qualify. Thus, several factors in adult students' lives impact their learning activities.

Nevertheless, the participants showed real enthusiasm for and an innovative commitment to their teaching and learning.

The principles and theories of ODL, ABET and learner support produce student-centredness. In South Africa, Unisa and its stakeholders have thoroughly embraced the ODL mode. The focus of online education at Unisa seems to take into account of the diverse background of our students and the accessibility and affordability of online learning. Although distance education is sometimes criticised and regarded as second-chance education, Unisa is striving for excellence in its provision.

Even though both positive and negative responses were obtained from the participants, it is clear that learner support in ODL has the potential to improve the throughput rate and ensure student success. It can also improve the quality of education and help to provide education for all.

RECOMMENDATIONS

While there is increased interest in integrating technology in learning and teaching, very little is known about the use of ICTs and changing student approaches to learning. The new communication technologies, particularly the internet, appear to offer exciting possibilities for overcoming geographical access and cost barriers to learning. Introducing ODL has been gen-

erally understood as a response to the new challenges of increased and diverse demands for supportive learning in the educational sector. The distance education offered in developing countries has depended largely on first- and second-generation delivery modes and has relied heavily on print as a form of information dissemination. The technological challenges are often cited as the main reasons for such drawbacks.

Adult education is crucial for social change globally. It addresses socio-economic problems by empowering people with relevant skills. Although ABET in South Africa is booming, Project Literacy indicated that South Africa has about 4,7 million illiterate people, and these low levels of literacy and numeracy persist. Moreover, ABET diploma students are diverse and are often located in rural areas without the necessary facilities.

Unisa, as an ODL institution, requires effective learner support to improve throughput and success rates of ABET diploma students. The dropout rate and the inability of many students to use myUnisa is a significant problem. There is substantial evidence that technology can be an effective tool in supporting teaching and learning at a distance. However, challenges face students who live in rural communities.

The literature reviewed reveals that ODL could be an effective tool in enabling students from less privileged social groups and those who have traditionally not entered higher education after school to participate in higher education. Therefore, it is important that countries offering distance education deal effectively with technological challenges and problems.

In this regard, technologies such as the telephone, multimedia, CDs and DVDs, video and audio conferencing, SMSs, cellphones, e-mail and discussion forums via myUnisa have been proposed as new possibilities for supporting learning in distance education.

The department should consider the local context when providing learner support strategies. If we know who our learners are, we will be able to respond to their needs instead of regarding technology as the first consideration. Starting with learners' needs prompts more creative and responsive solutions. For example, where there is only limited internet connectivity in people's homes – or none at all – there may be internet cafes nearby. An education provider could

establish a partnership with the internet cafes and cover some of the learners' costs in using them, thus improving internet access for learners.

Implementing technology in undergraduate courses to facilitate learning is an important part of the ODL learning process. ABET diploma students should be encouraged to make use of technology in their learning experience.

Thus, student support through mobile phones should be considered to increase learner support in the ABET department. The lecturers have a responsibility to provide opportunities for all ABET diploma students across a wide spectrum of diverse backgrounds and abilities. The access to a variety of ICTs should be exploited in the teaching and learning activities to meet the needs of learners in a transformative way.

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