

A Comparative Study on the Academic Wellness of Postgraduate Students in ODL Institutions: A Case of ZOU and UNISA

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KEYWORDS Academic wellness; ODL; ZOU; UNISA; postgraduates

ABSTRACT The objective of this study was to explore and establish the academic wellness of postgraduate students in the respective institutions. The sample of six ZOU students and six UNISA students was purposively drawn from two institutions. This study draws an intensive ethnographic research interrogative approach through observations, interviews, and open ended questions to explore and establish the academic wellness of ZOU and UNISA postgraduate students in ODL Institutions. An integrative framework lens namely the Transactional distance theory, Cultural Historical Activity theory and Hetler's Wellness theory were mainly used to try and get a better perspective on students' wellness in ODL institutions. By using an integrative lens, the researchers were mainly trying to get a better perspective on academic wellness of postgraduate students in ODL Institutions. Ethical considerations were observed by the researchers. Data was analysed manually through hand coding and categorizing of ideas, which eventually formed themes to this research study. Findings for now revealed that postgraduates' students in both institutions are technologically challenged, are experiencing challenges in terms of registration process and library facility usage. The mentoring process and the student-supervisor relationship have a great impact on their wellness. Additionally findings from this study revealed that post graduates students' wellness in both institutions, is affected in different form hence they are crying for the respective institutions to assist them accordingly to enable

them to overcome the encountered problems during their learning process. The study was limited in its geographical coverage and scope, the findings of the research can neither be generalised to other provinces nor to the entire populations of Zimbabwe or South Africa. In view of that, it is therefore, recommended that, the study should be replicated in other ODL institutions. In this way, a broader and more comprehensive perspectives and understanding will be gained on the academic wellness of postgraduate students in ODL institutions.

BACKGROUND

UNISA was founded in 1873 where it started as a university college which offered courses to learners via correspondence. Subsequently, the university migrated through the various developmental stages of distance education. In 2004, thus when it was constituted as a comprehensive open and distance learning university. Similarly, ZOU was founded in 1999 as an Open and distance learning. Both universities (UNISA & ZOU) as DOL Universities, promotes open access to courses, flexibility in methods and criteria of assessment. Open and distance learning (ODL) implies a shift from content to learner. This dictates that the needs of the learners be addressed in a holistic manner (Seleetse, 2002:91). For a student who has other commitments in life like work related issues, family and other responsibilities it is very difficult to study full time at a university. With an increasing number of students who study part time and living in other countries, an ODL university is the best option for them to study. Open Distance Learning institutions support diversity and social inclusion (Gaskel, 2010). Wisker, Robinson and Shacham (2007) argue that isolation is no longer an issue since in this age of electronic communication, interactions at a distance is comparable to a face to face one. Although their argument is debatable since in developing countries there are challenges of access to internet or technophobia depending on the age cohort of students. Postgraduate students need more support since there is a lot that is expected from them in terms of delivery. Simpson (2008) asserts that there is a theory that is needed for student support especially in ODL context. Simpson (2008) suggested that in ODL learner support should focus on learner's strengths, proactive motivational theory. The theories that Simpson (2008) postulated are actually supporting the academic wellness of students. Dzakiria (2008) also emphasises that students in ODL context need support in order to attain academic fulfilment. All learner support systems are interrelated

and support one another hence, it is against this background that the central question that the study addressed was: **how is the academic wellness of postgraduate students in ODL Institutions?**

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study used an integrative lens of transactional distance theory (Moore ,2007), Cultural Historical Activity theory (CHAT) Lev Vygotsky (1978) and the Wellness theory (Hettler 1980). The researchers used transactional distance theory since both universities are ODL institutions which have planned learning that normally occurs in a different place requiring special techniques, communication through various technologies and special organizations and administrative arrangements (Moore & Kearsley, 2005). Moore and Kearsley (2005) further define the transactional distance as the gap of understanding and communication between supervisors and postgraduate students caused by geographic distance that must be bridged through clear modes of interaction. Dialogue between the supervisor and the student, flexibility of structure in this study the marking of the proposal and chapters and giving feedback, and student autonomy are three major components in transactional theory. Furthermore the researchers used CHAT as a lens and the focus was on mediation: how practical activity shapes and is shaped by cognitive functioning. This in turn aids students in acquiring the thought processes and behaviours deemed valuable and specific to their culture or society. The changes and academic growth that students experience as a result of these interactions with supervisors allows students to become competent in their research. Vygotsky (1978) explained this interaction in terms of “mediated action” in which participants are not passive, rather active as they interact with artefacts or tools (technologies) and use these interactions to make meaning of their environment, or evolve and change their current meanings. The CHAT theory has a strong focus on the social aspects of human beings. In the current study the social aspect was the communication between the postgraduate student and the ODL administrative staff and the supervisor. The third lens used in the current study was the wellness theory of (Hettler 1980). Hettler (1980) developed a theory of Wellness, exploring how humans can develop ways to live optimally. Hettler's model focuses on an integrated approach to wellness, and living a healthy, fulfilling life. Hettler's model defines six equal areas of life: physical, emotional, intellectual,

spiritual, social and occupational. Hettler espoused that achieving wellness meant finding balance in these six key areas both individually and as they overlap in human life, as these six distinct categories or dimensions are intertwined and help to empower people to contribute to their environment and community, and enable them to build better living spaces and social networks thus achieving more balance and wellness in their lives. In this study the postgraduate's wellness is influenced by the conditions which encampass the student's life. If the student is challenged academically the social, emotional, spiritual and career may be affected. Hence the use of three theories for the current study assisted the researchers to explore the academic wellness of the postgraduate students in ODL institutions

LITERATURE REVIEW

Student supervision in ODL context

In supervision there is a formal role played by a supervisor who is by virtue of being in an academic institution should be more qualified to lead an activity of supervision. Chiapetta-Swanson and Watt (2011) assert that there are expectations and accountabilities to both the supervisor and the supervisee. Every university has rules and regulations that pertain to the smooth running of supervision. In ODL institutions the challenge may be the number of students allocated to supervisors. Therefore it calls for careful administrative skills from the supervisor so that none of the students is lost or forgotten. The procedures that are outlined in ODL universities should advantage both the student and the supervisor (Chiapetta-Swanson & Watt, 2011). Though in ODL the supervisor and the student may not meet but the supervisor should bear in mind that 'supervision in the academic context is a process to facilitate the student becoming an independent researcher and scholar in their field, capable of adapting to various research arenas (Pearson & Brew, 2002). In becoming a scholar postgraduate students have intellectual freedom to explore eccentric ideas, follow hunches, and test the supervisor's knowledge which may be annoying to other supervisors. It therefore calls for maturity and one's personality to understand the stance that the student is taking in writing and building an argument. In ODL the challenge is the relationship may be strained and there is no chance of meeting and resolving the misunderstanding. In supervision it is more on the wellness of the students since this is a developmental path for their academic journey.

Supervision in ODL institutions has a major challenge of distance, problems related to ICT accessibility and affordability (Mafa & Mapolisa, 2012). At times internet is unreliable and frustrates both students and supervisors. At UNISA a system of recording students' activities is on My Unisa which is a tool which needs an internet facility and the server must always be on. The supervisor frustration comes when after marking the student's work and one needs to record the activities onto My Unisa and the system does not work on that afternoon. The supervisor ends up sending an email and the chances are high that the supervisor may forget to update the system the following day. The postgraduate office when they monitor My Unisa it appears as though the student is inactive since the site is empty, though the email use is utilised by both the student and the supervisor. These are some of the challenges at UNISA which may appear minor but when the student completes there may be hassles since the administration tool is empty, there are no recorded activities. This calls for the supervisor's vigilance since this may affect the wellness of both the student and the supervisor. The supervisor should ensure that students don't become dissonant. In overcoming dissonance supervisory dialogue should provide support enabling students to succeed in their postgraduate studies (Wisker, Robinson, Trafford, Creighton & Warnes, 2003)

Mentor mentee relationship in ODL context

Supervision entails mentoring relationship between the supervisor (mentor) and the student (mentee). The mentoring role is characterised by a relationship wherein personal experiences and knowledge are being shared and someone less experienced grows and matures in such a relationship. Chiapetta-Swanson and Watt (2011) assert that a mentor is someone who engages in a long term relationship with a student by mutual agreement. Magano (2011) posits that mentoring process ensures that even after the student has completed a PhD will be able to be an independent researcher and not resenting anything that has to do with research. The relationships in mentoring can either built or break someone's confidence. UNISA since it is an international university it has diverse student population across the globe, it is therefore important that in mentoring one has to be open minded. Manathunga (2007) highlights that effective supervision has mentoring in it, therefore the two concepts mentoring and supervision cannot be separated. Since ODL institutions has a wide spectrum of students the mentoring process may be complex since online telematics are used in communication. In using technology to facilitate the process

of supervision one must guard against the abuse of power as a supervisor. Magano (2011); Manathunga (2007) posit that there is freedom of expression between supervisor and the students though guidance is also necessary and mutual respect between mentor and mentee. The wellness of both should be enhanced throughout the process of mentoring. The role of the mentee is ensure that there is guidance regarding students' aspirations, the students prior knowledge, know that it is the students research, counsel where there is frustration, being a role model and have a good relationship (Mafa & Mapolisa, 2012). A good mentor is accessible to students that he or she is supervising and responds timeously and gives constructive feedback (Chiapetta-Swanson and Watt, 2011). A good mentor assists in choice of the research topic and guides the student. Sadly in ODL context most students do not discuss their topics with supervisors first, they write research proposals and after registration the administration office sends their proposals to the departments. Some students are not willing to change the topic or reshape it. It becomes frustrating for the supervisor to guide the student since communication is always by email. Other students stay for a prolonged period of time without a supervisor, by the time the student gets a mentor the anger level is high and they take time to get along. The mentee mentor relationship should be an academic one establishing the academic level where the mentee is so that there is proper guidance. In striving for academic wellness the mentee knows that the development of the mentee is an investment in academia and the mentee may end up being a research collaborator in future. There may be networks which form cultural capital between the mentor and mentee.

Support structures in ODL context

The student who studies at an ODL institution needs extra support in order to succeed in one's studies. Apart from receiving support from the supervisor, there are a number of technological services on library services and administrative issues like posting assignments and receiving them back. A student in ODL institution needs resources to refer to and therefore internet facility should be reliable. In a study conducted at Allama Iqbal Open University (AIOU) on perceptions about distance library support services, respondents indicated that they were dissatisfied with the virtual reference services, online database facilities, interlibrary loan, library membership and borrowing of library material from AIOU (Arif & Mahmood, 2008). A study conducted by Chabaya, Mupa, Chabaya and Chiome (2012) at Zimbabwe Open University on customer care in ODL institutions students indicated that they needed quality tutorials, efficient registration

processes, well managed weekend tutorials and quick and efficient publication of results. Customer care referred to by Chabaya et al (2012) simply mean student support. In promoting the wellness of postgraduate students, support services for students in ODL institutions should be helpful and upgraded. The loan system of books should be improved also especially time frames of courier processes. This is in line with UNISA strategic thrusts of ODL research which is the impact of student support (cognitive, administrative and affective) on student success and retention (Unisa's Open Distance Learning Research Framework and Plan, 2012-2015).

Purpose of the study

The purpose of the study was to establish how the wellness of postgraduates students from the two ODL institutions (UNISA & ZOU), is being promoted when it comes to the registration process, the proposal writing stage, the support during proposal writing stage, what it takes to complete the proposal, the library use, the process of borrowing books, the e-resources, the internet, the type of supervisor, the communication with support (administration staff), the use of technology, the challenges in general.

Research Question

This study was guided by the following research questions:

- How is the academic wellness of postgraduate students in ODL Institutions being promoted?
- How can the challenges and limitations experienced by postgraduate students be addressed.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- To establish how the processes enhance the academic wellness of post graduates students in UNISA and ZOU.
- To explore strategies which the two universities may employ in order to ameliorate the predicament postgraduate students at UNISA and ZOU find themselves in when pursuing their studies which impacts on their academic wellness.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The importance of this study lies in that, if the voices of the postgraduate students are heard by supervisors and responsible authorities from both universities and even other universities, measures will be put in place through implementation of the recommendations to ensure that challenges by post graduate students are minimized or eradicated.

METHOD

The study followed an interpretive paradigm and was qualitative in nature (Henning, Van Rensburg & Smit, 2004). The researchers were interested in knowing the students' experiences at the two universities; hence the qualitative method was appropriate. The researchers requested their students who were enrolled at Masters and Doctoral degrees to participate in the study. Ethical considerations were observed by the researchers. Participants were ensured privacy, anonymity and that their rights and voluntary participation would be taken into consideration. Questionnaires which had open ended questions were used to obtain data from students. Since the Universities are Open Distance Learning emails were used to send the research instrument to students. The students were given time frames to return the questionnaires. In a period of two weeks all questionnaires were returned. The questions evolved around the registration process, the proposal writing stage, the support during proposal writing stage, what it takes to complete the proposal, the library use, the process of borrowing books, the e-resources, the internet, the type of supervisor, the communication with support (administration staff), the use of technology, the challenges in general in an ODL institution as a postgraduate student. Researchers outline that there are positives and negatives of studying through ODL (Sonnekus, Louw, Wilson, 2006). At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, and phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them (Denzin & Lincoln 2000:3)

A purposive research sample comprised six postgraduates students from ZOU and six from UNISA. The sample was drawn from two ODL universities (ZOU & UNISA). Data was collected using interviews with postgraduates students, questionnaires as well as observation of

the learning process in the two universities. These formed the tools of data gathering in this study. The three data gathering instruments were used to enhance truthfulness, validity and reliability.

Data collection process

The researchers sought permission to interview postgraduates students. Interview dates with the students were made. The participants gave the researchers dates which they thought were convenient for them and the researchers recorded them in their diaries. A day before the interview date, the researchers made follow ups with the respondents to ensure that nothing had changed to the scheduled dates. The participants were briefed on the interview process in which they were free to remain in the interview session or withdraw any time they felt like. Each interview session ranged from 30-40minutes. As Glatter and le Vacic (1994) argue, maintaining an equal amount of interview time with each interviewee ensures consistency which leads to trustworthiness of the study. Follow-up interviews were conducted until data were saturated. The researchers also created a favourable and non-threatening environment for interviews by warmly thanking the participants for their willingness to participate in the research (Rossouw, 2003). The instrument was now administered to twelve postgraduates students (six from UNISA and six from ZOU). The researchers observed the registration process by students.

Data Analysis

Qualitative methods of data analysis were used. Data analysis begins when the first data were collected, which in turn guided decisions towards further data collection (Burns & Grove, 2001). In this study, the data analysis process involved “bringing order, structure and meaning to the mass of the collected data (De Vos, Strydom, Fouche, Poggenpoel & Schurink, 2005). The researcher analyzed the data collected from observations, interviews and questionnaires. Similarly, Creswell (2009) maintains that, the first stage of data analysis involves taking text data or pictures gathered during data collection, segmenting sentences or images into categories, and labeling those categories with a term based in the actual language of the participant.

Interviews with postgraduates students

In analyzing data we followed what Henning, Van Rensburg and Smit (2004:34) outlined. All

the interviews were tape recorded to ensure that the researchers captured every word which was said by the interviewees. All the folders/tapes were transcribed for easy coding and analysis. The transcribed folders were typed and printed on hard copies for easy easier clustering of similar topics. At the beginning, we had to read all the transcriptions from all students (participants) carefully. When questionnaires were received open coding was used to analyse data. As Henning et al (2004) and Creswell (2009) explain the researchers colour coded the data and patterns of similar meanings were grouped together into categories. Categories were further collapsed into patterns of similar meanings until few themes were formed. The following themes from University of South Africa and Zimbabwe Open University emerged:

Questions	UNISA	ZOU
1. The registration process	Frustrating if you don't have patience on the use of technology, you wait to be allocated a supervisor and this may take a year	It is done manually at the regional centre and this ensures accuracy in filling in of the form. Fees for registering as a postgraduate student is very expensive.
2. The proposal writing stage	Your topic is changed to suit the interest of the supervisor and it is not possible to see him or her and talk face to face	The supervisor assists you to coin/panel beat the topic to be more meaningful. There are rare cases when the supervisor changes your topic
3. The support during proposal writing stage	It depends on the supervisor some take time to respond others are quick and give substantial feedback that guides you	Some supervisors are very supportive and they give quick feedback while others derail every process
4. What it takes to complete the proposal	You as a student you have to read and have insight on research otherwise you may fail the proposal module and	The Proposal has to be completed and accepted within a period of two years. Usually when to go and

	you are given a year at UNISA to complete that	present a proposal and defend it will depend upon the agreement between the supervisor and the student.
5. The library use	Our library at UNISA is so helpful and the librarians do library search for you regarding articles related to your topic.	The Library at ZOU is far away from where I stay and the books in the library are not current ones
6. The process of borrowing books,	The books are enough though if you are far like me when you borrow they may be lying at customs and you are waiting. No one informs you unless you make some enquiries	Most of the books are minimum and old version. The few current ones are quickly grabbed by those who stay near the regional centre.
7. The e-resources	Very helpful though some articles are abstracts only and do not have full versions	Though very helpful, most of the articles do not download the full articles.
8. The internet	That is a challenge for a person like me who needs to buy data bundles so that you can upload staff. At times Unisa internet is down you can't access the library that is frustrating and I can't go personally it is far	The internet is only in town and at our regional centre so it becomes very cost for me considering where I stay.
9. The type of supervisor	If it were possible I would try to meet my supervisor. The explanation in writing is not enough at times. He tries but	I send my proposal to my supervisor for marking then my supervisor makes an appointment with me. We

	sometimes there are misunderstanding because we never met	then meet face to face for further explanation on how I should go about correcting my proposal.
10. Communication with support (administration staff),	That is really frustrating the waiting period to be allocated a supervisor. With me they changed supervisors twice and I wish the process could be changed especially the registration process. When you go during the year in June you can't register	The communication is very effective. I was quickly allocated to a supervisor and I am always getting in touch with my supervisor whenever need arises.
11. The use of technology	The use of technology is not an option at this level with an ODL institution. You are forced to adapt or else you will lag behind. I have learnt a lot of things since I joined UNISA	One has to have the know how of computers; otherwise you will have a terrible experience. Without technology, then you will not obtain current information.
12. The challenges in general in an ODL institution as a postgraduate student.	The space between me and my supervisor is a problem but constant communication helps a lot. As a student I drive my supervisor by sending emails asking questions and sending work promptly so that he does not forget me	I am well connected on internet, therefore, I am always communicating with my supervisor. However, some of my friends who are in rural areas are not connected on internet are always facing a great challenge since most of us meet our supervisors once after every three months

13. The positives and negatives of studying through ODL.	Right now I have developed my skills in the use of technology I no longer rely on anyone and I know I will complete my studies and the bursary is helpful	I can pursue further studies while I am still at my work. The introduction of a SSB stop-order in payment of my school-fees has enabled me to carry my studies in a more financial stability than before.
14. How long did it take you to complete your Masters or Doctoral degree	I took almost 5 years instead of completing within 3 years	

The themes above were further collapsed into the following

- Postgraduate students are technologically challenged
- Registration and library use a nightmare
- Supervisor supervisee relationship impacts on academic wellness

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Technological Challenges: Findings in this study revealed that students in both institutions UNISA and ZOU had challenges with regard to technological tools. These findings are similar to what other researchers such as Chigunwe and Ndoro (2013) who assert that the majority of lecturers and students lack ICT skills and the major stumbling block to IT literacy is limited. Since the current study was addressing the academic wellness of students, challenges with technological tools delayed their completion of degrees therefore one can conclude that it is advantageous to be technologically skilled in order to enhance one's academic wellness.

Registration and Library use a nightmare

Both universities have the libraries books and e resources, though in ZOU the challenge is old books and new ones are few. The students who are far from the university don't get a chance of getting new books in the library. On the other hand UNISA students who depend on the postage

of books or courier system do get books but after they made enquiries which cost them money since they use their own telephones for follow up. The articles are available and the student will upload and be able to use the article. As far as registration is concerned; UNISA students indicated the frustration that they face particularly when they are new students who are not clear about the procedure. ZOU is still using the manual way of registration which takes time. UNISA has a large number of students that need supervision which is another nightmare of waiting for a supervisor, whereas ZOU students enjoy the privilege of being allocated a supervisor immediately after registration. Students get an opportunity of meeting with the supervisor and decide on the topic. UNISA students rely on online communication since the student population is all over the world. This calls for both the student and the supervisor to check the emails on daily basis since students rely on that. Currently there are supervisors who prefer to use video conferencing to communicate with students regarding certain aspects of research.

Supervisor supervisee relationship impact on academic wellness

In both universities ZOU and UNISA supervisors behave almost the same. The relationship is determined by the personality of an individual and whether the supervisor understands the role of mentorship as Manathunga (2007) and Magano (2011) highlight the importance of mentoring. Findings of the current study indicated that students differed in their explanation of their supervisor's role. There were those who were positive regarding feedback which was timeous and constructive and those who complained about the delay of receiving feedback. The change of supervisors was a concern for students at UNISA and they were not sure about the cause of changing the supervisor. The change of supervisors may discourage the student moreover when one is far, the distance also may cause dissonance. Students who are persistent make use of online communication to seek clarity and post their work in bits and pieces so that a dialogue is maintained which is in line with Cultural Historical Activity theory. The tools which are online communication facilitate learning and mentoring process. The use of technologies add value to postgraduate studies, hence ODL institutions promote lifelong learning and contribute towards human development.

CONCLUSION

The study revealed that ODL institutions are helpful towards improvement of qualifications amongst adults who are working. ODL institutions contribute positively to the academic wellness of postgraduate students although this comes with challenges. The good thing is even when a period of studying in an ODL institution is prolonged but students do complete their degrees. The issue of not getting used to technological tools goes with age; this may be a temporary measure since the Y generation is used to technological gadgets. Poverty may be another obstacle of obtaining tools like computers and getting access to internet if one does not have money. Both universities where the study was conducted need to improve on the registration process since this may discourage some. The online facility depends on the availability of internet and to some this may not be easy to access. The manual registration at ZOU may be cumbersome for those who stay far from the university and the university if it is ODL it must extend its territory and make use of online registration also. The blended methods for both universities may be a viable mode which will cater for the needs of diverse students. Inclusion is necessary since access to higher education is also a right for the previously marginalised groups.

RECOMMENDATIONS

On the basis of the research findings, the researchers suggest the following recommendations: that the postgraduates students at UNISA be allocated an alternative manual registration process at the centre as this will promote fast allocation of supervisors to students rather than being congested technologically within the short given space of time. Basing on the voice from the students, supervisors should not change students' research topics; instead, they should assist in re-shaping that very topic. The study also recommends a timeframe for completion of the proposal for ZOU students to promote standardization. Supervisors should not be changed frequently as this may frustrate the student. Timely feedback encourages the student and the tempo of working is maintained.

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