

The Role of University of South Africa in Contributing to Open Distance and E-Learning and to Social Justice in South Africa

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Abstract

Social justice in higher education would imply equal opportunity to access, participate and benefit from higher education. This simply means removal of barriers and inclusion of all those who have traditionally been excluded either by history, perceptions or structures. Because of its flexibility of programmes and forms of delivery, open and distance learning (ODL) has been acknowledged to have greater potential for reducing these barriers. However, to date, especially in developing societies, there are still a great number of people who are missing out on higher education. In this paper, the researcher looks at the role of University of South Africa (Unisa) in contributing to ODL and e-learning in South Africa and beyond. A large amount of the country's budget is spent on education. According to the constitution of South Africa, education is the basic right for everyone. The ministry of education in South Africa has identified ODL as a system that should expand the educational opportunities and provide access to individuals who would not have had the opportunity to study full time. The researcher randomly sampled 400 students from the total number of 1808 enrolled in the Higher Diploma in Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET). They were targeted to participate in the survey to ensure the best possible representation of their experiences of learner support in ABET. The response rate was 257 questionnaire returned by the students. However, while the findings represent the views and experiences of the target population, they cannot claim to be representative of the views and experiences of all ABET and Unisa students. A review of literature study identified the Community of Inquiry model proposed by Garrison, Anderson and Archer (2001) as useful in this context and this model will be used as the conceptual framework for this study.

Keywords: social justice, open distance and e-learning, adult, University of South Africa, widen participation

1. Introduction and Background of this Study

The introduction of open distance learning (ODL) has been generally understood as a response to the new challenges of increased and diverse demands on supportive learning made on the educational sector (Dhanarajan 2001; Ipaye 2007; Boulard 2005; Guri-Rosenblit 2005, University of Botswana 2006) and as one of the strategies through which higher education institutions can manage to substantially open access to higher education. More

higher education institutions therefore expand their delivery modes to include ODL to address the problem of access. Even though participation rates have increased, recent studies observe that many qualified potential students who would like to pursue their studies are generally still unable to access higher education institutions (Dodds, Gaskell & Mills 2008). It would appear that generally ODL is making a more significant contribution towards access to higher education in developed countries (Davies & Pigott 2004). Access to higher education institutions appears still to be very limited in developing countries (UNESCO 2005).

According to Muganda (2008), social justice in higher education would connote equal opportunity to access, participate and benefit from higher education. This simply means removal of barriers and inclusion of all those who have traditionally been excluded either by history, perceptions or structures. The researcher will use Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) students as examples in this study.

Badat (2005:186–187) and Unisa (2008:3) discuss widening participation as the activities that are aimed at bringing in and supporting groups of people who are identified as underprivileged for higher education. In doing so, it takes into account the diverse needs of people in different sectors of the economy, as well as different racial, gender and age cohorts who participate in higher education.

The University of South Africa (Unisa) has been identified by the ministry of education as an ODL institution that will help in widening participation. Unisa was founded in 1873 as a university college which offered courses to students via correspondence. According to Seletse (2002:88–90), subsequently the university migrated through the various developmental stages of distance education until in 2004 when it was constituted as a comprehensive ODL university

after amalgamation with two similar educational institutions, namely Technikon South Africa and Vista University. The new born effectively became the dedicated, comprehensive and mega university. Ngegebulu (2003:1) adds that in 2004, Unisa had over 200 000 students. According to Key Provisional Information (2004–2008), Unisa had 286 372 students. The number of students keeps on increasing every year from 2004. Unisa has accepted its research mandate of developing knowledge, skills, attitudes and values necessary for the development of this country. Also, it has been mandated to register a diverse student body from both rural and urban area.

Undoubtedly, technology has been and will continue to be utilised. However, the university cannot ignore the fact that many of its students do not own a computer and may have difficulty in gaining access to the internet. Another issue is that changing demographics are opening up opportunities to people who were previously disallowed entries to higher education on the grounds of their economic, class, racial, religious or gender status. Contact and ODL institutions alike are increasingly opening their doors to more and more students, many of whom, in South Africa particularly, are not adequately prepared for tertiary education. A further challenge is the way in which recent technologies are providing an alternative source of knowledge transfer (Bajinath 2011:6)

2. Widening Participation

Widening participation is discussed according to the activities that are aimed at bringing in and supporting groups of people who are identified as underprivileged for higher education. In doing so, it takes into account the diverse needs of people in different sectors of the economy, as well as different racial, gender and age cohorts who participate in higher education (Badat 2005:186–187; Unisa 2008:3).

The introduction of ODL has been generally understood as a response to the new challenges of increased and diverse demands on supportive learning made on the educational sector and as one of the strategies through which higher education institutions can manage to substantially open access. More higher education institutions therefore are extending their delivery modes to include ODL to address the problem of access. Even though participation rates have increased, recent studies show that many qualified potential students who would like to pursue their studies are generally still unable to access higher education institutions (Dodds, Gaskell & Mills 2008). Generally, ODL is making a significant contribution towards access to higher education in developed countries (Davies & Pigott 2004). Access to higher education institutions appears still to be very limited in developing countries (UNESCO 2005).

3. Context of ABET Students

The Department of ABET at Unisa offers programmes that enable practitioners to present and manage ABET programmes as well as to use, design and evaluate material and assess learners. Another characteristic worth mentioning is that this department is equipped to analyse the learning needs and social contexts of the adult learner. Our intention is to train practitioners who might find themselves in one of a diversity of situations where they will be required to train adults who require basic education. Some of our many graduate students work in sectors such as the departments of Water Affairs and Environment, Health, Education, Transport, Labour, the trade unions and many of the NGOs both in South Africa as well as in our neighbouring countries.

4. About E-Learning at Unisa

The introduction of e-learning in public institutions globally is crucial and is reducing the distance in ODL. The education system is undergoing major changes globally.

At the University of South Africa, ICT is used everyday in pedagogical situations. It is used for services such as registration, library, access, scheduling, communication, messages, security, warning emergency, risk management, evaluation forms etc. In pedagogy we use e-learning for typing, technology, e-mail and video conferencing.

In order for students to participate in e-learning, they require access to the resources which will enable both the lecturer and student to engage effectively in dialogue. According to Mbatha and Naidoo (2010:65), ICT is not only seen as impetus of change in traditional concepts of teaching and learning, but also as prime motivation behind the higher education change as the interplay of technological developments and socio-economic change, and shape the processes of teaching and learning. ICT has been recognised for the valuable role it plays in developing and improving distance education methods. Full participation in the information society is enabled by successful education, which according to the DoE (2003), incorporates learner-centred pedagogy, inquiry-based learning, collaborative work and the development

of higher level thinking skills. For these reasons and to achieve other policy goals reflected in the White Paper, the adoption of ICT in schools generally (for administration and management systems) and the integration of ICT into teaching and learning practices specifically is being encouraged.

5. About myUnisa

As indicated above, the University of South Africa has adopted a number of technologies to facilitate learning; the available technologies are not adopted uniformly throughout the various colleges and academic departments including ABET. Cant and Bothma (2010:56) argue that, even though Unisa may officially endorse a particular learning technology, it is ultimately the lecturers within a department who determine the extent and effectiveness of the use of that particular technology and their respective views on these various technologies may differ. According to Cant and Bothma (2010:56), there may be some lecturers who are technologically challenged and who either shy away from or limit their use of technology solutions in their teaching activities. Other lecturers, however, might be more comfortable with certain technologies than with others, and this could result in the desperate use of technology to support learning. In addition, some of the more techno-literate lecturers may adopt one or more technologies not directly supported by the institution such as various social media, skype, mixit, web based solutions outside of the control university, as well as other ICT solutions they may have developed themselves. Despite this, the e-learning seems to be the way to go at the university. In rural areas, the unavailability of computers, the internet and electricity is indeed a major constraint. This seems to be the problem even in developed countries.

6. Methodology, Results and Discussion

The researcher randomly sampled 400 students from the total number of 1808 enrolled in the Higher Diploma in Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET). They were targeted to participate in the survey to ensure the best possible representation of their experiences of learner support in ABET. The response rate was 257 questionnaire returned by the students. However, while the findings represent the views and experiences of the target population, they cannot claim to be representative of the views and experiences of all ABET and Unisa students.

7. myUnisa (Teaching Presence)

The questions in the questionnaire determined the extent to which respondents use myUnisa as a teaching tool. The result indicates that most respondents agree (51%), and 17, 5% strongly agree that the lecturer clearly communicated important module topics to them. Furthermore, some respondents disagree (29%) that important topics were communicated on myUnisa.

The majority of respondents (51, 4%) agree, and 16, 3% strongly agree that module goals in myUnisa were clearly communicated to them by the lecturer. However, some respondents (13, 2%) disagree, and 15, 6% strongly disagree that the lecturer clearly communicated module goals to them.

The majority of 43, 2% of the respondents agreed, and 23, 3% strongly agreed that the lecturer clearly communicated due dates to them. However, some respondents (17, 1%) disagreed and 12, 8% strongly disagreed about communication of the due dates.

Most respondents (47, 1%) agreed, and 21, 4% strongly agreed that the lecturer provided clear instruction on how to participate in module learning activities on myUnisa. Only 12, 5% disagreed and 16, 3% strongly disagreed that the lecturer provided clear instructions on myUnisa learning activities.

Over half the respondents (49, 4%) agreed, and 16% strongly agreed that the lecturer stimulated development to creative thinking through module topics. Only 14, 8% disagreed, and 17, 1% strongly disagreed that lecturers develop creative thinking. The majority (49, 9%) of the respondents agreed, and 10, 1% strongly agreed that the lecturer assisted them through participative engagement in productive dialogue. However, some respondents (23%) disagreed and 16% strongly disagreed about the lecturer's assistance in participative dialogue.

Furthermore, most respondents (47, 5%) agreed, and 19, 1% strongly agreed that they were sufficiently helped by lecturers to achieve focused learning; 16, 6% of the respondents disagreed and 29% strongly disagreed that they were sufficiently helped to achieve focused learning.

The majority of respondents (44, 7%) agreed, and 18, 3% strongly agreed that the lecturer encouraged the exploration of new concepts presented in the module. However, some respondents (16, 7%) disagreed, and 17, 1%

strongly disagreed about the lecturer's encouragement of new concept exploration.

The majority of respondents (43, 6%) agreed, and 15, 2% strongly agreed about the lecturer reinforcing a sense of community through the myUnisa portal, while some respondents (22, 6%) disagreed, and 14, 8% strongly disagreed about the lecturer reinforcing a sense of community.

The majority of respondents (45, 9%) agreed, and 15, 6% strongly agreed about the facilitation of focused discussions on myUnisa. However, some respondents (19, 8%) disagreed, and 15, 2% strongly disagreed about the facilitation of sufficient discussion on myUnisa.

Most respondents agreed (43, 2%), and 26, 1% strongly agreed about lecturer feedback concerning students' strengths and weaknesses, while a small percentage of respondents disagreed (14%) and 13, 3% strongly disagreed about lecturer feedback. The students mainly use myUnisa for downloading learning material. This clearly shows that the students are not using myUnisa the way it is supposed to be used. Most students also cited a lack of communication between the students and the lecturers. This could also be attributed to that most students are in rural areas where there is mostly poor communication mediums like internet, postal delays and network problem for cellphones. Most Unisa learner support systems are in the cities and far away from the students in the rural areas. There is a geographical distance between the students and the lecturers.

Anderson (2008) argues that understanding of students' prerequisite knowledge, their learning environment and their cultural attributes are starting points in the development of the student-centred effort services. The learner support systems were established to be learner-centred and to reduce the distance between the students and the lecturers. The students who have access to myUnisa seem happy about the services of the learning management tool. The myUnisa is mainly used for downloading and sending e-mails. The students do not have a clear picture of the different functions of myUnisa. For example, most students use myUnisa to check assignment results. This suggests that training of students on myUnisa is lacking.

What really stands out is the clear communication goals on myUnisa portal between the students and the lecturers. The majority of the students (68, 5%) view communication between the students and the lecturers as good. Therefore, the students use their cellphones or mobile technologies to communicate with the lecturers. The majority of the students in the survey have good communication platforms with the lecturers. The students are using technologies for learning.

8. Reliability and Validity

The alpha co-efficient of the 12 items is 952. This suggests that the items have a relatively high internal consistency. The instrument was highly reliable. The results of the study suggested that the instrument was a valid, reliable and efficient measure of the dimensions of social presence and cognitive presence, thereby providing additional support for the validity of the Col as a framework for constructing effective online learning environment.

9. Conclusion

According to Sengedo (2010), higher education in Africa is going through revolutionary times and trying times. The number of students in universities is increasing without a corresponding increase in facilities – both human and physical. In this context, our current learning technologies provide considerable opportunities, including collaborative engagement, access to various platforms of information, interaction with content and opportunities for individual empowerment. Teaching in such an environment requires that teachers or academics become comfortable with moving from traditional face-to-face classroom activities into an online classroom in which they can comfortably utilise technology to ensure quality teaching and learning experiences. Granting that technology has potential to take education to the millions at greater speed. The questions related to availability, access and use of relevant technology in distance education need to be considered carefully before institutions commit themselves to policies of technology and multimedia (Ramanujam 2002:11). The literature is full with the information that there is a need to study the impact of pedagogy to learning.

The e-learning also offers opportunities. According to Ramanujam (2002:11), the increasing use of technology in distance education has a lot of promise and also poses some serious challenges in developing and delivering the educational programmes. While technology provides opportunities for the students of the advanced countries to choose their ways to learn, in developing countries, it proposes to increase the educational access to the masses.

There are opportunities for innovative teaching approaches. Social networking connects students across demographic spheres and it is not fully utilized for learning purposes by both the students and the lecturers. The students

have access to internet in the classroom.

The challenges of accessibility of technology to ABET students who are scattered in the rural areas will be a thing of the past as the university is taking mobile buses with technology to rural areas. The university is living up to its vision and mission of an African university in service of humanity. The internet cafes are mushrooming in most rural villages. The University of South Africa is addressing the issue of redress and equity in open and distance e-learning in rural areas.

The large amount of most country's budget is spent on education. Recently, the South African government set aside R150 million to finance students, allocating special funds to students who qualified for financial assistance in their final year of undergraduate study. This is applauded and the country is really showing commitment to social justice in higher education

10. Recommendations

The large number of students registered at the university is an indication that, to many students, Unisa is their only access to higher education. Therefore, total commitment to student support is crucial in this situation. As the only dedicated comprehensive ODL institution in South Africa, Unisa presents the only opportunity for access to higher education for many students. The implementation of technology in undergraduate courses to facilitate learning is an important part in the ODL learning process. ABET students should be encouraged to make use of technology in their learning experience.

The lecturers should innovate pedagogies in the ABET department to help students engage in peer-to-peer activities and in the construction of knowledge, as well as forming part of the community of learners through learner support structures.

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