

Enhancing Teaching and Learning in Open and Distance Learning: A Mechanism to Facilitate Student Success

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ABSTRACT This paper considers the place of students learning in an open and distance learning (ODL) institution. All students need access to a variety of support services. We need to think about the variety of support services that can facilitate student success in ODL. There are many challenges facing distance learning students in the changing context of flexible teaching and learning. Distance learning students may also have different learning styles preferences and coping strategies. Questionnaire surveys and focus group interviews were integrated and conducted with students who are studying at a distance in different distance learning institutions. The focus was on *the causes of student dropout in ODL institutions preventive measures of this escalating challenge and the possible ways of student retention*. The findings from the research raised a possible solution to effective student support in different ways and at different levels. Distance learning institutions claim that they provide a comprehensive student support system, but students disputed this. Instead, students complain of “individual isolation and loneliness”. The lack of coherent student support systems causes a low throughput rate because of a high dropout rate. A convenient sampling of 100 research interview participants and 426 respondents who returned questionnaires were selected from the four provinces of South Africa. The study therefore recommends that students should be engaged as early as possible by using techniques and strategies needed to facilitate effective teaching and learning.

INTRODUCTION

According to McLoughlin and Marshall (2000), learning support is particularly important in Distance Education (DE) because many distance students perhaps for the first time, are now faced with a new learning environment and the expectation that they will have independent learning skills and the capacity to engage in activities that require self-direction and self-management of learning. The terms *open learning* and *distance education* represent approaches that focus on access to education and training provision freeing students from the constraints of time and place and offering flexible learning opportunities to individuals and groups of students. ODL is one of the most rapidly growing fields of education and its potential impacts on all education delivery systems that have been greatly accentuated through the development of internet-based information technologies and in particular the World Wide Web.

Theoretical Framework

For the *student* ODL means increased access and flexibility as well as the combination of work and education. It may also mean a more student-centred approach enrichment higher quality and new ways of interaction. For many students ODL is a way of combining work and fam-

ily responsibilities with educational opportunities.

Meanings of Student Support

According to Rumble (2000), distance education institutions have been engaged in developing strategies and ways in which isolated students can be supported. The focus on providing student support services was driven by the need to address the high dropout rates associated with the correspondence nature of distance education. In correspondence education distance education students receive study materials – sometimes only a wrap-around textbook which they must purchase separately. Glennie and Bialobrzeska (2006) maintain that after that the next engagement of distance learning students with the institution is when they sit for the examination. This system assumes that students have the ability to work through the study material independently. However, studies have shown that students seem to value contact with other people even when they study at a distance (Rumble 2000; Tait 2000, 2003; Thorpe 2001; Sewart 1993).

According to Tait (2000), student support services are learning resources that start with students' inquiries about the courses that are offered the advice they receive the admission into the programme and the type of support they

receive as they go through the learning experience. Thorpe (2001) describes the purpose of student support as meeting the needs of *all* students because they are central to high quality learning. Sewart (1993) equates student support services with service-oriented programmes where the students' needs as customers are paramount. Thorpe (2001) states that students need guidance on course choice study skills access to learning groups and learning in informal small groups or tutorials offered by the university. These functions serve the purpose of supporting students in ODL.

According to White (2003), support is defined as "a response to the individual student rather than a standard or uniform product." Student support involves acknowledging the identity of each student and responding to his or her needs. Ideally, Unisa's tuition model depends on effective student support; but the implementation poses challenges. Tait (2000) argues that the primary functions of student support are threefold:

1. Cognitive: supporting and developing learning through the mediation of the standard and uniform elements of course materials and learning resources for individual students

2. Affective: providing an environment which supports students creates commitment and enhances self-esteem

3. Systemic: establishing administrative processes and information management systems which are effective transparent and overall student friendly.

Tait (2003) asserts that student support in ODL has a primary aim of assisting students to learn successfully and in doing so it recognises that in learning and teaching systems characterised by distance and part-time study and by helping students with their feelings of confidence and self-esteem will energise them in ways that support persistence and success.

Student support is a "support system" underpinning material and learning task provision. Student support is a means through which individuals are enabled to make use of institutionalised provision. Sewart (1993) maintains that student supporters are "intermediaries" which are able to talk the language of the student and to interpret the materials and procedures of complex bureaucratic organisations.

Mills (2003) argues that the term "student support" can often be a vague one and may cover

a myriad of academic personal/emotional and administrative support. In addition to face-to-face support it can also include support provided by letter e-mail or telephone. A distinction is sometimes made between learner support and student support with the former referring to tutoring and the latter to administrative support.

METHODOLOGY

Questionnaire surveys and focus group interviews were integrated and conducted with students who are studying at a distance focusing on *the causes of student dropout in ODL institutions and what can be done to prevent this escalating trend*. The findings from the research raised a possible solution namely effective student support in different ways and at different levels. The researcher's argument suggests constructing student support as broadly as possible to encompass all factors that support students in their learning.

Participants' Background

The 100 research interview participants included 63 male and 27 female students. Of the 426 (85.2%) questionnaire returned. 298 were female and 122 male. In terms of ethnic and cultural background diverse students contributed to the findings of this research. All of the respondents involved are Unisa students from Gauteng, Limpopo, Mpumalanga and Kwa-Zulu Natal provinces. The maturity of the students resulted in an overall average of 0–25 years of working experience. Fifty-three per cent of them had professional careers including teaching, policing, nursing, clerical, sales, technical, self-employed and secretarial work. 12% are temporarily employed and 35% of the participants are fresh from high school. Seventy-four per cent of the students had an immediate family to care for. The average household size of the respondents was 6–9 people. 26% of the research participants came from households with 3–6 persons; 20% from households with 5 persons or more; while 18% came from households with 3 persons or less.

The Questionnaire

According to McDonough and McDonough (1997) the self-completion questionnaire was

selected as the most appropriate tool for two reasons: (a) because it is an effective small-scale research tool and (b) because “the knowledge needed is controlled by the questions, therefore it affords a good deal of precision and clarity”.

As Cohen and Manion (1994) state, “surveys gather data at a particular point in time with the intention of describing the nature of existing conditions or determining the relationships which exist between specific events”. In addition, given the size of the study and number of people involved a questionnaire was particularly appropriate for collecting data in a relatively quick and inexpensive manner (Bell 1999). Furthermore, because they are anonymous questionnaires encourage respondents to be honest. Seliger and Shohamy (2000) believe that they provide data that are more “uniform” and “accurate” than that obtained by other methods. In an effort to maximise the response rate, the questionnaire was designed to be deliberately short (two questions). These questions were open-ended questions to avoid respondents feeling pressured to write too much.

Processing the Data

In processing the questionnaire data and following Cohen and Manion (1994) the returned self-completion questionnaires were checked for completeness accuracy and uniformity. It was discovered that each respondent had answered every question and, furthermore that all questions were answered accurately (in the sense that appropriate answers had been given to the questions). Respondents also interpreted the instructions and questions uniformly (Table 1).

Table 1: Breakdown of questionnaires dispatched

Provinces	Number dispatched	Number returned	% returned
Gauteng	250	230	46%
Limpopo	150	124	24.8%
Mpumalanga	60	45	9%
Kwa-Zulu Natal	40	27	5.4%
Total	500	426	85.2%

The respondents who are Unisa students across the four randomly sampled provinces are composed of a diverse group regarding demographic, educational, employment, living and learning information. The responses highlighted the ineffective student support systems. This is

a clear indication that Unisa students are all over the country. The respondents were so keen to complete a questionnaire hoping to be supported in their studies in order to be successful. From the high response rate, one concludes that there is a problem interrogating the effectiveness of teaching and learning and reality of student support systems. The response rate was calculated by comparing the number of questionnaires analyzed with the number distributed to students (Table 2).

Table 2: Summary of questionnaire response rate

Number of questionnaires distributed	500
Number of questionnaires returned	426
Response rate	85.2%

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study reveals that one of the greatest problems experienced by distance students is a feeling of isolation which makes the possibility of a trusting relationship between the students and the lecturers/tutors and with other students difficult.

Interview Response

I was disappointed in the degree I am studying at the end. I mean...I got something out of it. I found some of the course interesting and entertaining but regrettably. I felt lonely most of the time I was studying at Unisa...I understand that most or many of my distance education friends are working, but I get frustrated when my questions or when I seek for help from lecturers usually get late reply. ...and I can't depend on your friends (other distance learners) I met online at myUnisa as well because they too may have the same problems and be busy with whatever...

The researcher suggests that before examining the dimensions of effective student support. Unisa should first consider why it is providing student and learning support. Reasons for providing a range of learning support services of different types at different stages of a programme include the need to assist with student recruitment provide for students' demands to help students overcome feelings of isolation and the need to nurture students who may not have participated in formal education for some time. These will minimise the geographical distance between

the students and the institution and the isolation students feel as a result. The response such as the above forced me as a researcher and Unisa as institution to abandon the myth of a comprehensive student support system. Such evidence is parallel to Ravhudzulo (2003) in her article entitled "Nobody is listening: the attitudes of teachers towards professional development by distance". The students' dependencies on distance lecturers/tutors and their desperation were constantly evident in the findings and discussion of this paper.

Interview Response

I am lost most of the time when I use technology. That is the problem; technology lacks a human or personal touch. I just don't feel the satisfaction of being in the class physically and able to have eye contact with the lecturer or to raise hands, ask a question and getting prompt response. What I have realised is that the minute you post questions through email and don't get a reply 5 minutes, 15 minutes, an hour or more, you'll feel frustrated.

In the light of the response above it is hardly surprising that providing feedback is one of the most important tasks of the lecturer/tutor in ODL. Feedback must be timely, clear, specific and constructive. Smith (2004) reported that one of the things that students valued most was prompt and useful feedback. Lentell (2003) quotes Jackson (2001:67): "Careful reading of student work is the core of teaching...if students realize you are paying close attention to their work, they feel a responsibility to pay close attention to you."

The concern from the respondent is about the availability and accessibility of support. Students wanted to be able to contact a real person and to have their questions answered on time as part of the student support package. I suggest that since technology is part of student support provided by Unisa it should be reliable and available to minimise frustrations and dropouts. The internet has revolutionized education as it has other areas of life and much support can be provided online. However, the means are less important than the general principles which should apply whether the support is face to face by telephone or from Unisa. The researcher suggests that all academics should receive full training on VLE and the A-Z of my Unisa. When their

courses are linked, they should make it a point to engage students and encourage them to interact with other students in the same course.

Students felt that they needed continuous human contact – the presence of a human figure to guide their learning. These frustrations arose because the majority of the participants are fresh from high school and they registered with Unisa without understanding how teaching and learning take place, possibly because the majority of them are "products" of a high school. As such:

1. they do not have any learning experience of distance learning
2. they had no experience in how Unisa operates
3. they were expecting to attend classes at the main campus
4. they are experiencing discouragement and frustration as distance students
5. they expected that lecturers/tutors will take them through their study packages after registration
6. they realised that their distance lecturers/tutors deprive them of human interaction.

From the above statements this section of the paper provides evidence that dispels the myths of comprehensive student support. Everything is falling through the cracks and Unisa will end up without a clear picture of who are the Unisa students. There should be an induction programme into ODL and how teaching and learning take place to both new Unisa lecturers and students access to service, formative assessment management tutor system. ODL relations and student support. I agree that all these issues might be recorded somewhere, but who is communicating the realities to prospective Unisa lecturers and students so that when they come to Unisa their expectations will be realistic rather than unrealistic. We all know that good customer service means that customers return. In education, we all want customers to stay and benefit from the full product.

The consequence is that the distance lecturers/tutors have very little sympathy with students. They don't understand the degree of difficulties that distance students may have in pursuing their distance course. In reality, the process of student learning at a distance as revealed in the interviews is more complex than the conventional setting the reason being that the obstacles that these distance students encounter

may differ from one distance student to another with varying degrees of complexity.

Interview Response

Looking at the young learners who are able to use operate computers software and so on...and comparing to that to myself... who uses one fingers to punch on the keyboard while my heart is beating fast each time something goes wrong or a window appears on the screen. I am scared of technology and too scared to venture. What I need is support constant lecturing/tutoring a class that gives lessons on computers. myUnisa and the Internet...I think such activities would be much appreciated especially for student like me who is over 48 years of age...

The internet in that it facilitates discussion between student and student and student and lecturer/tutor via computer mediated communication has had a considerable impact on distance learning and changed the model of knowledge acquisition to one that supports a cognitive constructivist approach.

Interview Response

Getting the LLB degree has always been my objective in my distance learning programme. But thinking about what I have been doing over the last five semesters learning is not the core activity that I am involved or should be involved with. I kept doing something else like my office work helping my wife taking care of my children and the house chores. Partly I think as the head of the family it is my responsibility. Now I feel guilty about not learning well learning effectively or learning adequately. Failure is the feeling I often have. I wonder if I could be helped attending classes or if I can be guided so that I can pass the modules I have registered because it is a waste of time money and energy.

The researcher would encourage the lecturers/tutors to be available for advice when needed for the response such as above. What the researcher always observe and see at Unisa is that the office doors are closed and if you are new or a visitor, you will think that there is nobody at the university. Students will have all sorts of queries and it is important to provide real time slots when the tutor is available on the phone or via chat room. Some lecturers/tutors provide responses to "Frequently ask questions" to save

having to answer the same common questions over and over. This can be useful, but they should still be available for individual queries. Assignment requirements in particular may need to be untangled, especially if the assignment is open ended or work related.

The researcher asked herself a question after all these interviews and responses from the questionnaires. The question was: "*What caused such frustrations and feelings of disappointment to the Unisa students*"? Analysis of the data suggests that many of the research respondents were asking and yearning for support and attention. They specifically wanted to have more contact with the distance lecturers/tutors computer literacy orientation and induction. Based on this evidence it appeared that some of the distance students needed help continuous training and to learn the new ways of learning at Unisa.

The majority of respondents (76%) were either dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with the range of support provided, while 24% were satisfied or very satisfied. It was possible to identify a number of specific concerns namely that while students were expecting to meet their lecturers/tutors many were disappointed with the way in which they were treated. 29% of the respondents reported a bad experience with the first visit to the lecturer/tutor. "*You must first make an appointment you don't just come. I am sorry I can't help you because I am in the middle of something*" As evident many respondents highlighted that students suffer from "loneliness" or "isolation". It is for this reason that the learning support needs to be as *supportive and non-judgmental* as possible.

CONCLUSION

The results of the research highlighted a number of areas in which students felt let down by the course, especially in terms of learning support and access to and provision of resource materials. The study highlighted the need for comprehensive student support services, access to reference materials and efficient administrative procedures in order to better fulfil students' needs. The results indicated some areas in which further research would be useful and pinpointed areas where the university needed to evaluate its performance in relation to student expectations.

The responses of the students to the questionnaire have revealed that it is a myth that Unisa is satisfying the students' expectations as regards the provision of student and learning support. The lessons to be derived from the student's responses are that in designing the learning support, ODL providers should choose appropriate combinations of methods for particular learning contexts.

It has been argued that on the ground most students remain isolated and do not have the kind of support that can guarantee that students do not drop out of the system. More needs to be done to enhance teaching and learning in facilitating student success through different support systems in order to ensure that Unisa enjoys the throughput that it so desires. The paper proposed the need for a closer relationship between the student and the lecturer/tutor and that these intermediary or go between support programmes can be of significant benefit in ensuring that the students' needs are managed and indeed reconciled with their expectations of what a distance education institution should offer to its students.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As distance students, the number of distance education courses and new technologies are continuing to increase, it is critical that lecturers put together a framework for engaging student with the goal of increasing persistence.

- Students should be engaged as early as possible by using techniques and strategies needed to facilitate effective teaching and learning.
- Self-directed learning can be promoted by integrating learning activities that contain flexibility if the content allows distance lecturers/tutors should communicate to students that autonomy is strongly encouraged and that the learning process is just as valuable as the actual product.
- Institutional policy and the role of management are crucial in the establishment of an effective learning support to facilitate student success.

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