



Tracing Factors that Influence Students' Success in Open Distance Learning at South African Higher Education Institutions

Muhandji Mbodila

Department of Information Technology Systems
Walter Sisulu University, South Africa.
E-mail: mumbodila@wsu.ac.za

Munienge Mbodila

Student Tracking Unit, Directorate of Learning and Teaching
Walter Sisulu University, South Africa.
E-mail: mmbodila@wsu.ac.za

Dagogo William Legg-Jack*

Directorate of Learning and Teaching
Walter Sisulu University, South Africa.
E-mail: dlegg-jack@wsu.ac.za

**Corresponding author*

Abstract

For the past decade, improving students' success and throughput rates have been a key topic in higher education. International research and South Africa in particular show that the effective implementation of e-learning and various educational technology tools can help improve students' participation and increase pass rates in distance education. However, to achieve the desired outcomes as well as students' participation in Open Distance Learning (ODEL) environment other important factors need to be taken into consideration. This includes such factors as students' background, technology availability, language barrier, and time management among others. Thus, this paper, based on the review of related literature traced factors that affect students' academic performance and pass rate in the open and distance learning environment in the context of South Africa. The paper also discussed and compared these factors as to provide a guideline that can be used by educational practitioners to address issues faced by students in the South African context.

Key words: Higher Education, Open Distance Learning, Students Success,

Introduction

Open distance is a multi-dimensional concept that focuses on bridging the time, geographical, economic, social, and communication between student and institution, student and academics, students and courseware, and students and peers (Unisa 2008, p. 2). The introduction of Open distance learning (ODL) has enhanced teaching and learning in the face of higher education worldwide. According to Dhawan

(2020), ODL has overcome many learning challenges that were faced with face-to-face learning as it is more flexible and effective. In their research study, Angara et.al. (2010) reported that open distance learning eliminates all unnecessary barriers to learning and offers students a chance to succeed in education. Many countries worldwide, have adopted the use of ODL in higher education institutions to meet the high demand of students in the 21st century. These countries, especially the developed ones are shifting from traditional education to ODL using information and communication technology (Seeletso, 2021). The integration of ICT in teaching and learning has become part and parcel of ODL in many countries (Selvaras, 2020). Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have offered many benefits that can help improve students' participation and increase pass rates in open distance education.

In South Africa, the colonial and apartheid regime had caused a serious impact on the intellectual, economic, and social fabric of the society (Makgoba & Mubangizi, 2010). During this time of apartheid, the population was divided between the "race group" namely black, white, and Indian. Black South Africans were extremely oppressed during the apartheid regime. This oppression was also enforced in the education system. Some scholars (Faloye & Ajayi, 2021; Nyahodza, Lena, & Richard Higgs, 2017), stated that during the apartheid regime, schools were divided and this was used as a tool to allocate resources unequally. This division occurred at all levels of schooling (primary and high schools) and higher education (Universities) (Nkotwana, 2014). Even presently, many Black South Africans are still living in the poverty that they experienced since the apartheid regime. A greater number of them live in rural areas and poor townships where there is a lack of access to many facilities. Some learners after passing their matric, find it very difficult to pursue their studies at the tertiary level as this comes with a high cost. Most higher education institutions are located within the cities, and this makes it difficult for learners from rural areas to attend or pursue their tertiary-level studies. The stress of finding accommodation, tuition fees, and the money to sustain them while at the University constitute challenges for learners from rural and disadvantaged backgrounds. Hence, the introduction of Open distance education in South Africa to close the gap that existed in the school system for learners that come from rural areas and disadvantaged backgrounds.

The open distance education in South Africa has formed a vital part of the university subsystem, contributing to approximately 40% of headcounts students and approximately 30% of full-time equivalent students (DHET, 2014, p. 10). The University of South Africa (UNISA) is the only largest institution that offers Open distance learning education in South Africa and in the African continent (Letseka, 2021). The University of South Africa offers open distance education to mature non-traditional, working students who have difficulties enrolling full-time in campus-based higher education institutions (Letseka & Karel, 2015, p. 3; Badu-Nyarko & Amponsah, 2016, p. 88). According to Kimotho (2018) and Zimbabwe Open University (2018), ODL focuses on removing barriers to accessing learning and the flexibility of learning provision and student-centeredness.

However, despite the benefit offered by open distance education, students that enroll with ODL still face many challenges such as time management, language barrier, access to and availability of ICT resources. Students that enroll in ODL must be equipped with the skills needed to operate the ICT resources (Croft, Dalton & Grant, 2010; Chau, 2010, p. 186; Cloete, 2017, p. 2; Kimotho, 2018). According to Mukwevho (2018), poor time management leads to challenges such as learners' inability to integrate the demands of off-campus study with family, work, and social commitments.

Open distance learning (ODL)

Open distance learning requires special education and communication technologies and is usually implemented through the application of electronic and other media. ICTs have offered many benefits that can help improve students' participation and increase pass rates in open distance education. The integration of ICTs in teaching and learning has become part and parcel of ODL in many countries (Fozdar & Kumar 2007). In their paper, Ferreira and Venter (2006) stated that the use of Short Message Service (SMS), discussion forums, email, and PowerPoint presentations has become important with technological advancement. However, despite the introduction of online learning with the use of advanced technology by the University

of South Africa (Unisa) to improve students' throughput rate and pass rate, many students are still faced with the challenges of finishing their studies, simply because they do not handle the pressure of ODL (Ferreira & Venter, 2006).

Why do ODL students fail to succeed?

The shift from high school to university can be a challenge for many students regardless of which school learners come from. Whether they are from public or private schools, they face many challenges when they enroll in tertiary education. According to Murangi (2017), the transition from high school to university makes it difficult for students as they have to adapt to a new learning style that is not similar to the one that they are used to in high school. This was also highlighted by Murangi that this transition can be even worse for those students enrolling in the ODL institution since they were used to face-to-face contact classes which are totally different from the approach which is used in ODL settings. Simpson (2013) argues that one of the reasons ODL students fail to succeed is because ODL institutions focus too much on the delivery of online teaching materials than on motivating students to learn. According to Mahlangu (2018), the lack of support from relevant stakeholders other than the academics and administrators could also be one of the reasons that students do not perform well in the ODL institutions. The research study by Chetty and Pather (2015) together with Hassel and Ridout (2018, p. 1) showed that when first-year students enroll in the ODL institutions, they expect the teaching approach to be the same as the one in high school where the teacher does all the teaching and students sit and listen to the educator. After they realise that the teaching method is totally different from the high school, the students become stressed, and this leads to poor performance and some of them end up dropping out of the university. Therefore, it is recommended that ODL institutions must take in consideration some of the challenges that students might face when they enroll to study in the institutions such as the background where the students come from, the language of instruction, technology skills, and other aspects of their lives.

Methodology

This review hinges on the affordance of exploratory qualitative research design. An exploratory qualitative research design is deemed appropriate to reveal factors affecting students' academic performance and pass rate in Open Distance Learning (ODEL) in South African Institutions. According to Brown and Brown (2006) as well as Guragain (2019), exploratory design to research is employed when there is need to address a new problem on which little or no previous research has been executed on. Therefore, the research adopted a secondary source to generate the data needed to address the research question posed in the study. Data for this study was generated through secondary sources namely, published peer reviewed journal articles, policies, document analysis and reports within the South African context on Open Distance Learning with specific focus on factors that inhibit students' participation in this mode of learning.

Results and Discussion

Findings from the review of related literature have shown many challenges that affect students' academic performance and pass rate in open distance learning environment. In this paper, we propose the following solution to improve the students' academic, success, throughput and pass rate.

Understanding students' different backgrounds

Basic education in South Africa is covered between the first twelve years of schooling, that is, from Grade 1-12, and by this time it is expected that learners sit in classroom and be fed with knowledge by the teacher (Kgosinyane, 2019). Hence, when they enroll for ODeL which requires at a different pace, the student is affected. As soon as students are admitted or recruited in any higher education institution whether face-to-face or open distance learning institution, the institutions have to understand learners' background. As we know that students come from different backgrounds: "Privileged or underprivileged". Shifting from traditional classroom and face to face learning environment to open distance learning environment can be

very challenging for any students especially first years. As soon as these students start with their studies, the instructors must assist them by providing learning guide, engaging with them in the discussion forum, sending announcement to explain what the institution requires from them. Providing study materials to assist them with their courses, setting self-assessment exercises to prepare them with their assignments, providing them with tutorial materials that will assist them understand how the learning management system functions. It is on this premise suggest that higher education institutions link the teaching in schools with teaching and learning in higher education institutions so that when students shift from high school to university it would be easy and not appear as shock for most first year students.

Language of Instruction

One factor revealed in studies as the major challenge to students' success in ODeL is that of language. Ferreira and Venter (2006) revealed in their study that learners find it difficult to express themselves effectively because the academic language of communication is a second or third language of many of the students. Therefore, it is obvious that students will be challenged succeeding in ODeL. In a related study, it was reported that language constituted a major challenge in students success participating in ODeL (Mdakane, 2011). The disparity in home language and that used for instruction was highlighted as factor that impact students success, the use of home language at foundation phase and English language for instruction at school created a major problem for students (Mdakane, 2011). Research reported that students struggling with reading and writing English as it is used as the language of teaching and learning, these are referred to be "underprepared" or are generally not academically ready (Sosibo & Katiya, 2015, p. 274). It was mentioned by the CHE (2010, p. 4) that teachers in higher education institutions had to adapt with teaching more students in English than for some students is their second or even third language. Maphosa et al. (2014) stated that language competence may be regarded as another factor affecting students' throughput and pass rate in the higher education institutions. Consequently, we suggest that teachers be fair with student when marking their assignments or work, as we know that for many students the language of instruction (English) can be their second or third language. Many students lack the skills of writing in proper English that can meet the university standard. The instructors should not penalize students for grammatical or spelling errors instead; they must correct the grammar and spelling when giving feedback to students.

Availability, Access and Skills in the use of Technological Infrastructure

In the 21st Century, technology has become part of our daily living. Technology has the potential to enhance teaching and influence students learning and motivation (Mafhenya, 2016). The use of Technology in ODL has overcome the physical distance between students and teachers as it enables the flexibility of learning at distance, anywhere and anytime. Hence, access to information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure remain the strength of any online related learning, distance education inclusive (Legg-Jack, 2021; Elkaseh, Wong & Fung 2015; Guri-rosenblit 2012; Tait 2018; Tait 2014). According to Mills (2008), access to ICT infrastructure and internet connectivity has become a major hindrance to successful teaching and learning in developing a country where the cost of internet is exorbitant. On the other hand, Croft, Dalton and Grant (2010), Chau (2010), Cloete (2017) as well as Kimotho (2018) were of the view that, to keep abreast with technology, students in the ODL environment should be equipped with competencies required to operate both the hardware and the software of ICT strategies. The need for digital literacy has been emphasised due to the massive growth of digital format of information in higher education institutions (Odede & Jiyane, 2019). It is a requirement that affords students access to effective use of Open Education Resources (OER) (Law, Woo, de la Torre, & Wong, 2018; Odede & Jiyane, 2019). Digital literacy as defined by Law et al (2018) is the ability to access, manage, understand, integrate, communicate, evaluate and create information safely and appropriately through digital technologies. In addition, digital literacy involves an understanding of wide range of software applications such word processing, presentations and web-based resources (Odede & Jiyane, 2019). This implies that, success in online environment is considered possible when a student is technologically competent (Mafhenya, 2016). However, considering

the history of South Africa, Mahlangu, (2018) aver that much of the population are poor, residing in the rural areas where Internet access is problematic and are generally illiterate as far as the internet is concerned.

Several evidence show that availability, access and skills in the use of ICT infrastructure constitute major challenge for students in ODeL in the South African context. It was reported in a study that price for devices and connectivity are significant barrier for various students of distance education (Mashile, Fynn & Matoane, 2020). The study conducted by Cox and Trotter (2017) among other findings revealed that many students lacked access to reliable internet access because they live in poor rural areas with weak infrastructural support, or in urban townships from UNISA satellite centres. Consequently, Mashile et al (2020) conclude that South Africa is a country with high levels of inequality, as measured through the gini-coefficient. According to them, data costs in South Africa are among the highest in the world and are too expensive for students, specifically those who depend on government bursaries to finance their education. Also, findings from studies indicate that students of ODeL lack the necessary digital competence to undertake this aspect of learning. For example, lack or limited digital literacy was highlighted as a challenge to students' participation in ODeL (Mphahlele & Makokotlela, 2020). From the foregoing, it is evident that availability, access and skills in the use of technological infrastructure remain a challenge to students' participation in ODeL in South Africa.

Many students that come from high school are not computer literate. As we mentioned earlier, most of the students that enroll in the South African's higher education institutions come from disadvantaged schools where access to electronic devices such as computers is a problem. Some of them never used computers in their schools and others think that computers are only used to play games not to learn with. We also mentioned that even though those that have access to computers at home or had a chance to use them at high schools they still do not know how to use them fully. The use of Information and Communication Technology is regarded as part of distance learning. Thus, student cannot perform well academically if they are not computer literate, as we know computer literacy is a concept of understanding and having knowledge on how computers work and its uses. The basic knowledge of computers can assist students do their online assessment without struggling. Students, especially those coming from the rural areas need more training on how to use communication media as soon as they start with their studies (Ferreira & Venter, 2006). For students to be successful in online environments, they must be technologically skilled in the use of computer (Mafhenya, 2016). We suggest that open distance learning institutions organise face-to-face training to train the students on the basic knowledge of computer and the use of technology to enhance their learning. These students should also be trained on how to use Learning management system (such as myUnisa, Blackboard Canvass, Moodle etc...) to perform their tasks such as doing and submitting their assignments.

Time Management

Managing time can be a problem for students studying online and through open distance. Most of these students are working and have family responsibilities. Therefore, they struggle to handle the pressure of studying, working, and managing family responsibilities due to their various everyday commitments. We suggest that instructors provide students with a study schedule to assist them plan and manage their time. Instructors should not overload students with many assignments as this can have negative effect on the their performance. The number of assignments for a module should be manageable for students, as they also have to do assignments of other modules. The time allocation for submission of each assignment should be at least two weeks. This means, when students submit their first assignment it should take them at least two weeks to submit their next assignment. If students have few assignments, they will have more time to work on them but if they are loaded with too many assignments and less time, they will be under pressure of submitting assignments that might contain too many errors and this can also affect their perform. Finally, instructors must provide a time schedule for each assignment and send constant announcement to students reminding them about the assignments due date's submission. Time management is considered as one of the reasons why some students fail or withdraw from ODeL programmes (Doherty, 2006). Some of the

reasons given by students that indicate lack of time management include disparity in lecture schedule, inability to visit campus during lecture period as well as procrastination.

Research that explored study habits and time-management trends of post-graduate students in accountancy revealed some levels of inadequacy in time management schedules (Fouché, 2017). The study reported that half of the students had poor time management habit, and this impacts significantly on their performance; thus, it was recommended that students should be supported in building soft skills in the area of time management.

Motivation

After they students enroll in distance learning courses, they find it difficult to cope with the pressure. They fall behind and in some point; and feel like quitting or giving up. Motivating and encouraging these learners can help them deal with the pressure. To motivate students, we suggest that instructors engage with students by following up on students' performance, giving them feedback after marking their assignments, attending to their queries on discussion forum or by email. For instance, when a student fails to submit his assignments, the instructor can personally contact the student telephonically or by email to find out why he/she did not submit his/her assignments. The most important way to improve students is give feedback or comments for their work. Action without feedback is very unproductive for the students (Laurillard, 1993, p. 63). Giving feedback to students is regarded as keeping track with regular student performance.

Socio-Cultural Issues

Socio-Cultural aspects as conceptualised in this study are referred to as environmental, social, cultural and economic related issues (Lephalala & Makoe, 2012). These are said to have negatively impacted on students participation in ODeL in South Africa in one area or the other as indicated in the sections below.

Environmental aspects

Environmental aspects entail the physical environment that constitute where the learning takes place, and this comprise the students' geographic location as well as the availability of resources in that environment. Tait (2000) and Soudien (2007) caution that, the environment influences learning in several ways, and should not be ignored when examining students learning experiences. A study which explored the impact of environmental aspect on ODL on students' success found geographic distance as a pertinent challenge for both rural and township students (Lephalala & Makoe, 2012). Students from rural area felt they were marginalised and overlooked. According to the study, distance learners are disadvantaged and not acknowledged, whilst those from township echoed the need for frequent face-to-face interaction with the lecturers as they found it difficult to engage with the study guides as well as difficulties with understanding course content. Similarly, the study conducted by Baloyi (2012) also identified environment as a major challenge to open ODeL, as students from remote rural areas lack support system and are disadvantaged in so many areas. Arko-Achemfuor (2017) also reported a high level of dissatisfaction expressed by students on support services, due to the lack of connectedness that exists between staff and students. From these studies reviewed, there is an overwhelming evidence that issues related to student's environment impede on their success on ODeL.

Social aspect

Social aspect is described as the relationship an individual shares with family members and those within the community from where they belong alongside other support structures (Lephalala & Makoe, 2012). In their study it was reported that students lack social contact with lecturers, fellow students, family and community members. Interaction among fellow students is considered as a necessary component required for the successful completion of specific task in an online environment (Legg-Jack, 2020). Students consider themselves as group learners who find engaging actively in dividual learning difficult, and thus, required active interaction with fellow students (Alison & Katijan, 2000; Purdie & Hattie, 2002; Usun, 2006).

Cultural aspect

Cultural aspect is closely linked with that of social as it deals on relationship with others. As argued, communal interaction occupies a prominent place to how students learn in their communities and find meaning as well as rely on each other for support (Bempechat & Abrahams, 1999). Interaction among students plays a key role in their active learning, retention, and overall perceptions of the course/instructor effectiveness (Flottemesch, 2000). Interaction gives students the chance to engage in active cognitive processing; it demands that they participate in making meaning out of content; as well as forces them to contextualize that meaning among a social group (Castaneda & Rentz, 2020).

Economic aspect

Economic aspects as conceptualised by Lephalala and Makoe (2012) are issues that focuses on financial implications of being a distant learner. As revealed in a study, fees and other finance related issues constitute stress and frustration for ODeL in South Africa (Mittelmeier et al, 2019). In their study, it was noted that students of ODeL voiced out their frustration on the challenges encountered because of self-funding and paying for fees not covered by the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS). Some of the issues related to the inability to cater for the financial needs of ODeL bothers on class (Mittelmeier et al, 2019). It is on this premise Hager (2011) argues that the procurement of ICT related gadgets places additional financial burden on distance learners. Consequently, we conclude that lack of funds has a significant impact on students' involvement in ODeL because it impedes on their affordability of certain resources required for their effective participation.

Situational factors

Situational challenges such as job and family or home-related responsibilities have been described as objects of distraction that reduce students study time according to Higher Education Academy [HEA] (2015) and Kimotho (2018). These factors have stronghold on ODeL students as they find it very difficult to balance their work, family life and study. As reported, inability to create balance between education, work, family and social life influence students' commitment to their study (Kara et al, 2019), thereby leading to either failure, withdrawal or total dropout. It was noted that the period an individual stayed out of school before enrolling for ODeL programme also has significant impact on their academic performance and the attainment of their goal (HEA, 2015). Besides, other factors that tend to inhibit students' success in ODeL especially amid socio-economic circumstances hinges on employment-related and household responsibilities (Sadler & Erasmus, 2005). This is because, students are under intense pressure from their employees to deliver work and they might also have family responsibilities (Roos, 2009). Studies from the South African context have also proven the impact of situational factors on students' success in ODeL programmes. The study carried out by Aboo (2017) revealed that home responsibilities alongside other commitments took up much of their study time, hence impacted on their success in ODeL. Hence, handling situational factors could contribute to students success in ODeL, especially within the South African context.

Total reliance on online mode for course delivery

The fact that internet service provision in Africa is exorbitant is not contestable (Kimotho, 2018). South Africa has a long history where most learners are disadvantaged due to digital inequality. Therefore, the total dependence on online technology as the only delivery mode for ODeL will further widen the digital divide, thereby creating further exclusions in education Chau, 2010, p. 186). A study by Bordoloi, Das and Das (2021) has revealed that blended learning approach provides the solution for education in the 21st century. In India, the study further recommends that universities and colleges form alliance with community communication centres (CCCs) and community information centres (CICs) located in different blocks of the district in the provision of required information to desired learners (Bordoloi et al., 2021). The implication of this to the South African context is that a form of collaboration be established between

institutions that operate ODeL and communities where students reside to ensure functional in-person centres are established to tackle the challenges related to total reliance on online learning.

Conclusions

This review traced factors that influence students' success in open distance learning at South African Higher Education Institutions. An exploratory qualitative approach was employed in reviewing secondary sources from published peer reviewed journal articles, policies, document analysis and reports within the South African context on Open Distance Learning with specific focus on factors that inhibit students' participation in this mode of learning. The findings revealed seven factors as challenges to students' success in open distance learning at South African Higher Education Institutions. These include students' background, language barrier, availability, access and skills in the use of technologies, time management, socio-cultural and situational factors as well as total reliance on online mode of instruction. From the findings, the review concludes that, with these challenges the success of students in open distance learning at South African Higher Education Institutions is being contested by these negative factors.

From the conclusion, several practical implications are drawn as it affects all stakeholders concerned. Firstly, and with these findings, the goal of making higher education accessible to everyone is defeated because these barriers will definitely limit students' access to instruction and a variety of online resources for their leaning. Secondly, the presence of these challenges as found in the review is a clear indication that the removal of all hinderances to equal access to education by the South African child is inconceivable. Thus, the inequality that existed in the education system for learners from rural areas and from disadvantaged backgrounds will be widened. Thirdly, the digital divide and social inequality in regard to access and use of technology or the impact of ICTs will remain major barrier to students success in Open Distance Learning (ODEL). Fourthly, with the evidence of this review, the number of persons unable to access education and dropouts in Open Distance Learning (ODEL) will increase thereby culminating to a poverty ridden and crime prone society.

Thus, it is recommended that, the government together with other stakeholders make provision as well as create unfettered access to technological infrastructure. Also, there is need to provide students with skill in the application of the various technologies in use for online learning. Furthermore, there is need to ensure the elimination or reduction of socio-cultural and situational factors as well as create on-site learning centers to cater for the challenges emanating from total reliance on online mode of instruction.

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