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Challenges Experienced by Lecturers in Supporting Students at an Open Distance e-Learning Institution

Abstract

Institutions of higher education in South Africa have seen a shift in the student demographic of student population, and from contact teaching approaches to distance and online approaches to instruction. This has posed challenges as students find themselves without adequate support in online environments to successfully fulfil their studies. There are few studies that focus on the challenges lecturers experience in an open distance e-learning (ODEL) setting. This paper seeks to narrow that gap by exploring the challenges experienced by lecturers in an ODeL institution, which offers massified higher education for part-time students. The study is aimed to determine and explain how lecturers could use their concerted skills to benefit students. The research is embedded in Moore's transactional distance theory and adopted Vygotsky's social constructivist approach. In terms of methodology, a qualitative research approach with a phenomenological design was used. Data were collected through open-ended semi-structured interviews from participants of the College of Education (CEDU) at the University of South Africa (UNISA). Transcription and thematic analyses of data were completed to identify themes.

Findings from the study revealed that lecturers in CEDU were not inducted on their core functions hence the shortcomings in delivery of student support services. The study recommends that further research be conducted on how to support and empower lecturers within CEDU to give students leading-edge support.

Keywords: support challenges, ODeL experiences, distance learning, transactional distance

Introduction

Unisa is the largest ODeL institution in South Africa (Unisa, 2019a). The vision and value statements of Unisa aim to unite diverse cultures through education platforms and to guide students during the decision-making and strategic planning processes. The vision aims to achieve this in South Africa and globally, without compromising the standards of teaching and learning. This would require lecturers to possess cutting-edge teaching skills to realise Unisa's vision – "towards an African university shaping futures in the service of humanity" – which describes Unisa's wish to serve the African continent while transcending language and cultural barriers. Unisa's mission is to be a comprehensive ODeL institution that delivers excellent scholarship and research, offering quality tuition ... "guided by the principles of lifelong learning, student centredness, innovation and creativity"; this includes lecturers who continuously and consistently work towards student-centredness, innovation and creativity (Unisa, 2019b). Quality teaching is essential in the landscape of higher education facing continuous changes (Hénard & Leprince-Ringuet, 2008).

Students in ODeL institutions are responsible for planning their studies. For most students, their previous learning experiences did not prepare them for the e-learning and study journey that makes for a successful Unisa student.

The advantage of ODeL is that it is an effective tool, enabling students that are unreachable because of their geographical location, financial constraints or domestic conditions to access professional development programmes at higher education institutions. ODeL removes barriers to access learning, provides flexibility of learning, is student-centred, and supports students, when constructing learning programmes. ODeL is defined as a multi-dimensional concept aimed at bridging the socio-economic, educational, communication and time divide amongst students, the institution, student academics and courseware. It focuses on creating access to education and training provisions, offers students flexible learning opportunities (Matlabe, 2010).

In ODeL institutions, lecturers have to render support to students in all student services that complement the course materials and learning resources. The primary functions of student support, essential and interdependent, are cognitive, affective and systemic (Tait, 2000).

This understanding of student support emanates from Vygotsky's constructivist theory (Cheng et al., 2008) which stipulates that knowledge is made and remade by participating in learning.

Universities depend on committed efforts of all staff members (Cant, Wiid & Machado, 2013); central to this are the lecturers who have to render unconventional service essential to students who rely on lecturers' support to guide and manage their learning experience.

Increased international competition, growing social and geographical diversity of students and the Covid-19 pandemic are some of the reasons why ODeL tuitions should be forward-looking. This compels lecturers to improve their tutoring skills and approaches to support students, further laying clear, simple communication systems in place.

Student support is a critical component of student success in ODeL. Student support is a broad term referring to the services provided to distance students, enabling them to overcome barriers to learning, and complete their studies successfully (Simpson, 2018). Central to student support is the lecturer, who should close the apertures in student support; create a balance between students' autonomy and the learning content. This balance will empower students and lead them to owning their academic journey.

Lecturers whose training and experiences are anchored in the conventional system of education are employed in CEDU and are expected to deliver leading-edge tuition with no ODeL expertise. While ODeL has varying features of historical backgrounds from country to country, the basic concepts remain the same and are comparable. The key to success lies in identifying and building on existing talents of lecturers, seeing how these talents can be transferred to the skills that are required for effective teaching and learning in ODeL institutions to guarantee student success (Simpson, 2018).

The importance for lecturers to develop synchronous communication tools cannot be over-emphasised, it is a two-way interaction which increases dialogue. These tools can assist lecturers to break the sense of isolation felt by many ODeL

students; assist lecturers to create student communities of practice, promote interaction, advance personal and cognitive participation (Falloon, 2011). Consistent interaction between lecturers and students in ODeL institutions using synchronous systems improves students' attitudes, encourages earlier completion of coursework, advances their performance in formative and summative assessments; assesses students' levels of knowledge and understanding, ensures deep, meaningful pedagogic opportunities, and builds a ubiquitous learning community (Falloon, 2011).

Lecturers in ODeL institutions should provide timely and constructive feedback to students, assist them in structuring their learning and guide them to identify their study priorities (Falloon, 2011). They should continually change their instructional strategies and content, uphold quality interaction and dialogue which are critical components to break down students' barriers to succeed in ODeL institutions. The separation between lecturers and students lead to communication gaps, and creates a psychological space of potential misunderstandings.

In ODeL institutions, there is the emotional, psychological and geographical distance between the student and learning materials which adversely impact the transaction of teaching and learning (Tait, 2017).

Lecturers may have little or no knowledge of, or contact with the students as they prepare and deliver instructional lessons, because the didactic conversation is different from that of face-to-face institutions. Conventional lecturers have not received proper training and guidance to effectively design, develop and deliver distance learning courses; moreover, the necessary technical support is also often not available.

Lecturers in ODeL institutions do not have regular and consistent interaction with students to ensure student success. This deleteriously impacts both the lecturers and students' attitudes resulting in delays in students' completion of coursework and poor assessment results. Lack of lecturers' ODeL skills adversely impacts student motivation and engagement in their studies. Lecturers require skills to develop excellent didactic conversations with their students, to create the conversational mode necessary for successful teaching, online discussions and conferencing. These skills have not yet been acquired by conventional lecturers; hence, the deleterious impact on the transaction of teaching and learning (Tait, 2017).

In research and scholarship, having a problem has always been at the heart of the investigation process. In this case the problem is about lecturers acquiring superlative skills and strategies to equip them to successfully render efficient support to the ODeL students. There seems to have been little research – especially in the context of South Africa – on the challenges posed to lecturers in ODeL institutions including the ways of motivating them to improve their methods and delivery of learning. The question is, which skills and strategies are necessary for addressing the many challenges faced by lecturers in ODeL institutions?

Integrated theories underlying the study

Moore's transactional distance theory (Gorsky & Caspi, 2005) was used in exploring the lecturers' challenges and experiences in this study. Through transactional distance theory, an attempt was made to research the gap in the lecturer-student relationship, and the synchronous and asynchronous delivery

formats. Transactional distance theory proposes that the essential distance in ODeL institutions is transactional and not spatial or temporal. The transactional distance theory comprises three components: the **dialogue** between the lecturer and the students, the **structure** of teaching and learning which has to suit the ODeL students, and the **autonomy** of the students. The transactional distance theory was appropriate in this research because of its relevance in bridging the transactional gap in the ODeL arena and the primary objective of distance learning. For lecturers to be impactful in distance learning, they require skills which will enable them to engage with students effectively in dialogue (Mbatha & Naidoo, 2010, pp. 2-3). The transactional distance model serves as an empirical device, the means of identifying questions for research and serves as a practical instrument used to make instructional design decisions.

Through the application of the social constructivism theory (Cheng et al., 2008), emphasis is made on the importance of culture and context of what occurs in ODeL institutions. Constructivism as a paradigm posits that learning is an active, constructive process. This guide construction of new knowledge based on reality constructed through individual lecturers' activities. Cheng et al. (2008) view scaffolding as the central approach within the social constructivism construct in ODeL, and further maintain that a constructivist approach should be taken where interaction between students and lecturers would create the necessary knowledge and skills in a specific context.

The concept of dialogue is developed by teachers/lecturers and learners/students in the course of the interactions that occur when instruction is given and students respond (Letseka, Letseka & Pitsoe, 2018, p. 133) in ODeL. This dialogue is purposeful, constructive and valued by both lecturer and student. It is an educational relationship towards the improved understanding of the module content by the student.

Research methodology

The study was embedded in a transactional-constructivist paradigm. The open-ended, semi-structured interviews were structured to explain how lecturers dialogued and interacted with students, and how the modules were structured with students' autonomy in mind. The qualitative approach to study the phenomenon in-depth from the lived experiences of the participants – lecturers, including their viewpoints, was of great advantage. The methodology was exploratory, descriptive and used textual data. The purpose of the research was to identify gaps in the skills needed by lecturers in CEDU, and to extract their viewpoints about their needs to improve quality in their endeavour to support students. This provided real-life experiences of their individual challenges and needs, to give their respective students optimal support.

The research sample comprised 10 ODeL lecturers from different departments within CEDU at Unisa. Their ages varied from 32 to 60 years; there were six females and four males; their language backgrounds were – one Setswana, three IsiZulu, two Sepedi, one Tshivenda, two IsiXhosa and one Sesotho. Their academic qualifications varied from BEd, Honours to PhD, their positions were lecturer, senior lecturer and associate professor. The interviews lasted between 38 and 59 minutes. All participants were invited to participate in the research through a formal

invitation letter, following a verbal or telephonic request. The research had approval from the university's research ethics committee and followed standard informed consent protocols. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews, as well as written reflections of the CEDU lecturers. The questions were based on lecturers' experiences on how they support students in teaching and learning.

The ability to listen to each participant assisted me as a member of the teaching and learning community to strengthen my relationship. This process humanised the learning environment and built a greater sense of community within an ODeL institution. Participants highlighted issues around structural aspects such as personal relevance, organisational, communication and feedback (Falloon, 2011).

The semi-structured interviews were effectively employed to understand the lecturers' individual experiences and suggested possible solutions to the challenges they experience. The scope of the questions covered both the emotional and academic aspects of the lecturers' experiences. The academic aspect was divided into the following categories: how to motivate students to learn, to study and to write assignments.

Inductive thematic analysis (Nowell et al., 2017, pp. 2, 8) was used to analyse the data and the following themes emerged:

- Lack of formal induction on core functions;
- Dysfunctional service delivery to students;
- Radical development in technology in supporting students.

Discussion of findings

Lack of formal induction on the core functions

Findings of the study revealed that lecturers are in dire need of induction in their core function – teaching and learning. Participants cited that the institution's induction is mainly on administrative matters, instead of teaching and learning. Lecturers should be inducted in didactical skills with emphasis on commitment to teaching and learning, personal competence, creativity, innovativeness, exposure to international experience and networking in the department in which one is working, and willingness to take ownership toward academic self-management. Lecturers need skills and they can only achieve this through proper induction on their core functions if an institution truly would like to improve the throughput of student success (Cant et al., 2013).

Dysfunctional service delivery by lecturers to students

Findings of the study revealed that lecturers experience that students are very distant, they are unable to communicate effectively and efficiently. This is as a result of students' lack of access to e-learning resources, and lack of skills by lecturers to use devices and innovative Information and Communications Technology (ICT) resources at their disposal.

It is important that lecturers incline themselves to render unconventional services to students to equip them to fit the global society.

Conversely, skills and strategies referred to are: lack of innovative ICT skills, huge student numbers, non-communicating students because of lack of access to technology, inadequate ICT system, and late delivery of study material to students.

It is important that ODeL institutions have crucial amenities to ensure successful transaction of tuition (Mbatha & Naidoo, 2010, p. 1).

Radical development in technology to support students not accessible to all

Findings showed that planning programmes in ODeL in Africa should focus on an African philosophy and the practical realities of day-to-day life in Africa (Letseka, 2013, pp. 1-2). It could be assumed that when planning programmes at Unisa, the African philosophy and practical realities of the day-to-day life in Africa have not been taken into consideration. This is because students in remote rural areas and those from poorer communities cannot access the technology modes introduced to enhance student support.

Recommendations

The findings revealed the need for induction and orientation of newly appointed lecturers on the delivery of their core functions. Lecturers' service delivery to students should be greatly improved by capacitating them in all ODeL skills and strategies of teaching and learning. The institution needs to devise means to reach students in the remote villages where technology is not readily available.

The study contributed to the policy and practice of ODeL in Unisa. ODeL should be about student-centredness. Students' digital literacy is limited. This depends on the students' socio-economic status, and their residency – rural or suburban. The idea of digital literacy is a mystery to both lecturers and students, as not all lecturers are conversant with the use of digital devices. How will these very lecturers engage students online? Interventions are necessary to bring about desired results. Unisa should have an enabling value chain that supports the success of both the lecturers and the students. The transactional and knowledge creation environment should be conducive to both the lecturers and students, and have impactful value. The relationship between throughput, distance, number of students, teaching and learning should be critically considered so as to leverage opportunities, skills and strategies for best practices.

Conclusion

The scholarship of teaching and learning demands lecturers to change their negative perceptions regarding 'problems' of teaching and learning within ODeL institutions. This requires changing lecturers' mind-set and embrace the 'winds' of change. Lecturers should consider ICT problems as an opportunity to advance their knowledge of online tuition. They need to inculcate mastery goals associated with reaching high levels of proficiency, and performance goals that are associated with demonstrating competence to their students. Importantly, ODeL lecturers should be intrinsically driven by curiosity and pleasure to improve their skills and strategies to impart knowledge to their respective students. They should be determined to produce top-achieving students. Lecturers need to fully recognise their talents and develop these into strengths, apply their strengths in their roles as efficient lecturers, imparting high-quality knowledge to their students.

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