

Open Distance Learning (ODL): A "Shock" to Learners in South Africa

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to analyse challenges encountered by registered students at an open distance learning (ODL) institution in South Africa. Before 1994 racial segregation posed obstructions in terms of equitable access and success in higher education (HE). Learners from deprived homes, especially those resided in townships or rural areas were denied access to high-quality school education. Interestingly, there was a shocking growth in enrolments in HE post 1994. However, it seems the higher education institutions (HEI) have been largely unprepared for this astonishing growth. As a matter of fact, a lack of capacity in the HE system has been a perennial problem in South Africa. Research indicates that approximately 18%–19% of new matriculants can be accommodated by HEIs. Moreover, different HE institutions receive thousands of applications of qualifying students who cannot be all accommodated, especially for first year study. The problem of capacity at HE was worsened by the introduction of fee-free HE in 2017. Subsequent to this, the National Financial Aid (NFSAS) was placed under administration in 2018, which resulted in more students' application attention and funding was ultimately allocated in 2019 academic year. This paper argues that South Africa is faced with a dilemma of insufficient capacity at HEIs to accommodate matriculants since the pronouncement of fee-free education. Moreover, prospective learners have only one alternative left, thus, an enrolment at Open Distance Learning Institution (ODL). Since most matriculants have been exposed to only face-to-face teaching for twelve years of schooling, this ODL mode of learning comes as a shock to these prospective learners. Research indicates that this shock could be attributed to lack of prior preparation at basic education phase. Eventually, these prospective learners are bound to struggle and drop out. In light of these problems, this paper recommends an intervention through an introduction of ODL pilot initiative at school level. This initiative should encourage scholars to communicate via online with their teachers and submit their assessments online.

Keywords: Fee-free education, Higher education, National student financial aid scheme, Open distance learning

1. Introduction

Nelson Mandela once argued that: *"Education is the great engine of personal development. It is through education that the daughter of a farmer can become a doctor, that the son of a mine worker can become the head of the mine, that a child of a farm worker can become the president of a great nation. It is what we make out of what we have, not what we are given, that separates one person from another"*. This sentiment is resonated by states and nations across the globe. In simple terms, the above quote emphasises the indispensability of education to the country, communities and individual. This view is supported by the Human Capital Theory, which argues that a causal link exists between expansion of educational partaking and economic growth (Case, Marshall, McKenna & Mogashana, 2018). Likewise, Banerjee (2018) posits that HE has the probability to disrupt poverty that is intergenerational by bringing through the provision of social mobility.

Accordingly, if investment in education can be taken seriously, it can help in changing the lives of many individuals and community at large. However, before 1994, racial segregation posed impediments in terms of equitable access and success in higher education. Students from deprived homes; residing in townships or rural areas were denied access to high-quality school education (Mdepa & Tshiwula, 2012:20; Leibowitz, Bozalek, 2014; Reddy, 2018). The segregation made equality impossible amongst South Africans, but that is something of the past. Post 1994 South African higher education institution (HEI) experienced a growth in enrolments from 799,490 in 2008 to 1,041,000 in 2018, with projections to reach 1.1 million in 2020/21 (Jansen, 2018; Matsolo, Ningpuanyeh & Susuman, 2018). According to the South African Development Plan, a target of 1.6 million enrolments is expected in 2030 (Council on Higher Education, 2016). The increase in enrolments is partially the result of the pressure the government applied to HEI with the

aim to redress the racial and gender disparities in admission and partaking (Letseka & Karel, 2015). This paper argues that, while the racial segregation is being regarded as something of the past, a new problem has surfaced due to an increase in HE enrolments. Universities have been largely unprepared for this bewildering growth, hence they cannot cope with the influx of matriculants every year. There is a huge capacity problem at institutions of higher learning (Ojo & Olakulehin, 2006; Ramrathan, 2016; Tshayana, 2018).

2. Evidence of Capacity Problem at Contact HEI

The South Africa's pass rate has been recording an increase from 2016-2018 (Writer, 2019). This implies that in the past three years the number of students succeeding in matric, and eligible to enrol at HEI has also increased. Unfortunately this came with no adequate increase in the capacity at HEIs to accommodate this increased pass rate (Ramrathan, 2016). The HEIs cannot cope with the increasing numbers (Letseka & Karel, 2015). This seems to be a problem in the whole Sub-Saharan Africa (Dahir, 2017). The study conducted by Quartz Africa among the top 10 countries with high population in Africa shows that just over 740 universities service more than 660 million of Africa's 1 billion people. But when comparing that figure with countries like the United States, which has some 5,300 universities and colleges serving a population of over 323 million people; and China with over 4000 universities (Centre for Chinese Studies, 2019), it becomes clearer that Africa has a long way to go in solving capacity problem at the institutions of Higher Learning. Sadly, South Africa has 136 HEIs with a population of over 54 million, hence its current serious capacity problems in absorbing all qualifying students to enter their first year of study. In actual fact, only 18%-19% of SA's new matriculants can be accommodated by HEIs in South Africa (Ramrathan, 2016). Although SA has a large number of Technical and Vocational Education and Training colleges (50 public TVET colleges with 250 registered campuses) (SA Department of Higher Education and Training, 2018), it is a well-known fact that these colleges are not effective (SA Presidency, 2017). As a result, TVET colleges cannot be seen as the solution to the capacity experienced at HEIs. The following statistics highlights just a few examples of the trouble in paradise that prospective students in SA are actually facing:

- The University of the Witwatersrand (WITS) received 70349 applications from first-time first-year students, and the enrolment target for first-years in 2019 was only 5 200 (WITS, 2019).
- Tshwane University of Technology received in excess of 100 000 applications from prospective first time-entering students, but had the capacity to accommodate only 15 000 first-year students (TUT, 2019).
- The University of Limpopo (UL) received over 60 000 applications for first-year of study, and had only the capacity of 478 for 2019 academic year (UL, 2019).
- Around 4 200 new first-years are accepted to study at University of Cape Town (UCT) every year. Interestingly, this is the only institution that experienced a decline in applications from prospective first year students. According to the Director of Admissions at UCT, this decline was primarily due to factors such as the drought that struck Cape Town recently, student unrest (#FeesMustFall and other related students movements), limited student residents within the institution, leading to inflated prices for residence outside the institution; as well as prospective inclination to consider other sources of HE.

In actual fact, the capacity problem was further worsened by former President Jacob Zuma's announcement about free education in 2017 as it opened doors to all previous years' matriculants who qualified and wished to further their studies but had financial constraints (Tshayana, 2018). Faced with a lack of capacity at HEIs, and the high cost of HE (for those falling outside the specified threshold to qualify for free education which is between R000 00 – 350 000 of the combined household income), prospective students find enrolment at an ODL institution as the only alternative they have. The hope to get access to the ODL institution is high because of mainly three reasons, namely: less cost, the admission capacity that such institution has and lenient admission point scores (APS) at these institutions. However research has revealed that students struggle to cope with the ODL pedagogy, hence a high dropout rate or late completion of qualification at these HEIs (Musingafi, Mapuranga, Chiwanza & Zebron, 2015:59; Aboo, 2017:105).

3. Open Distance Learning

The ODL system seems to be on the rise. It is becoming more and more a vital part of the university sub-system, contributing 40% of headcount students and approximately 30% of FET students (SA Department of Higher Education & Training, 2014) because face-to-face institutions are also increasingly making use of blended learning options (Heydenrych & Prinsloo, 2010; Biney & Worlanyo, 2015; SA Presidency, 2017). ODL is defined as the mode of tuition whereby there is no daily contact between the learner and the lecturer and yet there is equally effective exchange of knowledge (Dodo, 2013:30). This is the mode of education that SA embraced in an attempt to close the country's knowledge and skills gap in the country (Mpofu & Maphalala, 2019). According to Letseka & Karel (2015:3) and Badu-Nyarko & Amponsah, (2016:88) ODL institutions offer educational prospects to mature non-traditional, working students who find it difficult to get entrance into HE in full-time, residential, and campus-based institutions. This view is shared by Ghosh, Nath, Agarwal & Nath (2012:53) as they put it "distance education system focuses on open access to education and training to make the learners free from the constraints of time and place, and offering flexible learning opportunities to individuals and groups of learners."

Further, Kimotho (2018) & Zimbabwe Open University (2018) also uttered that ODL focuses on removing barriers to access learning, flexibility of learning provision and student centeredness. It becomes clear from these authors that learners studying through ODL do not have daily lectures, and that such learners are responsible for planning their studies and managing their time effectively (UNISA, 2019). In his address, at the opening of the Open Learning Conference held at Unisa from 5-7 September 2018, South Africa's Deputy Minister of Higher Education and Training Mr. Buti Manamela, made it clear that his department does not associate open learning with any particular mode of delivery but considers it to be an approach based on principles that include learner-centeredness, lifelong learning, flexibility of learning provision, student support, rigorous quality assurance and the construction of programmes in the expectation that the student will succeed.

As an advancement to the ODL mode, some ODL institutions are shifting from ODL to ODeL pedagogy. The ODeL pedagogy is characterised by the shift from print-based to online delivery using virtual learning

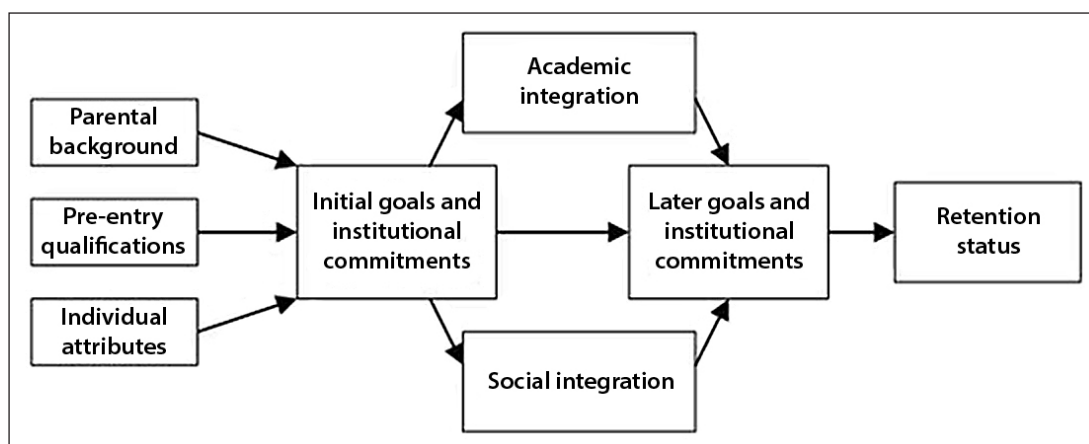
environments (VLEs) and various Web technologies (Arinto, 2016). This is very worrying taking SA history into consideration. The ODeL agenda is premised on the postulation that every student learning can be supported by modern electronic tools and other arithmetical facilities (Ngubane-Mokiwa, 2017:4). Another assumption made is that students are self-regulatory and adequately motivated to study independently in their own time; and that face to face learning could be replicated in online education (Cloete, 2017:2). Nevertheless, these assumptions reflect naivety on the side of these institutions, especially in SA where inequality is still rife. Likewise, Chau, (2010:186) and Cloete, (2017:4) warn that too much reliance on technology, such as online education where the use of technology is emphasised, disguises the truth that access to technology may not be easy to some; or that not everyone has the skills to use it, and would therefore not benefit from it.

4. The Theoretical Framework

This paper is guided by Tinto's (1993) Student Integration Theory which is depicted in Figure 1.

Tinto's (1993) hypothesises that the student's social background should be integrated into their academic environment for them to perform academically. This theory further argues that on their first entry into the university, students combine a set of background features. These features involve individual attitudes, pre-entry attributes, and family background. Individual attitudes include gender, race, age and aptitude. Family background features include the education level of the family, expectations from the family and the family social status. According to Tinto, such set of features affect students' initial goals and institutional commitments directly (Schreiber, Luescher-Mamashela & Moja, 2014). This theory believes that students are likely to achieve their academic goals at the HEI only if their parental backgrounds, individual attributes or pre-entry qualification are integrated within such an institution. For instance, if a student's parents obtained their qualifications through a face-to-face institution, they will not be positive about their child obtaining his or hers through an ODL institution. Similarly, if a student's pre-entry qualification was obtained through face-to-face, (matric certificate), such a student is likely to expect the same mode of tuition to be followed at the HEI he or she enrolled at, thereby making ODL unpopular. The findings of Arinto (2016) and Aboo (2017) are consistent with Tinto's (1993), warning

Figure 1: Tinto's 1993 Student Integration Theory



Source: Tinto 1993 in Connolly (2016)

that the ODeL pedagogy will only be successful if we know the context and background of each learner, and acknowledge learners' diversity as this is key to how they learn.

5. Why ODL Fail?

The evolution from high school to university can be overwhelming regardless of whether one comes from a small public school or a superior one in a fancy suburb. Murangi (2017) and UKEssays (2018) attribute the difficulty in transition to the fact that students are required to adapt into new environments learning styles; which they find different from their previous years of schooling. This equally affects students starting at a contact university or ODL institution. Unfortunately, for students enrolling at the ODL the situation is even worse as they are used to face to face contact classes which is not the case with ODL institutions. Students face two sets of challenges when they enrol at the HEI for the first time, namely, individual and institutional factors. Considerable literature documented the following individual and institutional factors as the most common causes of problems students face when they enter the HEIs, particularly ODL institutions (Musingafi, Mapuranga, Chiwanza & Zebron, 2015; The Higher Education Academy, 2015, Arinto, 2016; Murangi, 2017; Kebritchi, Lipschuetz & Santiago, 2017; Kimotho, 2018; Roodt, 2018).

6. Individual Factors

6.1 Substandard Basic Education

This factor is peculiar to SA due to the colonisation and apartheid the country suffered over many years.

Therefore, in order to address this challenge, the SA government made education its first priority. In his Budget Speech, SA Minister of Finance Tito Mboweni indicated that government is set to split out R5,8 trillion over the next three years for the running of the county; of which R1,2 trillion, (which is the biggest chunk) will go towards education (Budget Review, 2019). But still, notwithstanding a vast growth in the number of people in education today, the question remains: are learners receiving a good quality education? (South African Institute of Race Relations, 2018). Although SA managed to eradicate racial exclusion in the past 25 years, schools that seem to be efficient are those that served predominantly white learners, while those that served black learners remain dysfunctional (Donohue & Bornman, 2014; Chetty & Pather 2015; Spaul, 2015:34; South African Institute of Race Relations, 2018). It is therefore a fact that matriculants from schools offering quality education will be more prepared for HE than those from schools in rural communities where the education offered is of a poor quality (Fishman, Ludgate & Tutak, 2017). As a result, having been exposed to only one mode of teaching (attending classes) for twelve years, it is clear that learners are not prepared for ODL teaching mode. Chetty and Pather (2015) further argue that the biggest challenge SA faces is the interdependence of HE, secondary and primary education, whereby a failure in one area affects the other areas. Therefore, SA should address the quality of education at school level in an attempt to prepare learners for HE.

6.2 Unpreparedness for the ODL Pedagogy

In South Africa basic education takes about twelve years to complete (from Grade 1 to 12). During this period, learners sit in the classroom and expect the

teacher to feed them with knowledge. The study of Chetty and Pather (2015) and Hassel and Ridout (2018:1) revealed that first-year students expected that teaching at HE would be the same (classroom setup) as it had been at school level. This resulted in significant distress, poor academic performance and increased drop-out rates when they realised that there is a huge difference. This puts pressure on schools to create an awareness about ODL HEIs to equip them with skills and knowledge to cope and perform well in such institutions.

6.3 Unique Situational Factors

The Higher Education Academy (2015) and Kimotho (2018) explain situational challenges as factors such as a job or home responsibilities that reduce time for study. The individual attributes such as how long one was out of school before enrolling at the ODL also contribute to their academic performance and their goal achievement thereof (The Higher Education Academy, 2015). Aboo's (2017) study further revealed factors such as family responsibilities and commitment as some unique factors that affected some ODL students more than others.

6.4 Access to and Skills in Technology

In order to keep abreast with technology, ODL students should be equipped with skills needed to operate both the hardware and the software of Information Communication Technology strategies (Croft, Dalton & Grant, 2010; Chau, 2010:186; Cloete, 2017:2; Kimotho, 2018). Considering the history of SA, the majority of South Africans are poor, residing in the rural areas where the Internet access is problematic and are generally illiterate as far as the internet is concerned (Mahlangu, 2018). Unfortunately difficulty in accessing technology negatively affect it acceptance (Pulker, 2016).

7. Institutional Factors

7.1 Student Support

Considerable literature recorded lack of student support as the main challenge students at ODL HEIs experience (Croft, Dalton & Grant, (2010:47; van Niekerk & Schmidt, 2016; Aboo, 2017; Maboe, 2017; Leontyeva, 2018; Sánchez-Elvira Paniagua & Simpson, 2018). This is because ODL institutions have a tendency to generalise their students within the large group that participate in HE (The Higher

Education Academy, 2015); forgetting that this is a different group of students that is expected to learn differently from their peers at a contact HEIs. In addition, Simpson (2013) argues that ODL institutions focus too much on the delivery of teaching materials, particularly online, and too little on motivating students to learn. It should be taken into account that ODL institutions accommodate students who could not get entry into a contact institution due to a lack of capacity, costly tuition fees or simply because they did not get enough admission point score (APS) (Pulker, 2016). As a result, such students may require a different approach to effective learning. Additionally, there seems to be also be a lack of support from the relevant stakeholders, other than lecturers and administrators (Mahlangu, 2018:23), namely the government and the Department of HE. Considering the demographics of students studying through ODL in South African, some students may not afford the use of technology if the governing bodies cannot support students by providing subsidy to educational technologies or make them free (Mahlangu, 2018:23). The study of Queiros and De Villiers (2016:176-177) revealed that the majority of students still believe that their learning can be effectively accelerated by an increase of quality time for them and their lecturers, which implies that they still want more facilitation of learning to come from their lecturers than themselves.

7.2 Offering 100% Online (A shift to ODeL)

It is a fact that Internet service provider services in Africa are expensive (Kimotho, 2018); therefore given the history of SA, too much reliance on technology might create further exclusions in education (Chau, 2010:186).

8. Conclusion and Recommendations

There is substantial evidence that the world is shifting from a contact or classroom mode of tuition to ODL. However, HEIs should take it easy because not everyone is ready or well prepared for ODL mode. Given the SA history, learners come from diverse backgrounds, with unequal access to technology. Therefore, the government should help with the development of a sound foundation of ODL pedagogy at school level by introducing an ODL curriculum. HEIs offering ODL should also strengthen their learner support strategies to embrace different learning styles among learners. The study recommends the following:

- Governing bodies should improve quality of education at school level by providing resources.
- HEIs involved in ODL should spread learner support by adding more regional offices at rural and farm towns, as well as strengthening face-to-face and e-tutoring to be able to cater for learners in rural areas.
- Instead of going 100% online, a blended learning approach of tuition is recommended.
- Embrace diversity among learners. Provide free technology training and resources at regional offices.
- Teacher training at HEIs should introduce ODL pedagogy to be able to impart it their future learners.
- Prepare learners at school level. Instil self-directed and independent learning at school level, even if it is on one subject, just to introduce learners to ODL at an early stage to avoid a "shock" in the future.

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