

Learner Support Challenges Faced by Adult Open and Distance Learning Students

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ABSTRACT There is substantial evidence that learner support strategies can be an effective tool in supporting teaching and learning at a distance. However, Unisa students who are situated in the rural areas of the Republic of South Africa face particular challenges in the open and distance learning (ODL) environment. They may not have knowledge of learner support strategies offered by Unisa to enhance their learning. This paper uses a qualitative research approach to explore some of the challenges faced by these ODL students in rural areas. A sample of such students from four provinces was randomly selected as participants in this study. The paper proposes some ways of improving the Unisa's learner support strategy.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) is a broad one and it can be variously defined, and it is thus important to point out that there is no one absolute definition. Freeman defines ODL as an amalgamation of two approaches which focus on expanding access to learning (Freeman 2004: 6), Leach and Stevens (2005:218) define it as the open learning approach which, when combined with distance education methodologies, is often referred to collectively as open and distance learning. Commonwealth of learning (2000) defines it as "correspondence, home study, independent learning ... flexible learning or distributed learning". Unesco (2002: 7) says in the ODL philosophy and practice, the terms represent approaches that focus on opening access to education and training provision, freeing learners from the constraints of time and place, and offering flexible learning opportunities to individuals and groups of learners. There are common elements to all these definitions, that is, the combination of Distance Education (DE) and Open Learning, access and separation between the lecturer and the learner.

Students studying at the University of South Africa (Unisa) come from both rural and urban areas. This geographical difference has an impact on Unisa's service delivery (Sonnekus et al. 2006: 45). According to the Higher Education Act, Reauthorisation status and issues, institu-

tions of higher education have been mandated to enrol a large and diverse student body.

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 Education in South African has identified ODL as a system that should expand educational opportunities and provide access to individuals who do not have the opportunity to study full time. In support of widening the participation of those people who have difficulty accessing 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, with the aim of facilitating lifelong learning, developing the skills base of the country, and redressing historical inequities in the provision of education.

The South African government is increasing the participation rate in higher education even in remote rural areas through policies, reports and commissions. In this country, widening participation is understood to mean the provision of equality to previously disadvantaged groups – those with poor educational qualifications and low levels of academic literacy. In ODL situations, the educator and the learner are at a distance from each other; learners experience isolation because of this separation from their institution, their lecturers and fellow students (Rumble 2000: 1). ODL has been successful in increasing the number of students but unsuccessful in

improving throughput rates. Part of the reason for this is that students are isolated from their teachers. Dzakira (2005:105) explains that in order to support learners in an ODL environment, distance teachers must have the skills and experience to facilitate the learning process through designing and building support that will encourage learning.

It is in this regard that it was decided to investigate ODL systems at Unisa and its provision of learner support strategies.

One of the critical components of ODL is learner support. The literature shows that this is a broad concept and can be viewed from different angles. Garrison and Brynton (1987), Tait (1995) and Thorpe (1998) in Lee (2003: 182) all regard learner support as a rather broad concept and its definition has varied from one researcher to another. Some consider resources and interactivity as critical in defining learner support while others put more emphasis on individualisation or customisation of services.

Thorpe defines learner support as a support system underpinning material and learning task provision. It is the means through which individuals are enabled to make use of an institution's provision. Thorpe believes that learner support in ODL is an area in which transformations in the nature and the scale of activities made feasible by on line teaching are generating widespread changes in pedagogics and learning communities and access to institutions as a whole (Thorpe 2001:3). These are clearly manifest in both large and small scale variants of ODL, and we are seeing the evolution of existing second generation approaches as well as the introduction of completely new online forms.

Unisa defines the term learner support as the range of activities which complement the mass production of materials which make up the most well known elements of ODL. Printed course units, television and radio programmes, computer programmes and so on replace the lecture as a means of delivery, and offer so much both in terms of social and geographical access, and in terms of cost-effectiveness, and support students in central ways (Unisa 2008).

However, Unisa highlights the fact that student support is a generic term that is applied to a range of services that have been developed by the university to assist students in meeting their learning objectives and in gaining the knowledge and skills they need to be success-

ful in their studies (Unisa 2008:2). Dzakira expands on this, adding that in order to support the learners in an ODL environment, distance teachers must have the skills and experience to facilitate the learning process through designing and building support that will encourage learning (Dzakira 2005: 105).

Kelly and Mills believe that this is an area in which ODL institutions should invest in order to improve both completion rates and the quality of teaching. Learning centres with well equipped libraries and adequate ICT infrastructure should be established. Through these centres, all other relevant learner support services could be provided. This, however, calls for substantial investment and ODL institutions need to be encouraged to take this bold step (Kelly and Mills 2007: 149).

According to the scholars quoted above, for example Thorpe (2002), Sewart (1993) and Dzakira (2005: 105), learner support in this sense is not a term that has much currency within campus based higher education. In this context, it usually refers to provision that must be made for handling personal difficulties which grow too great for the student to handle alone. It is thus the provision of support for exceptional needs arising among a minority of students. By contrast, learner support in ODL refers to the meeting of needs that all learners have because these needs are central to high quality learning-guidance about course choice, preparatory diagnosis, study skills, access to group learning in seminars and tutorials, and so on. These are the elements of systems of learner support that many practitioners see as essential for effective provision of ODL.

Learner support has thus been identified as of particular importance for student success in ODL.

Teaching and learning at Unisa has undergone major changes and has progressed through the phases of development mentioned by Tatkovic et al. (2006) and the generations proposed by Fozdar and Kumar (2007). Unisa has been a distance education university since 1946. Initially, tuition was based on postal correspondence with limited face-to-face interaction. The study materials were print-based, supplemented by face-to-face tutorials, of which attendance was not compulsory. But the need for a more flexible system came with the development of ICT. In 2008 Unisa introduced an ODL Policy,

which changed the focus of tuition to include technology and multimedia interaction.

Technologies such as telephone, multimedia CDs and DVDs, video and audio conferencing, short message services (SMS), cell phones, e-mail and discussion forums via myUnisa have been proposed to offer new ways of supporting learning in a distance education situation.

Research has shown that there is an abundance of literature, with different points of departure, on the subject of learner support. This literature reveals that Distance Education (DE), Learner Support (LS), ODL in Teacher Education (TE) all make up a multifaceted subject and can be approached from various angles. But although the literature on the development of ODL shows some common patterns, there are still debates about ODL and theories of learner support.

Research Problem

Although Unisa follows global best practices in its learner support strategies, there are some gaps. The university uses various learner support strategies to reach out to all its students, however, there seem to be some problems facing those living in rural areas. In particular, studies have reflected the apparent lack of patronage of myUnisa by most students. This prompted this researcher to explore the perceptions, views, opinions and attitude of these students as to the use of ICTs such as myUnisa. Lecturers at Unisa conducted a small scale study to elicit feedback from the Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) students about learner support in an effort to improve Unisa's plans and strategies for learner support.

The increased use of technology in distance education promises a great deal but also poses some serious challenges in the development and delivery of educational programmes. While technology provides opportunities for learners in advanced countries to choose their own ways to learn, in developing countries it proposes to increase educational access for the masses. In the latter, the possibility of increasing access to education through technology is intimately bound up with access to technology itself (Ramanujan 2002: 53).

Objectives of the Study

- ♦ To investigate views and perceptions of learner support;

- ♦ To investigate the challenges that students faced which are posed by learner support strategies;
- ♦ To make suggestions for effective and appropriate use of learner support for students in rural regions of South Africa;
- ♦ To help students to study more efficiently and to complete their qualifications.

METHODOLOGY

This study comprised a survey of student opinion and the challenges they face. The research design for this study was a descriptive case study that was analysed largely through qualitative methods. The case study approach is not a method as such, but a research strategy through which the researcher aims to study one case in depth (Burton and Bartlett 2009:63).

The focus of the paper compelled the researcher to consider a qualitative research design. This choice of methodology was based on the grounds that the researchers wished to share learner support strategies with the participants. It is also important to remember that the choice of research methodology has an influence on data gathering techniques. In this case, the study used in-depth structured interviews as the method to collect data. This is a technique typical of qualitative research.

In qualitative research, the researcher uses purposive sampling. McMillan and Schumacher (2006: 319) describe purposeful sampling as selecting information rich cases for in-depth study. The reason for choosing purposeful sampling in this study was that it was purposive and the participants would help the researchers to answer the problem statement and the research questions. Gorard (2001: 10) points out that the purpose of sampling in qualitative research is to use a relatively small number of cases to find out about a much larger number.

Population and Sample

The paper was designed to consider the views and experiences of pipeline students who have registered for PGCE in teacher education and to determine how they could be supported by the university's learner support strategies. These students come from diverse political, social and economic backgrounds. They are situated all over the rural and urban areas of the

Republic of South Africa. A sample of thirty distance education students in four provinces, namely, Eastern Cape, Limpopo, Mpumalanga and KwaZulu Natal, were randomly selected to participate in this study. The researchers conducted this small scale study to elicit feedback in an attempt to improve Unisa's various learner support plans and strategies. They profiled students according to their geographical area, their race and gender.

Tools and Techniques

The tool used to collect the data was an interview schedule specially developed for this study. The participants were asked questions related to student support systems by means of telephonic interview conferencing, in order to determine their opinions and perceptions on using learner support strategies to study and pass their examinations.

Procedure

The data was collected from Unisa students who had registered for PGCE in four provinces of South Africa. The ethical issues were taken into consideration and students were contacted telephonically to make appointments to speak to them. The students were interviewed in their natural setting through a telephonic interview conference conducted from the main campus. The participants' voices were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The emerging issues and patterns were identified and categorised.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The issues raised by participants were classified and are recorded below.

General Communications

The students' methods of communication with Unisa are varied: students communicate through myUnisa, emails, by telephone and short message services (SMS). Some students have no internet access, or find it too costly to access the internet.

Some students value communication amongst themselves. This is how their experiences were expressed:

"I use myUnisa to communicate with my lecturer if I have difficulties. I manage to socialise with other students by using myUnisa."

"The lecturer is seldom updating on myUnisa and rarely answer our questions. I thank Unisa for myUnisa is really helpful. In future, I think it will be helpful, myUnisa helped me a lot with my studies. I have someone who is a former student and helps me with my studies and does a job of a tutor well, he is not appointed by Unisa."

"Discussions on myUnisa are sometimes not very thorough, they leave you hanging. Therefore I have a slight problem with discussions on myUnisa."

One participant said, *"The material is very helpful and myUnisa helps us to communicate with our lecturers. Even if you study at home as long as you communicate with other students through myUnisa you are able to study alone at home because sometimes is not easy to form study groups. Most of the assignment questions are based on real life experiences of which is not easy on some of cause we are not yet teachers. Some material especially from the internet is not easy to get hold of."*

Computer Literacy

The participants revealed different levels of computer literacy. It appears that some had never touched a computer in their learning lives. The following views were expressed by participants:

"I cannot be able to communicate with the university because I am not computer literate."
"The questions would be appropriately answered by someone who has already completed the programme or not a new student to Unisa. It is my first registration."

"I have never visited myUnisa before, I don't have access to on myUnisa."

These views were voiced by students who were computer literate:

"I have started having submitted my assignments on line. Unfortunately I have not yet seen comments by lecturers on myUnisa. I will be monitoring most of the communication effective from May, when most of the year courses assignments are due."

These participants acknowledged the value of the computer in ODL. According to eEducation paper of the Republic of South Africa, all

learners should be computer literate by 2013; however, there are still teachers who are struggling to use the computer as a learning tool.

myUnisa

The students were asked to provide some information about myUnisa and their engagement with lecturers and other students. Those students who claimed to use myUnisa indicated that it gave them a sense of belonging to the course. The functions that students use most often appear to be the discussion forums, where they communicate among themselves and with their lecturers. These discussions promote learning, a sense of collaboration and are an excellent medium for social interaction. It was agreed that lecturers visit the discussion forum on a general basis and provide clear instructions. myUnisa facilitates learning and dialogue in this way. Most students interviewed had adequate access to myUnisa; however, technical problems in using myUnisa remain a problem.

"The myUnisa is a very good communication tool, however recently it has been giving me problems when trying to upload written assignments, which makes it difficult to submit my assignments. Otherwise the communication means are good."

The following views were expressed by participants:

"I have problems logging in with my account I have to use other student's account. I think if you can provide a person whom we can contact if we experience problems, even registering to myUnisa it is sometimes difficult."

"We need to see monthly classes to be started even in our areas, for example, Giyani, where we can meet with our lecturers and discuss or ask what we don't understand on study material. I also suggest that let all people who registered for a certain module be appear on myUnisa website."

Discussion Classes

The students valued discussion classes, and were happy with the information disseminated to them at these classes. They noted that lecturers were always prepared and students could engage them and fellow students in group discussions. After discussion classes, the students felt well prepared for further learning and exam-

inations. When those who had not attended group discussion classes were asked why, they said they lived too far from the centre, or that they worked and did not have the time. Interestingly, students received information about group discussions on time and information provided during these classes was made available to them. Some students formed discussion groups with other students and this helped them. The students who had not attended group discussion classes felt they had missed out and they relied on feed back tutorial letters being sent to them after these classes.

Tutor System

None of the participants had registered for tutorial classes. Some students were assisted by former students of Unisa on a voluntarily basis, for which they did not pay, others did not know that a tutor system existed although students do receive information about the tutorial system from Unisa. Some students found the system very helpful in terms of assisting them. Most students indicated that they lived too far away from where tutorial sessions were held to be able to attend. The interviewees were also offered an opportunity to make recommendations to lecturers on any aspect of learner support in the tutorial system which had been discussed. Comments included *"I think Unisa should offer more tutorial classes rather than most of the tutorial classes that are offered is undergraduate, and postgraduate classes is only few."* But overall, students seemed to be in control of their studies and were positive, despite the challenges they referred to above.

Learners all have different characteristics and these will have implications for how they learn, how they benefit from ODL and the challenges they could face in pursuing their studies. Kelly and Mills (2007: 155) believe that ICT application presents a special dilemma for ODL institutions. On one hand, ICT offers the potential to take the distance out of distance education. Students may be physically separated from each other, their tutors and the institution but they can be linked electronically as active members of dynamic educational communities.

On the other hand, sizeable minorities within developed countries and the great majority in the developing world lack reliable and affordable access to ICT. The socio-economic chal-

lenges facing rich and poor institutions are thus very varied student support services are essential and crucial in the ODL system. Widespread use of the internet and the quest for online support services has added a new dimension to the pursuit of learning, particularly at tertiary level where learners have considerable freedom to select a programme of their choice.

Technologies such as e-mail, fax, the internet and high speed data links have fundamentally changed the way nations, communities, organisations and individuals communicate with each other (Arulchelvan and Viswanaithan 2008: 42). The internet gives students access to anything and everything of their choice, including curricula, books, news, friends, relatives, peer groups and interest groups, and at a time of their choice. They can do all this without leaving home.

According to Panda et al. (2005), the application of ICTs gave a major boost to the accelerated development of distance education. But so far the progress in this direction has been quite limited.

Greater use of ICT would enable students to collaborate and share information with other students around the world without geographical limits. ICT has the potential to take the distance out of ODL but students seem reluctant to take advantage of this. In this technological era, students in classrooms are gradually becoming more informed through the availability of ICT. Such students are more likely to own cell phones than computers, especially in rural areas. Unisa has taken a step in reaching out to students who are situated in rural areas by the introduction of mobile libraries. The researcher's impression is, however, that students are not motivated to integrate ICT in their studies. There are villages in the country that are without electricity and this poses a challenge to ODL students in this area.

In addressing Teacher Education in rural areas, Unisa uses technology to reach out to its students. According to Braimoh and Osiki (2008: 58), most villages in rural areas are without an electricity supply, have poor roads, a lack of postal deliveries, and few telephone lines. Students in these areas do not have easy access to technology, especially the internet. Many learners are not able to afford the internet, even where it is available. Students sometimes struggle because they have to study on their own and with

little interaction with their lecturers or their peers. This is a particular cause for concern among Unisa students. The following views were expressed by participants:

"I have problems accessing the internet, therefore haven't fully explored the aspects asked about. I have no proper access to internet."

"I have never participated on myUnisa. So if I get to know it I can be more informed. I have financial constraints in accessing."

"I have never visited and logged on to myUnisa. In future I think it will be more effective because more physical interaction with fellow students can help a lot."

Most students expressed an interest in using ICT but they did not know where to start. Education in South Africa is a moral concept: a large amount is spent on education, including ICT, in this country and these students have a right to basic education.

CONCLUSION

The literature review presented above argues that learner support ensures success and is crucial at ODL institutions. The challenges of accessibility of technology to students who live in rural areas could become a thing of the past with the university's initiative of taking mobile buses providing internet access to rural areas. The university is living up to its vision and mission of an African university in the service of humanity. Internet cafes are appearing in many rural villages and the University of South Africa is addressing the issues of redress and equity in open and distance e-learning in rural areas. However, while equal opportunity concentrates on treating all people equally and providing people with equal rights, social justice targets the marginalised people in society. For example, in South Africa, widening participation is understood to mean the provision of equality for previously disadvantaged groups – those with poor educational qualifications and low levels of economic literacy.

The students interviewed were at second or third year level, while some had completed their qualifications, so we received diverse views regarding knowledge of how Unisa functions. Even though both positive and negative responses were obtained from these participants, learner support in ODL has the potential to improve

throughput rate and to ensure successful studies. It can also improve quality education and education for all. Students such as these should be encouraged to use the various learner support strategies in their learning activities in order to ensure their own success. Students need support to study better, pass better and finish their qualifications.

RECOMMENDATIONS

We need to consider the local context when providing learner support strategies. If we know who the learners are, we will be able to respond to their needs, instead of regarding technology as the first consideration. Starting from learners' needs prompts more creative and responsive solutions. For example, in cases 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 these internet cafes and cover some of the learners' costs in using them, and in this way improve internet access for learners.

LIMITATIONS

The researchers sampled thirty students from the four provinces, but due to limited network coverage only fourteen students were interviewed.

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