Overcoming obstacles to learning: Guidelines for teaching, learning and support in open distance learning

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Whilst open distance learning (ODL) has undertaken many initiatives to address the problems associated with low pass rates, student performance remains poor. The research reported in this article was aimed at the provision of teaching and learning support services to overcome obstacles faced by students. A mixed-methods research approach was used to obtain data. The analyses of the data led to the development of a set of guidelines and an integration methodology to assist lecturers. Empirical evidence indicated that students felt that studying through open distance learning disadvantaged them. The quality of study guides was further found to be inadequate and not designed with the student in mind. Support services, which students rely upon, were also inadequate and inefficient. There was a need to inculcate a culture of the importance of the student and train staff to be sympathetic to their needs. There was an urgent need to bridge the gap between the student and the institution via the provision of teaching and learning support services in order to improve student performance. It is envisaged that lecturers consider the guidelines reported in this article and/or seek alternatives to ensure that students’ learning is successful.

Key words: Open distance, student performance, learning and teaching.

INTRODUCTION

“Are we helping our students to fail?”

“If one had to look at the examination results without taking any contextual factors into account, the answer would be a resounding YES. We are doing very little to help our students to pass. Let us look at the number of students we register and then at the number of students who actually write and pass the examinations. The truth is frightening” (Mail, 2000).

The above statement highlights the fact that students enthusiastically register for qualifications at open distance learning (ODL) institutions but end up encountering difficulties with their studies. The reason for these difficulties can be attributed to a number of factors. The uniqueness of ODL is that a “distance” exists between the student and the lecturer, and this highlights the necessity for the provision of additional teaching and learning initiatives to bridge this distance. The provision of study guides alone as the student’s replacement for the lecturer is insufficient to ensure success.

Bagwandeen et al. (1999, 3) state that distance education (DE) has certainly become a major form of teaching and learning around the world. It has earned itself the reputation of being a truly innovative education phenomenon in both developed and developing countries. Rangecroft et al. (1999,17) state that there are many advantages of studying through a DE mode, not least being the fact that DE offers a flexible way of learning and appeals to those who are unable or unwilling to attend...
an educational institution on a regular, scheduled basis. Moreover, it also offers opportunities to those in remote locations who do not have access to more conventional forms of educational provision. Although ODL offers a list of mechanisms and support strategies that assist in bridging the gap between the students and the institution, students still encounter difficulties.

For the purposes of the study on which this article is based, the author chose a subject which he presently lectures on at the largest ODL institution in South Africa, the University of South Africa (UNISA). Annually, an average of two thousand students enrol for the first-year subject called Organisational Effectiveness. This is a core subject of the programme for the National Diploma in Management Services but is generic to other programmes as a service subject. An analysis of historical data of the results of four other institutions that offer this subject revealed an average pass rate of 67.42% as compared to 5.43% at the ODL institution. These results are unacceptable. Whilst the ODL has undertaken many initiatives (e.g. tutors per regions and contact sessions) to address the problems associated with these low pass rates, student performance remains low.

Ignoring this situation will continue to cast a shadow over the quality of ODL practices and will lead to low student morale which will subsequently lead to an increased number of dropouts. The study being reported here aimed to establish the obstacles encountered by students in being successful in ODL and to develop a set of guidelines a methodology for the implementation of the guidelines which lecturers can utilise to ensure student retention and the provision of a quality service to students. The provision of teaching and learning support services will improve student morale, prevent dropouts and, overall, improve student performance.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this article, the literature review will focus on the initiatives necessary for the provision of teaching and learning support services in order to improve student performance. The literature review discusses the concept of ODL, the separation between the lecturer and the student, the learning guides provided by ODL, and the availability of new technologies to assist the ODL learner. The literature review concludes with a look at the advantages and disadvantages for the student in ODL.

Open distance learning

In the South African context, the first distance education (DE) institution that was established was known as the Technikon South Africa (TSA). On January 1 2005, TSA, UNISA and Vista University’s Distance Education Campus (VUDEC) merged to form a new institution called the “new” UNISA. It is the only dedicated public open and DE institution in Southern Africa, and now serves around 250 000 students, more than 30% of students in the public higher education system in South Africa (Commonwealth of Learning, 2007, 9).

ODL is a mode of education that provides access to education for those who, for reasons of geographical proximity, financial constraints and the desire for greater flexibility in their learning, may not be able to attend traditional face-to-face classes (Slabbert, 2009, 46). This type of education is normally non-restrictive in terms of the student’s geographic location and pace of study (Calder, 1993, 25). Maclure (1991, 4) states that ODL can provide opportunities to masses of people in need of higher education if properly planned and implemented. Holmberg (1995, 47) states that another important aspect about ODL is that it addresses social problems such as the development of students’ personalities and the necessities of livelihood. This implies that there should be co-operation between ODL institutions and industry so that study programmes can be directly related to the needs of the workplace.

Separation of the lecturer and the student

Slabbert (2009, 48) states that distance learning implies a physical separation of the lecturer from those being taught. The main feature of ODL is the ‘distance’ between the facilitating institution and the student. According to Keegan (1993, 100), this distance between the lecturer and the student could be physical, social or cultural. The physical sizes of lecture rooms in campus-based education institutions present restrictions in terms of the number of students. The separation of the lecturer and the student in ODL becomes an advantage because the number of students is not restricted in terms of the physical sizes of lecture rooms. This separation between the lecturer and the student means that the lecturer and the student do not meet each other in the lecture room but through the written word as in learning guides, assignments, and tutorial letters and any prescribed textbooks.

With this mode of education, the student is responsible for initiating and maintaining the learning process throughout. This does not mean that shared communication is not possible in ODL. This aspect (that is, separation between the lecturer and the student) of ODL implies that learning facilitation takes place at a distance from the student.

Learning guides

UNISA designs, develops, reproduces and distributes course material and other items to its students who are scattered nationally and internationally. Bagwandeen et al. (1999, 3) state that in the South African context, with the vast disparities characterising resources and infrastructure in urban and rural areas, ODL providers still
rely heavily on the medium of print. The learning guides and the tutorial letters for ODL are used to provide the structure of the subject being offered. Bagwandeen et al. (1999, 04) further state that the learning guides should be written in a style that reflects the concern of the writer for the student. The learning guide, understandably, is more impersonal than contact, face-to-face teaching. The whole process of teaching by educators and learning by students occurs through the medium of print. The learning guide should therefore be friendly and encouraging and written in a manner that is student-friendly.

Tshikwatamba (2000, 160) states that in ODL, the learning guides and tutorial letters are as varied in their content and the sophistication of their design and the range offered by the institute that produces them. The learning materials are structured in a form suitable for distance learning. This means that in the envisaged integrated teaching of Organisational Effectiveness, learning materials should be written in a conversational rather than a literary or scholarly tone and this is endorsed by the following statement by Kearsley and Moore (1996, 109): "The learning guides should be designed in such a way that they serve the same purposes as the normal discussions that occur between an instructor in the classroom and a student."

The learning guides provide the subject matter and contain direction and guidance for the students in their study of the content. Study guides also provide a structure for interaction between the student and the lecturer.

**The different domains of the development of learning guides**

In order to produce quality learning guides, a survey of the different domains of the development of learning guides was conducted. It must be stressed here that there are many theories and models regarding the development of learning guides, but the author restricted the literature survey to the following four domains as they were deemed to be the most important

**Instructional design**

Merrill (1994, 408) states that instructional design is, in the view of many, merely a set of systematic procedures for the development of instructional materials. However, he emphasises that instructional design is more than just procedures. He feels that the flowchart boxes depicted in instructional systems design diagrams are often empty. They suggest an activity, but have little to say about how and why you should carry out that activity. Merrill has consequently attempted to fill these empty boxes. Instructional design includes establishing problem-solving procedures that instructional designers can use to guide them in making decisions about their designs, planning what the solution, often a finished product, will be like, written specifications for the solutions and implementing the plans once the specifications have been completed. An instructional designer was appointed to assist the lecturer in designing the new guides for this subject.

**Learning theory**

Zemke (2002, 13) states, "We'd be lost without a solid learning theory base to work from." The theory or theories of learning that should guide one's work will depend upon the situation – the people one serves, the nature of the skills that they must master and the context within which they are to perform and frankly, one's comforts with the tenets of and confidence in those theories. Salomon (1979, 112) states that learning can be facilitated to the extent that the activated skills are relevant to the demands of the learning task. Thus, when the task calls for some act of analytic comparison and the coded message activates imagery instead, the learning may be debilitated. A learning theory is a systematic integrated outlook with regard to the nature of the process whereby people relate to their environments in such a way as to enhance their ability to use both themselves and their environments more effectively. Everyone who teaches or professes to teach has a learning theory (Bigge, 1982, 02). Reigeluth (1999, 12) states that learning theories are often confused with instructional design theories, but learning theories are descriptive. They describe how learning occurs.

**Curriculum development**

There is a movement in higher education to think of a curriculum less as a sequence of independent sources and more as a set of highly integrated learning and assessment experiences designed to help students develop clearly defined outcomes. At present, curriculum developers in South Africa find themselves in the middle of extensive curriculum changes. They have to understand the new ideas and concepts that are informing the changes to the education and training systems. Getting to grips with the new terms and definitions is a daunting task. Combined with the above, curriculum developers have to cope with transformation which demands courage and stamina. No one single theory of curriculum is acceptable to everybody. A room full of educators has many different opinions on curriculum (Shapiro, 2003, 423). Print (1993, 23) is of the opinion that curriculum development can be defined as the process of planning, constructing, implementing and evaluating learning opportunities intended to produce desired changes in students. He adds that curriculum
development must be seen as a deliberate, purposeful, planning activity that seeks to achieve general and specific intentions.

**Text design**

Instructional text design is more complex in its structure and appearance than is continuous prose and thus it requires greater thought about its presentation. Also, technical advances in print and publishing mean that more and more non-specialists are involved. Planning can help such people to be more effective. Olivier (2001, 1) says that, although there are differences when guiding and facilitating students within education and training, the ways in which human beings learn stay inherently the same, irrespective of the system within which they fit. It mainly becomes an issue of where the emphasis is placed with regard to the degree of guidance and facilitation when dealing with a specific group. Both education and training aim to furnish students with quality learning guides that will allow them learn and understand the subject content.

**Availability of new technologies**

The current fast-developing technological age necessitated a review into the availability of new technologies by UNISA to assist the ODL student for the provision of teaching and learning support services in order to improve student performance. Batte et al. (2002, 525) maintain, “It is clear that public higher education will only thrive and survive by meeting the learning needs of citizens throughout their life cycle ... and incorporating the possibilities of new technologies ... into organization and delivery systems.” Communication technology has shaped and reshaped our world as radio followed the telegraph, television followed the radio and satellites and computers followed in their turn. Broadcasting and the Internet have, in different generations, been heralded as forces that can transform education (Perraton, 2000, 139). Miller (1997, 2) says that making education accessible to adult students through the use of communication technologies and instructional systems has certainly brought a change in education. Miller (1997, 2) further maintains that, because ODL is a growing alternative to traditional classroom instruction, a student’s ability to interact with the instructor is very important. Some of these new technologies include online learning websites, online learning modules, e-mail, telephone, fax, tapes: audio and video, and satellite presentations, video-conferencing and podcasts.

**Advantages and disadvantages for the student in ODL**

As in conventional education, there are advantages and disadvantages for the student in ODL. Advantages in ODL relate to the incentives that students are offered to make their academic year rewarding. These incentives assist students to progress well in ODL programmes. They can be summarised as cost-effectiveness, individualised form of learning facilitation, flexibility, accessibility and life-long learning opportunities. Disadvantages in ODL relate largely to the problems faced by students. These can be summarised as actual distance, academic isolation, lack of communication, limited time and lack of or limited student support.

**METHODOLOGY**

A mixed-methods research approach was used to obtain the data, which enabled the researcher to come to conclusions and to make recommendations regarding the provision of teaching and learning support services. The data collection technique consisted of two research instruments, namely focus group interviews and questionnaires.

These two instruments were used to elicit present and past students’ experiences, in order to identify obstacles to student performance. A structured interview schedule consisting of 35 questions was compiled for the focus group interviews. The questionnaire consisted of 40 close-ended questions. The two research instruments covered seven categories each but only two were selected for the purposes of this article, namely ‘teaching and learning’ and ‘support services’. The covering letter of the questionnaire gave the students a good guide to the procedure involved in the completion of the questionnaire.

The sample consisted of students of the subject Organisational Effectiveness only. The target population of the study on which this article is based, comprised of first- and second-year students of the subject Organisational Effectiveness. The rationale for distributing the questionnaires to the second-year students was that because they had completed the first year they would know about problems that they had experienced. Seven focus group interviews were conducted. Students were selected at random and contacted telephonically and/or by e-mail and invited to participate. Before the focus group interviews took place, respondents were set at ease and assured of their anonymity in order to establish trust with the researcher. The questionnaire was administered to a sample of 465 students of the same subject and received a response rate of 29.89%.

**Data analyses procedures**

All focus group interviews were recorded in audio (tape-recorded) and data analysis was based on full transcriptions. The questionnaire data were captured into the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) 14.0 for Windows, and basic frequencies for each question were calculated. The researcher generated and interpreted all frequency graphs using Excel.

The questions asked in this instrument were formulated from the literature study. A pilot study was conducted with academic representatives, the student representatives and a representative from the research department of UNISA. The persons involved in the pilot study were to verify whether the questionnaire was measuring exactly what it was intended to measure. The feedback received was used to finalise the questionnaire. The completed questionnaire was then sent to a senior researcher at the research department for final input.

**FINDINGS, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION**

The findings and discussion of this study follow a
Problems experienced by ODL students.

**Teaching and learning**

Aoki and Pogroszewski (2006, 5) state that in distance learning, information must be exchanged over a distance. Teaching by UNISA and learning by the students were the two most important issues. The questionnaire asked students whether they experienced a serious disadvantage studying through ODL. Answers from students who responded to this question revealed an almost even split, with 46.8% stating ‘Yes’ and 42.4% stating ‘No’. In comparison, 100% of students at all of the focus group interviews indicated that studying through ODL placed them at a disadvantage. Students perceived that studying through ODL placed them at a disadvantage. They indicated that they experienced stress due to various commitments apart from their studies. The questionnaire identified ‘work problems’ (44.6%, Figure 1) as being the principal problem in their studies. ‘Isolation’ (34.5%) was also a serious problem for students, as they did not have continuous interaction with the institution and the lecturer, as would be the case with a campus-based institution. The focus group interviews revealed that students experienced stress due to various commitments apart from their studies. Some of these commitments included being a parent, having household and work commitments and having to consider financial aspects related to studies as a result of family commitments.

Students in the focus groups indicated that they were dissatisfied with the information contained in the tutorial letters that they received and felt that more calculation examples should be supplied for practice purposes. The questionnaire showed that 51.1% of the students indicated that the present learning guides were easy to read and comprehend, whilst 46.6% of students pointed out that this was not the case. In total contrast to the results of the questionnaire, all students at the focus group interviews indicated that the learning guides were not easy to read and comprehend and they contained too much irrelevant information. These students also indicated that the information contained in the learning guides was insufficient to assist them with their studies and they complained of there being too much text, a lack of examples, activities and graphs which could give them a better idea when answering the questions.

It must be noted here that, although the graph shows an almost even split between the positive and the negative perceptions of students, it is concerning that almost 50% of students reported struggling with reading and comprehension of the learning guides.

**Support services**

Aoki and Pogroszewski (2006, 1) state that the access to student support services has been shown to be a critical factor in student success. They further state that it is becoming increasingly important to provide all facets of student support services to the ODL student to assure his/her academic success. Allowing students and faculty members to have access to this information 24 h a day, will, firstly, eliminate the frustration and isolation many ODL students feel by the physical separation from the
Students in this study were initially asked whether they believe that ODL offered sufficient mechanisms to bridge the gap between the student and the lecturer/institution. The results of the questionnaire showed that 51.8% of students agreed that ODL does offer sufficient mechanisms to bridge that gap between the student and the institution, while 25.9% responded that this was not the case. From the focus group interviews, it was evident that the support services at ODL institutions were inadequate and inefficient. Students indicated that their queries were not handled professionally by the support staff. Administrative staff did not provide them with efficient service and on certain occasions, they did not get closure on their queries.

Of the students who responded to the question in the questionnaire, 46% (Figure 2) rated the assistance received from the administrative staff as being good, whilst 48.9% indicated that it was poor. This indicates that a small majority of respondents were unhappy with the level of assistance received from the administration staff. Pitman (2000, 166) states that to treat the student as a customer requires a perception of quality of service not just on academic or teaching criteria, but also on the extent to which the student enjoys campus life. Student services, including administration, have an important role to play in this respect. This enhances the need for adequate and efficient administrative services.

Conclusions

The motivation for the study originated from the need to provide teaching and learning support services to overcome obstacles faced by ODL students, with the aims of improving student morale, preventing dropouts and, overall, improving student performance. This research allowed the author to elicit student perceptions and frustrations on the teaching and learning shortcomings of ODL via an empirical investigation.

Distance learning implies a physical separation of the lecturer from those being taught and the results are evidence that studying through ODL places students at a disadvantage. The study provided important insights into the problems encountered by students studying via ODL as such students experience stress due to various other commitments apart from their studies, such as work commitments, time constraints, limited contact, being a parent, household commitments, isolation and financial problems.

The learning guides should be designed with the student in mind and should include a recognised and updated learning approach and also include activities, proper explanations, contain sufficient examples and be free of ambiguities. It should be reassessed on a regular basis in order to keep up with the latest technological developments. Students indicating that the support services were inadequate and inefficient and that administrative staff were discourteous are a cause for concern as it is the moral obligation of the institution to provide quality service to its paying students. ODL must inculcate a culture of the importance of the student and subsequently train staff regarding student courtesy.

The output of this study is a table of guidelines and a methodology for the integration (Table 1) which could serve to bridge the gap between the student and the lecturer/institution, and ODL needs to take cognisance of the inherent problems that currently exist, consider the guidelines and/or seek alternatives to ensure that students'
### Table 1. Guidelines and methodology for integration.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Guidelines</th>
<th>Methodology for the integration of guidelines</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>New technologies</strong></td>
<td>Implementation of a virtual university.</td>
<td>A website, totally dedicated to this subject, should be made available. Here, the lecturer can communicate directly with students – individually and as a group. The learning guides can be placed on this website and all students can have access to them.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Telecommunications media such as video, DVD and audio tapes, bulletin boards, e-mail, facsimile, audio, and online applications over the internet must now be used to facilitate communication.</td>
<td>These can be supplied to students upon registration. Communication can take place via e-mail, and the internet. Audio tapes and CDs can be played on a car radio as the student travels to and from work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Satellite delivery, video conferencing, chat rooms.</td>
<td>Communication can take place via these new technologies, that is face-to-face contact and ODL must keep abreast of the latest technological improvements.</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Encourage the concept of computer-based self-learning.</td>
<td>Computer-based self-learning allows students to do examples and the computer indicates the incorrect steps. Encourage students to use internet cafes in their areas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Learning guides</strong></td>
<td>The formation of study groups should be encouraged.</td>
<td>Supply students with a list of the names of other students studying the same subject and residing in a common area. This will encourage them to get together to assist each other and to share ideas.</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Encourage web-based/internet learning to reduce study costs.</td>
<td>Sending an e-mail is much cheaper than sending a letter to the student. ODL must keep abreast of the latest technological improvements in DE.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Learning guides should be designed with the student in mind and accommodate his/her problems in learning.</td>
<td>Instructional design is an important domain of learning material development. The developers must take this into account during the design of the new guides.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>The learning guide must be made simpler and more understandable. This includes, for example, outcomes-based education approaches which are seen as a simpler approach to learning.</td>
<td>Develop the learning guide to be student-friendly. Students must get a good “feel” as soon as they open the learning guide.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Learning guides must include activities for example, more practical case studies, and sufficient examples.</td>
<td>Include activities of the various topics of the syllabus. This can be done by, for example, asking the student to look at his/her own organisation and to supply information of how a specific task is carried out.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Learning guides should be provided with the latest technological developments such as colour printed guides, pictures, video clips and audio tapes and internet exercises.</td>
<td>These can be supplied to students upon registration. Communication can take place via e-mail, and the Internet. Audio tapes and CDs can be played on a car radio as the student travels to and from work.</td>
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<td><strong>Other strategies</strong></td>
<td>Contact sessions: Change these sessions from weekdays to weekends.</td>
<td>Contact sessions should be arranged on weekends, as it will not interfere with the student’s work commitments.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Plan the content more effectively and allow students to accommodate the syllabus comfortably.</td>
<td>Using historical data, the lecturer can place more emphasis on the topics of the syllabus with which learners mostly encounter problems. This induction can take the form of an example of a study plan. Students are inducted as to how to go about writing their own study plan based on the example that was supplied.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Include an induction guide to facilitate a good study plan and to provide hints on planning studies.</td>
<td>The lecturer can attach examples of these to the tutorial letter. Students will have a guide as to the make-up of the examination paper.</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Students should be supplied with past examination papers, including solutions, in the learning guides.</td>
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learning in the ODL environment is fulfilling, pleasant and successful.

Maharaj (2002, 202) states that educators become lifelong students, making every effort to be insightful, visionary, knowledgeable and wise and to be role models insofar as values and work skills are concerned. In doing so, they should use as many techniques and ideas as possible to develop themselves and the student fully. In doing so, educators would be doing their duty and provide the sorely needed value-oriented individuals for the economy, business and industry and ultimately, the country.

Students represent the most important role-players in the ODL scenario and thus should be provided with quality service in order to make their academic life a rewarding one, free of frustrations, since they do not have continuous access to the lecturer/institution. Lourens (1996, 193) maintains that a more empathetic attitude toward the very apparent problems that students experience is needed and educators should bear in mind the educational goal of self-actualisation which students strive for.

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