

Examining Student Support in Implementing Open Distance Learning During COVID-19

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In times of crisis and the global spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, the world has observed exponential growth of online education as educators and students are required to stay at home and resume with online learning entirely. With the new norms in education, come new experiences and challenges. The demands in online learning have pushed both students and educators to maximise their information communication technology (ICT) skills and caused some to be unwillingly ready for the new normal. The purpose of this study is to describe the student support of registered students in open distance learning (ODL) institutions during the COVID-19 era. Active learning theory is adopted as a theoretical lens for the interpretation of the data. This study used a quantitative research method approach to gather insights regarding the student experience pertaining to technology integration in the ODL context during COVID-19. The findings uncovered challenges associated with online student support in ODL context. This paper provide recommendations to key stakeholders in higher learning institutions and future research directions.

Keywords: *active learning theory, COVID-19, information communication technology, open distance learning, student support*

Introduction

Msweli (2012) maintains that ODL is higher education provides access to students disqualified physical distance, personal restrictions or the full-time employment and family responsibilities. ODL further extends to provide tertiary education to previously disadvantaged students with limited financial resources that are unable to attend face-to-face higher education institutions. In offering access to higher education to students, ODL institutions offer student support to all registered students. It should be noted that South African Bill of Rights stipulates that every person has the right to education, therefore, barriers should not stop individuals from furthering their studies (South African Bill of Rights 1996). Hence, ODL contributes to overcoming identified barriers. Msweli (2012) highlights that many ODL institutions function in a blended mode of both online and physicality with regards to their module offerings; however, for an ODL institution to function effectively, proper processes must be put in place to support the students.

The sustainability of distance learning relies on quality services, therefore, it is imperative that institutions comprehend and recognise the nature of the quality of services being offered. Understanding this will assist institutions to select

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appropriate measures when determining the quality of support services, or how to start improving the quality thereof, and this, should be regarded as the key element in order to deliver quality student support services. Mankoe and Ntsaba (2019) maintain that open and distance learning institutions are responsible for aiding students in academic and administrative matters (which will be critically discussed in the following topics) to improve the trust of students and their sense of confidence, and to overcome feelings of isolation and reduce the drop-out rate.

Theoretical Background and Review of Previous Studies

COVID-19

In 2020, a deadly COVID-19 virus emerged. The number of infected cases increased rapidly and spread across the world, which resulted in many fatalities. Due to the disturbing situation, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a global pandemic on 11 March 2020. Precautionary measures are necessary to limit the spread of the diseases (Mailizar et al. 2020). The South African government enforced Movement Control Measures, new health protocols, guidelines, and restrictions on all sectors of the economy, including the education sector. One of the precautionary control measures pertaining to COVID-19 included the closure of schools and institutions of higher learning in order to flatten the curve of the pandemic. In addition, institutions of higher learning had to adopt technology in order to facilitate learning and offer student support to registered students during COVID-19 pandemic.

Defining Open Distance Learning (ODL)

Mayanja, Tibaingana and Birevi (2019) stated that the concept of open distance learning describes the offering of education at a distance where students are physically separated from the educational institution to instruct students in the absence of tutor and student interactions. Ravhudzulo (2014) maintains that ODL involves the ability to study at a distance from the higher learning institution and thus, provide a flexible learning model and allow students to access educational opportunities. Msweli (2012) maintains that open distance learning is seen as a learning system that incorporates student support, curriculum and instructional design, learning versatility, the elimination of barriers to entry, previous learning credit, and other instructional practices. These instructional design practices include the implementation and evaluation of programmes to meet students' diverse needs who generally come from different cultural, social and religious backgrounds (Msweli 2012). In the context of this study, the preceding definition is adopted and supports the view that ODL is targeted at anyone who is willing to further their studies in an open distance learning institution, and offering student tuition support despite the age, individual differences and geographic dispensation.

Active Learning Theory

This study adopted active learning theory as a theoretical lens for the interpretation of data as it forms the basis of deep active learning. Active learning is relevant in this study as it relates to the paradigm shift from teaching to learning. This is due to the fact that changes outside teaching environment are likely to bring change to how teaching and learning are facilitated in higher learning institutions including those operate in ODL context. Bonwell and Eison (1991) argued that although it is difficult to define active learning the point is that “when you take a position in a stationary object (T1) and next you see the object start to move (T2), you observe the gradual movement from T1 to T2. This movement is action and thus active. From this standpoint, learning (action) is always active, and passive learning cannot exist”. In this study, the author share the same sentiments that learning is an action that need to be active teaching which can be supported by student support activities even during trying times of Covid-19. The point is that academic staff needs to engage with students to facilitate learning in ODL context.

Previous Studies on Student Support in the ODL Context

Arifin (2018) highlights that student support can be regarded as the range of services available to individuals and students in groups, and complements the course material or learning resources that are appropriate for all learners. Mpofu (2016) posits that student support is a very important component of open distance learning programmes, including systemic, affective and cognitive factors that are intended to scaffold the student to achieve their academic success. Mpofu (2016) further states that ODL student support consists of three categories: a course and design dimension (course design and content delivery), educational support services (student groups, tutor support, academic service centres and technical services) and university support services (orientations, achievement and retention programmes, university support services, scholarships and awards, library resources, and computing and technology). Arifin (2018) suggests that technological infrastructure, scale and geography are also important in developing student support systems, and the importance of knowing which technologies are used by students is very vital. Technological innovation plays an important role in our lives, particularly social media networks, hence, social media is an effective tool that can be used to provide student support. Netanda et al. (2017) alluded that the value of providing support services for students is to allow students to meet various academic demands, to help them with their academic prospects, and to maintain them until they successfully complete their studies. Therefore, this paper acknowledges the importance of student support for student success and aims to focus on student support in the ODL context amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

Arifin (2018) maintains that student support can be accomplished through three support mechanisms, namely, systemic, affective, and cognitive support. These should be accompanied by the transformation of institutional attitudes affecting all staff at all levels in an attempt to set retention targets and establish approaches, motivators and incentives for achieving them. Netanda et al. (2017)

suggest that lectures should establish appropriate and meaningful educational content to promote the participation of students in learning processes and their achievements. Previous studies have shown that the use of support programmes for students provides more complementary benefits to both the students and the institution. Dependable and effective student support programmes that best address student needs can advance students' learning and learning experiences by affecting immersion and achievement in learning. Netanda et al. (2017) argue that ODL higher institutions should be competitive in a global higher education environment by providing students with support services that maximise student enrolment and retention rates until they successfully complete their studies. Makoe and Nsamba (2019) identified different modes of student support services that can be found in open distance learning institutions. These include the following: (1) Counselling, which provides career, academic and personal support to students; (2) Student regional centres that provide academic and financial advice, meet other students, make use of academic services and computers, and have conversations with counsellors in registration services; (3) Academic learning support through e-tutors, module design and library services (Makoe and Nsamba 2019). Student email addresses are also created for all registered students, to obtain updates on all the modules they registered for.

Mankoe and Nsamba (2019) compared students' expectations and perceptions through support services to determine the gaps in the quality of services offered. A questionnaire analysis was conducted consisting of four proportions, namely, tangibility, reliability, delivery and assurance. The results revealed that the aspirations of the students were greater than their perceptions in three dimensions of service quality, with the measurable dimension having the greatest gaps. The findings of the overall study from the perception and expectation assessment of quality from students' perspectives uncovered that there are discrepancies within an ODL institution's student support programme. This study also established that support systems should be more accessible and aimed at students' needs, and should not be a standard universal approach across the board. This study recommends that distance education institutions should set official quality standards and different types of services should be considered to decide what works and what does not work. Paniagua and Simpson (2018) recommended that to be efficient, institutional induction programmes should have systematic and on-going processes throughout the students' first year, to generate authentic networked learning.

The number of studies conducted on the role of student support in ODL institutions is increasing, but with diverse and inconclusive findings regarding some variables. Simsons et al. (2020) reported on the dimension of tutor support in student support services. The results of the study conducted by Simsons et al. (2020) show that students seem to highly respect the input they receive from their tutors on their evaluated work and describe it as a forward-thinking encouragement and motivation. The study further highlighted the positive impact on students, which was evident to students when they experienced stressful circumstances in their lives. Due to difficulties forcing the students to abandon their studies, they sought the assistance and support of their tutors who granted them extensions and

postponements on due dates, where circumstances were beyond the students' control. This support enabled the students to still accomplish their goals to complete their studies.

Mpofu (2016) posits the self-efficacy dispositions of students in relation to studying in the ODL context. The study suggests that student support plays an important role in ODL context, while student achievement is influenced by anticipated outcomes and further moderated by efficacy dispositions. Self-efficacy dispositions such as coping skills, proactivity, ingenuity, problem solving abilities and tenacity are also crucial in ODL institutions. However, further to the study of Mpofu (2016), Netanda et al. (2017) posit student autonomy as the degree of independence displayed by students in the student relationship to assess learning participation, goals and decisions to assess the learning programme, in summary students who commit to their studies are more likely to succeed in their studies. Simons et al. (2020) added that working students, or students with other commitments make use of ODL institutions. Therefore, ODL is the best alternative way in which to further higher learning studies since they do not have to attend the institution every day for tutoring lessons. Arko-Achemfour (2017) provides a definition of the 'distance' that is found in ODL institutions as the 'transactional distance' – this is found in Moore's theory, which refers to all the gaps that exist in educational ties, especially, geographically. However, the distance is measured by the amount of contact between the academic instructor and students, and the amount of structure in the course design. Educational processes in an ODL can be applied by using the transactional presence approach as stated by Arko-Achemfour (2017), which highlights the different modes that are offered by an institution to support the learner. Support services may include tutoring mediated programmes to allow students to achieve and realise their academic objectives and goals. He further defined transactional presence as the degree to which learners perceive the quality and accessibility of an ODL institution and its staff, as well as the learning centre's coordinators, tutors, peer learners, and other related persons.

In another study, Msweli (2012) found that ODL encourages the ideals of more independent methods of study and work, open education for all, and continuing professional development through its goals. Goals include: access to learning; and breaking down geographic barriers of time and space to meet learners' needs in a world characterised by new values and social trends; knowledge sharing and collaborative learning; and reaching economic goals. However, in today's fast changing world, societies are faced with conditions with a need to adapt to the Fourth Industrial Revolution. The revolution is influenced by our technological advances that replace most functionalities that are developed by humans. Pham and Ahn (2018) found that green or sustainable systems evolves under the support of cyber-physical systems (or digital twins) based on ICT technology. Mayanja et al. (2019) maintain that the evolution of the world economic change requires institutions to stay abreast of the current technological trends, which will enable them to provide the best services to their students, meet the expectations of students, and meet their institutional objectives as outlined in their missions and visions. Information and communication technologies such as

computers, emails, mobile phones, social media applications, radio and television are the barrier points between students, facilitators and institutions.

Paniagua and Simpson (2018) investigated an ODL system with specific reference to share expertise about how effective, or not, technology has been for developing innovative, advanced and quality student support services to large or small groups. The findings of this study uncovered that one of the greatest challenges experienced by ODL institutions is the large number of enrolled students, which calls for strong and well-organised student support programmes at an institutional level. The study further discovered that student support is fundamental to ODL and influences the quality of the entire system. Paniagua and Simpson (2018) suggest that for this reason, each quality assurance model in ODL incorporates specific indicators pertaining to the suitability of student support services at both institutional and course level.

Mayanja et al. (2019) explored the use of ICT services for student support in an ODL institution, namely, Makerere University. The study revealed the challenges students face as they struggle to obtain relevant research tools, which affects academic performance. Therefore, student study supervision is carried out through face-to-face interactions that require students to travel far distances, and incur costs due to these distances travelled, in order to meet their superiors at the University. At times, these meetings are cancelled after the students have travelled far distances. The findings of this study revealed that integrating ICTs in the various phases of the learning life cycle of the students can increase the students' satisfaction regarding the university programmes. In another study, Msweli (2012) explored on ODL strategy that supports the ODL framework, various components and how resources are distributed to facilitate learning. Msweli (2012) adds that each component of the ODL programme can and should be internationalised in order to obtain the full ODL outcomes, including extended and equal access to education and training, and improved student outputs..

Problem Statement

Regarding the afore-mentioned context, it is evident that the literature review revealed the processes about how students are supported in an ODL context, along with the different types of student support services that are offered. The literature review also indicated the relationship between student support and student experiences on the issue of access to student support services. Many studies have focused on examining the casual relationships of student support in an ODL context using a universal approach on students rather than focusing on the individual needs of students. The role of student support in open distance learning institutions needs to consist of informational approaches to enhance student achievement, and student retention needs to be considered.

Arifin (2018) maintains that the higher education sector plays an important role in the economy by empowering students to graduate and become employable in the labour market. Higher education institutions that operate in an ODL context, have concerns pertaining to student retention, as the global labour market provides

increased career opportunities for skilled professionals with specialised qualifications. Research conducted by Paniagua and Simpson (2018) has shown that success rates at ODL institutions are considered lower than conventional education offered by residential institutions. Arko-Achemfuor (2017) posits physical distance as the challenge faced by ODL students. Previous studies identified various success factors that lead to proper execution of student support in ODL institutions.

Fewer studies have been found on the relationship between student support services offered in ODL institutions and students in marginalised groups, with specific reference to students who are in rural areas in South Africa. Arko-Achemfour (2017) found that there are many challenges faced by students who are in rural areas, such as the lack of technological devices like computers, which also implicates financial challenges of tuition fees, whereas if they had proper access to laptop or computer with internet they would limitless and appropriate information on different types of financial assistance programmes and their providers. Arko-Achemfour (2017) add that there is a scarcity of information available on how different biographical groups differ in their perceptions of ODL institutions and student support, hence, this current study aims to address this gap in academic literature. This study also aims to enhance the understanding of ODL institutions in conceptualising the student support services provide to students through the use of technological devices to students both in urban and rural areas. The relationships between these variables should provide an understanding that will guide retention practices and strategies for students in ODL institutions in South Africa. The study should enlighten future research into the role that these variables play in retaining students and reaching suitable graduate success rates from different biographical and geographical groups. In summary, this study seeks to answer the following research questions:

- What are the different types of student support services that are offered to students in implementing ODL during COVID-19?
- What are the benefits enjoyed by students due to implementation of ODL during COVID-19?
- What are the challenges experienced by students due to the implementation of ODL during COVID-19?

Contribution of the Study

This study makes contribution to active learning theory by focusing on online student support platforms adopted by academic teaching staff in ODL context in engaging students in the process learning by identifying challenges experienced by the students. In practice teaching and learning methods in institutions of higher learning have changed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, this challenge in teaching methods is likely to present challenges to both students and academics as they have to embrace numerous new methods of teaching and learning on various online learning environments. The results of this study can assist academics

to choose the most effective and convenient platform preferred by students, which consequently will assist in identifying the most appropriate approach in the preparation of ODL materials in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, the study aimed to make an academic contribution by addressing gaps in literature pertaining to student support amid the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic.

Research Methodology

A descriptive quantitative approach was followed, using a structured questionnaire to achieve the research objective. A quantitative research approach was chosen as an appropriate research approach, since it permitted the participants to share their opinions and perspectives on student support in the ODL context during COVID-19 pandemic. A purposive sampling method was used in the study; this sampling method requires that participants are chosen by considering some defining characteristics that make them the holders of the data needed for the study (Tustin et al. 2005). Registered undergraduate students at various South African universities were selected as the unit of analysis. An online survey was used to capture data regarding the students' profiles and their experiences relating to student support during COVID-19 pandemic in implementing ODL. Descriptive statistics were used in this study to analyse the primary data on demographic variables of students, and student support tools were used to ensure the data was of good quality with no missing values. The reliability of the measurement scales was assessed by measuring internal consistency using Cronbach's alpha values. Cronbach alpha is used to measure the internal consistency reliability, which is the average of all possible split-half coefficients resulting from the scale items being split differently. (Malhotra 2010). The validity of the measurement scales was assessed looking at face or content validity and used scales, which that proved to be valid, previously.

Results and Discussion

304 undergraduate student respondents (registered for either a diploma or undergraduate degree) throughout South Africa participated and shared their feedback on the ODL implementation in their respective universities. The response rate was satisfactory, and this was the result of the online convenient survey used during the data collection process. The data analysed includes the demographic profiles of respondents and data on the students' perspectives have covered feedback on the ratings of online tools or platforms used to implement ODL, and the benefits derived from the online tools. The respondents of the study consisted of 38% males and 62% females. The next item analysed on the demographic profile was the location of the respondents and 66% were at home residing in cities, and 34% of these respondents were dispersed in rural areas.

In line with research objective one of the study which aimed to identify different types of student support services offered in implementing ODL during COVID-19, students were asked to identify the different types of student support services that were offered to them. Majority of students (94%) indicated that online student support services are offered by lecturers using Learning Management Systems (LMS), Microsoft Teams Meeting, YouTube videos, Zoom Meeting. However, only 6% of students alluded that online support service are offered through the use of WhatsApp social media platform. The results of the current study concur with the view by Arifin (2018) that technological infrastructure, scale and geography are also important in developing student support systems. The results regarding the use of social media platforms to offer student support concur with Arifin (2018) that argued that technological innovation can be utilised to play an important role in lives, particularly social media networks, as tool to provide student support.

To achieve research objective two, students were also asked to identify the benefits derived in studying via the ODL teaching model. 87% of respondents agreed that ODL teaching model supported by online platforms allows them to understand learning outcomes of the subject matter due to the convenience and flexibility of ODL while 13% of students disagreed. The results of this paper concur with Ravhudzulo (2014) in that ODL provides the opportunity to study at a distance through a higher learning institution, and provides a flexible learning model, in addition to allowing students to access educational opportunities. The results also support the view by Msweli (2012) that the ODL learning system incorporates student support. Students were asked to rate their internet connection quality in ODL context as a possible challenge in implementing ODL. In addition, 69% of the respondents indicated they were satisfied with the efforts made by lecturers to offer student support in conducting the lessons through online platforms, such as Learning Management Systems (LMS), Microsoft Teams Meeting, YouTube videos, Zoom Meeting. However, 31% mentioned that they did not prefer teaching to be carried out on online platforms (Microsoft Teams Meeting, YouTube videos, Zoom Meeting). The results of this study add new insight in literature by revealing the students' satisfaction regarding the student support offered by lecturers during unprecedented era of COVID-19 era.

To realise research objective three, students were asked to identify challenges linked to implementation of ODL model amid COVID-19. The majority of respondents 68% had good internet connection quality while a minority of 32% experienced poor internet connection quality. The preceding results regarding poor internet connection as a barrier to effective implementation of ODL add insights for academic literature related to open distance learning, specifically, in COVID-19 era. In addition, 58% of students indicated that late response on administrative queries pose a challenge for the effective implementation of ODL during COVID-19 pandemic era. These results are in support of Makoe and Nsamba (2019), these authors argued that administrative support is crucial for effective implementation of ODL.

Moreover, 64% of students alluded that offering online student support is appreciated, but face-to face classroom interaction is lost due to COVID-19 and

study material content cannot be explained in details. In addition, majority of students 68% agreed that online student support pose a challenge with regard to high data costs for downloading study material while minority of students 32% cared less about data costs.

Conclusions

In this paper, the respondents confirmed that different types of student support services were offered to them by lecturers using Learning Management Systems (LMS), Microsoft Teams Meeting, YouTube videos, Zoom Meeting. Furthermore, the results of this paper revealed that students are satisfied with ODL teaching model which is supported by online platforms as they allow them to understand learning outcomes of the subject matter due to the convenience and flexibility. These results add significant contribution to ODL literature by identifying the mentioned technological platforms used to offer online student support in ODL context. Moreover, the results of this paper add insight to literature by uncovering data connectivity as a one of challenges related to online student support. In addition, the results of this study revealed that students are faced with a challenge of high data cost associated with viewing and downloading of study material content. The results of this paper add new insight to literature by identifying additional challenges such as internet connectivity specifically in rural areas, and downloading data costs as a barriers for effective in implementation of ODL and online student support during COVID-19 era.

Recommendations

Despite the challenges faced in ODL implementation in the past, the opportunity to innovate teaching is available to the instructors to explore. On a positive note, ODL as the post COVID-19 new norm, has proven that learning has no boundaries. Instead of conducting lessons within four walls in the traditional way, the implementation of ODL will take teaching and learning to a whole new level and unleash creativity for both learners and instructors. In order to have effective student support and to improve students' performance at institutions of higher learning, which follow an ODL teaching model, various recommendations are made. First, online or virtual induction programmes in ODL learning institutions should be conducted for new students and new lecturers to empower them. Secondly, lecturers training workshops should be conducted on a regular basis to improve online lecturing and facilitation skills. Thirdly, students should be offered financial support with data to make studying effective and for downloading of study material. Furthermore, it is recommended that academics upload support material that consumes less data.

Future Research Directions

Future research should focus on obtaining insights on how to blend both online and offline student support tools to cater for the needs of students in rural areas characterised by poor quality network connections. In addition, future research should aim to analyse how to develop interactive teaching and learning materials. Moreover, future research should consider obtaining insights on the training needs of academics to ensure the effective implementation of interactive teaching methods for the ODL context.

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