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## Postgraduate Students in an Open Distance Learning Institution: Student Support Services' Awareness and Utilisation

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### ABSTRACT

This paper reports on the findings from the qualitative data (gathered by means of open-ended questions) of a quantitative, explorative, descriptive, cross-sectional, and contextual research study conducted to generate measures to increase awareness and enhance utilisation of student support services amongst postgraduate students in an ODL institution. Out of the 261 postgraduate students registered in the academic year 2020 in the specific Department at the selected institution, only 71 participated in the study. A census was used to select the participants. Data were collected utilising an Online LimeSurvey that used a self-completion questionnaire with closed and open-ended questions. The quantitative data (demographics) were analysed using the SPSS (version 26.0) and the qualitative data were analysed using Tesch's method. The results indicate that, the majority of the participants were employed (84.1%), married (82.6%), female (63.8%), computer literate (32.4%), PhD students (72.1%), older than 46 years (47.8%), living outside South Africa (52.2%) and in South Africa (47.8%); who have regular access to the internet (98.6%). However, they use the library only sometimes (47.8%). While only 2.9% of the participants lived in Asia. These participants registered with the specific Department for the first time in 2016 and with ODL institution for the time, some in 2013 and 2016 and some other in 2019. From the qualitative data, six themes emerged, namely: (1) awareness of the services; (2) provision of information regarding the services; (3) accessibility and availability of the services; (4) support and communication between students and the university; (5) the involvement of the library; and (6) marketing and advertisement of the services. Based on the findings from the qualitative data, the following measures were generated: increase awareness and enhance the utilisation of these services amongst the participants through information provision about these services; make the services available and accessible to all students irrespective of their levels; encouragement, motivation, enhance support and communication between students, and between students and their lecturers; involve the librarian; market and advertise the services utilising mass media and social networks. The effective and efficient implementation of these measures could increase awareness and enhance utilisation of these services amongst the participants and other students. Thus, students will be able to deal with academic challenges and improve their academic performance.

**Keywords:** Awareness; Distance Learning; Postgraduate Students; Open Distance eLearning; Student Support Service

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### INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Open distance learning (ODL) is a learning model that endeavours to bridge the time, geographical, economic, social, educational, and communication gap between the institution, the students, academics, and the learning materials (UNISA, 2008). ODL continues to play a critical role in the educational development of African people, most of whom were

previously denied opportunities to access higher education. Today, various ODL institutions on the African continent, specifically in South Africa, use a wide variety of modern and/or affordable technologies to facilitate the sharing of learning content with geographically distant students (Ngubane-Mokiwa & Letseka, 2015).

At its conception, ODL institutions were meant to provide educational

opportunities to mature, non-traditional and working students. But nowadays, this is no longer the case. Even young school leavers are joining ODL institutions. This shift has compelled ODL institutions to review its policies and programmes to accommodate all its students. These students are often unable to access higher education at traditional, full-time, contact and campus-based institutions.

In 2013, the selected South African university shifted from ODL to open distance electronic learning (ODEL). This shift presumes the existence of an established culture and the use of modern electronic technologies and reliance on such technologies (Ngubane-Mokiwa & Letseka, 2015). Shifting to ODeL warrants the consideration of student support services (SSS).

According to Maboe (2019), in ODeL situations, there is no value if there is no online interaction between students and the lecturer, between them and other support structures and between them and other students. For that reason, ODeL institutions should make available technological tools to enhance the online interaction between students and their lectures, other support services and between students themselves. Thus, ODeL institutions commit themselves to support distance students in all aspects being academically, cognitively, administratively, institutionally, and affectively. This led many distance education institutions to establish SSS to deal with and address the deficit (lower graduation rates experienced by many of these institutions including eLearning institutions) (Simpson (2015).

Awareness and use of SSS are of importance in enabling students to succeed academically. The researchers noted that SSS are available in the studied ODeL institution in South Africa, including services such as online connection and online counselling support services, which are available via email,

letters, academic literary services (Acalit Digital), and Hotline. There is no value in the existence of support systems if students are unaware of them, and the utilisation of these services is thus compromised. ODeL institutions must commit themselves to support distance education students in all aspects, such as cognitively, administratively, institutionally, and affectively. This study was conducted to generate measures to increase awareness and enhance the utilisation of SSS by postgraduate students in the specific department at the selected ODeL institution in South Africa. The researchers intend to recommend to management, of the researched ODeL institution, measures to increase awareness and utilisation of SSS. Based on the context of this study, the researchers refer to SSS as services that support postgraduate students academically, administratively, technologically, institutionally, and affectively (Maboe, 2019). Postgraduate students are operationally defined as master's and doctoral students at the selected ODeL institution in South Africa.

The researchers further noted that many distance education institutions have established SSS to deal with the deficit (lower graduation rates experienced by many ODL institutions, including e-learning institutions) and to cater for students' cognitive, emotional, social, and learning needs. These services act as the interface between the institutions and the students. They compensate for the isolated "individual" by making the necessary basic facilities available in the absence of "live support" from the teacher (Nsamba & Makoe, 2017). Therefore, these services should be a major component of a distance education system (Farajollahi & Moenika, 2010).

Kelly-Hall (2010) found that SSS are designed to give students the academic skills and confidence necessary for academic success, and to encourage them to

become integrated into the system. Ciobanu (2013) states that SSS contribute to the quality of students' learning experience and their academic success.

Ciobanu (2013) further argues that SSS are enhanced by relations between higher education institutions and students. The composition of the student group and the knowledge and beliefs of academic and administrative staff influence the manner in which student "programmes" and "services" are delivered, as well as their responsibility towards it. It is imperative that higher education institutions provide services and programmes that promote the quality of student life, meet students' needs, and improve learning and academic success (Ciobanu, 2013).

For Herman, Puspitasari and Padamo (2015), these higher education institutions have a duty to reinforce student support as a vital component of their institution. This is to ensure that students who are studying at open distance learning institutions have an enduring learning experience. The success of these institutions is reflected in the satisfaction of students with support services. Thus, it is crucial for these institutions to maintain the quality of SSS available and ensure that they are easily accessible (Herman et al., 2015). SSS are as important as providing students with excellent academic content. Without effective SSS, students will not have any academic, emotional or social connection with the institution, and they are more likely to drop out (Ciobanu, 2013).

Letseka and Pitsoe (2014) indicate that ODeL institutions need to organise their systems and resources to support teaching and learning without necessarily requiring educators and students to be in the same space at the same time. ODeL students are supposed to have access to modern electronic technology to enable them to make optimal use of such resources. Well-organised student support systems are essential for distance education (DE)

students to engage in the process of learning (Rangar, 2015).

The selected ODL institution in South Africa has established electronic and online facilities where students can get in touch with their lecturers, as well as other support services that cater for the needs of a diverse student base. These facilities, or services, are as follows: Connection online: this is the most important tool. It comprises an online student portal email address; Access to lecturer(s) by way of its website discussion forum and e-tutor programme; Academic literacy services; Counselling service support online, by email or by letter and Acalit Digital and Hotline. he previously mentioned SSS were established to cater for students at all levels. Hence, the researchers view these services as services which are meant and designed to support not only postgraduate students in particular, but all the students, in general academically, administratively, technologically, institutionally, and affectively.

Despite the existing literature on student support services, its importance, contribution, and benefits in ODeL, there is dearth of literature on the extent of utilisation of existing support services at this institution. No scientific evidence has been produced about postgraduate students' awareness and utilisation of these services at this institution.

In conceptualising and reflecting upon the rationale for conducting this study, the researchers have deemed it necessary to look at some indicators of students' academic performance such as qualification graduates and dropout (attrition) rates in the specific Department of the selected institution. The researchers are of the view that, effective and efficient utilisation of the available SSS may directly or indirectly have led to students' performance and attrition rates. For this reason, with reference to the qualified graduates and dropout rates in the specific Department of the selected institution from the years 2013

to 2019 as reflected in the cohort statistics (Data from the Institutional Research & Business Intelligence (stats from the

selected institution), June 2019) for this specific academic Department are shown in the tables below.

**Table 1:** Qualifications enrolments, qualifications graduates and qualifications graduate rates of Postgraduate (M&D) students in the selected Department of the selected South African University.

	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Qualifications enrolments	440	360	337	349	370	335
Qualifications graduates	92	118	70	56	85	47
Qualifications graduate rates	<b>20,9%</b>	<b>32,8%</b>	<b>20,8%</b>	<b>15,9%</b>	<b>23,0%</b>	<b>14,0%</b>

*Data from the Institutional Research & Business Intelligence (stats-from the selected institution), June 2019*

This table shows that, the qualifications graduate rates are very low from 2013-2018.

In addition, the cohort statistics per qualifications (M&D) in the selected Department indicates the following [(Data from the Institutional Research & Business Intelligence (stats-from the selected institution), June 2019)] show the following:

1. Cohort statistics for qualification **0779X (MPH)** starting from:

I. 2013: shows a high drop-out rate (50%) and a very low graduate rate (0%) based on cohort statistics starting from 2013-2018.

II. 2014: shows a higher drop-out rates (25% in 2017 & 50% in 2018) and an average graduate rate of 50% based on cohort statistics starting from 2014-2018.

III. 2015: shows a higher drop-out rate (67%) and very low graduate rate (17%) in 2018 based on cohort statistics starting from 2015-2018.

2. Cohort statistics for qualification code: **90010 (MPH)** starting from:

I. 2016: shows a higher drop-out rates (27% in 2017 & 36% in 2018) and low graduate rates (19% in 2017 & 32%) in 2018 based on cohort statistics starting from 2016-2020.

II. 2017: shows a higher drop-out rate (38%) and very low graduate rate (10%) in 2018 based on cohort statistics starting from 2017-2021.

3. Cohort statistics for qualification code: **90029: PhD (Nursing)** starting from:

I. 2016: shows a higher drop-out rates (15% in 2017 & 26% in

2918) and very low graduate rate (4% in both years 2017 & 2018) based on cohort statistics starting from 2016-2020.

II. 2017: shows a higher drop-out rate (46%) and very low graduate rate (0%) in 2018 based on cohort statistics starting from 2017-2021.

4. Cohort statistics for qualification code: **98422 (DLITT et Phil in Health Studies)** starting:

I. 2013: shows a higher drop-out rates (27% in 2014; 30% in 2015; 36% in 2016; 42% in 2017 & 42% in 2018) and very low graduate rates (3% in 2014; 20% in 2015) and low graduate rates (36% in 2016; 48% in 2017 & 48% in 2018) based on cohort statistics starting from 2013-2018.

II. 2014: shows a higher drop-out rates (9% in 2015; 23% in 2016; 29% in 2017 & 34% in 2018) and very low graduate rates (3% in 2015; 14% in 2016) and low graduate rates (31% in 2017 & 40% in 2018) based on cohort statistics starting from 2014-2018.

III. 2015: shows a higher drop-out rates (34% in 2016; 36% in 2017 & 46% in 2018) and very low graduate rates (4% in 2016; 18% in 2017 & 21% in 2018) based on cohort statistics starting from 2015-2019.

IV. 2016: shows higher drop-out rates (27% in 2017 & 49% in 2018) and very low graduate rates (4% in 2017 & 11% in 2018) based on cohort statistics starting from 2016-2020.

V. 2017: shows a higher drop-out rate (38% in 2018) a very low graduate rate (5% in 2018) based on cohort statistics starting from 2017-2021.

5. Cohort statistics for qualification code: **99502:MA (Nursing)** starting from;

I. 2013: shows a higher drop-out rates (25% in 2014; 32% in 2015; 36% in 2016; 41% in 2017 & 41% in 2018) and very low graduate rates (20% in 2014; 34% in 2015 & 39% in 2016) and above average graduate rates (52% in 2017 & 52% in 2018) based on cohort statistics starting from 2013-2018.

II. 2014: shows higher drop-out rates (16% in 2015; 24% in 2016; 32% in 2017 & 36% in 2018) and very low graduate rates (24% in 2015 & 36% in 2016). However, the graduate rates in 2017 and 2018 are higher (60%) based on cohort statistics starting from 2014-2018.

III. 2015: shows a higher drop-out rates (20% in 2016; 24% in 2017 & 37% in 2018) and low graduate rates (32% in 2016; 41% in 2017 & 49% in 2018) based on cohort statistics starting from 2015-2019.

IV. 2016: shows higher drop-out rates (25% in 2017 & 28% in 2018) and low graduate rates (25% in 2017 & 44% in 2018) based on cohort statistics starting from 2016-2020.

V. 2017: shows a higher drop-out rate (29%) and a low graduate rate (18%) in 2018 based on cohort statistics starting from 2017-2021.

In summary, the above statistics indicate a low qualifications graduate rate and a higher drop-out rates for the specific academic Department of the selected institution from the years 2013 to till the 21<sup>st</sup> February 2019. These numbers are from the different qualifications which are offered by this academic Department under study.

The above picture of the selected institution concurs with Khumalo (2018)'s findings that, credible research statistics on the students' success rates constantly paint a shocking and uncomfortable picture in the

Higher Education (HE) sector throughout the world. This happens despite the sectors' efforts of providing opportunities of success to all students. There is an abundance of empirical evidence on the factors that contribute toward low students' success rates. The challenges and the complexities that face HE institutions, especially those that are related to the graduation rates are huge. Higher Education environment continues to be complex, with increasing expectations about performance.

Khumalo (2018) argues further that, the pass percentage rate at HE, particularly in ODL, is alarming. Although access to higher education has increased substantially over the past years, student success as measured by persistence and degree attainment, has not improved at all. Despite substantial government funding incentives, numerous policy initiatives and well-intentioned institutional efforts, retention and success rates remain extremely poor." Leadership in ODL settings have a huge responsibility and are under pressure to ensure that constructively aligned instruction opportunities are created and technologically mediated to boost the academic achievements of students.

It is important to note that, students at this university come from the four corners of the world, whereby some of them have had some exposure to ODeL, whilst others have no experience of this kind of learning. Considering this situation and to enable the students' learning experience and achieve the expected results, these students would therefore, need some form of support. This kind of support can only be offered through the provision of SSS with the aim to give students the academic skills and confidence necessary for academic success and encourage them to get involved and integrated into the system (Kelly-Hall, 2010). Nsamba and Makoe (2017) state that the purpose of student support services in open and distance eLearning institutions is to cater for students' cognitive, emotional,

social needs and to help them with their learning. However, the extent of awareness and utilisation of these services amongst the targeted students in the specific Department at the selected institution are unknown. This is what has led the researchers to conduct this study with the intention to generate measures to increase awareness and enhance utilisation of SSS among postgraduate students in the selected institution.

## **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

This study sought to generate measures to increase awareness and enhance utilisation of SSS among postgraduate students at the selected ODL institution in South Africa. The main concern in this study was to involve postgraduate students by encouraging them to suggest ways and strategies, which, if implemented effectively and efficiently, can help increase awareness and enhance utilisation of the services amongst them. The research question was therefore, "What measures would increase awareness and enhance the utilisation of SSS among postgraduate students?"

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This study was underpinned by the Alexander Astin's 1984 Student Involvement Theory. This theory was found to be relevant for the study because it proved to be effective in guiding the researchers' investigation of student development by university administrators and faculty members to design more effective learning environments (Astin, 1999). "It provides an explanation of the way desirable outcomes for institutions of higher education are viewed regarding the way students change and develop because of being involved in the institution's activities. This theory is based on the facts that, a student's "inputs" such as their demographics, their background, and any previous experiences; a student's "environment and the outcomes

such as a student's characteristics, knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, and values that exist after a student has graduated college account for all the experiences a student would have had during college (Astin, 1999)".

Awareness and utilisation of SSS services should be linked to theoretical frameworks addressing concerns of involvement, attrition, and success (Kelly-Hall, 2010). This theory furthermore reveals that, the effectiveness of an educational practice is directly related to the capacity of that practice to increase student involvement which in this case translates into awareness and utilisation of SSS. This implies that, student involvement has a positive impact on development and learning. This theory further argues that the student plays an integral role in determining his/ her own degree of involvement in the institution's activities including extracurricular and social activities (Kelly-Hall, 2020).

Awareness and utilisation of SSS also implies students' involvement in the teaching and learning activities leading to their achievement in their academic journey. This involvement has quantitative and qualitative features; where quantitative is the amount of time devoted to studying and qualitative is the seriousness of the approach to reviewing and comprehending assignments (Kelly-Hall, 2010).

Drawing from this theory, awareness, and utilisation of SSS is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of student involvement. For students to optimally utilise the available SSS at their disposal, they to be actively engaged in their academic environment (Kelly-Hall, 2010). This theory brings in the attention towards the notion of students' motivation and behaviour based on the premises that, students' time and energy are considered as institutional resources. This implies that, the institution's policies, and practices, especially those that relate to academic and

non-academic activities such as SSS can be determined in reverence to the degree to which students' involvement in the academic activities can be increased or decreased (Astin, 1984).

To provide a better understand of this theory, it is of utmost importance to look at the five principles as proposed (Astin, 1999):

1. Involvement which refers to the investment of physical and psychological energy in various objects such as the student's academic experience (where objects are generalised) and preparing for a specific subject/module examination (where objects are highly specific).

2. Regardless of its object, student involvement, which occurs along a continuum, differs in terms of interest and time.

3. Student involvement has quantitative and qualitative features. The extent of a student's involvement in academic work can, for instance, be measured quantitatively (how many hours the student spends on studying) and qualitatively (whether the student reviews and comprehends reading assignments or simply stares at the textbook and daydreams).

4. The amount of student learning and personal development associated with any educational programme is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of student involvement in the programme.

5. The effectiveness of any educational policy or practice is directly related to the capacity of the specific policy or practice to increase student involvement.

Based on these principles, it was revealed that, students who interact frequently with the institutional structures

are more likely than other students to express satisfaction with all aspects of their institutional experience, including student friendships, variety of courses, intellectual environment, and even the administration of the institution. Thus, finding ways to encourage greater student involvement with faculty (and vice versa) could be a highly productive activity on most college campuses; and this is one of the purposes of student support services.

Conversely, awareness and utilisation of SSS should translate into student involvement and vice-versa. In line with Astin (1984) Kelly-Hall (2010), states that, the development of the student should be the central aim of all education considering that, the purpose of higher education is to facilitate the development of humans by means of a variety of programmes and resources. To achieve this aim, SSS were established to attend to students' various academic needs and experiences. Regardless of the programme, and academic needs of the participant, one key to their success is involvement in all university activities (academic and non-academic activities).

This theory of student involvement provides a link between subject matters, resources, individualised approaches and the learning the students' desired outcomes and the lecturer. The focus of the theory is more on active participation of the students in the teaching and learning process which can only be possible through awareness and utilisation of SSS. This therefore implies that, for a particular curriculum, to achieve the intended effects, it must elicit sufficient student effort and investment of energy to bring about the desired learning and development. Simply exposing the student to a particular set of courses may or may not work (Astin, 1984).

Student support services programmes at most universities should support and encourage students to get involved and be integrated into campus life, because the

programme is meant to provide them with a variety of educational services and place emphasis on academic achievement. All services are designed to provide students with the academic skills and confidence that are necessary for success at the university. The programme is committed to help the students learn subject matter through activities such as supplemental instruction, course instruction, computer-assisted instructional laboratories, study groups and tutoring, since the more students are academically integrated into the life of the institution, the greater the likelihood that they will persist and succeed academically. The most influential types of involvement are academic involvement; involvement with faculty/academics and involvement in student peer groups. These constitute the three main areas of focus for SSS programmes, the establishment of which should be in line with the university's mandate (Astin, 1999).

From the educator's perspective, the effectiveness of any educational policy or practice is directly related to the capacity of that policy or practice to increase student involvement. Thus, this theory is more advantageous in the sense that all institutional policies and practices relating to non-academic and academic activities can be evaluated in terms of the extent to which they increase or reduce student involvement. Similarly, academic staff and other university personnel, such as counsellors, student personnel workers, and faculty and administrators, can assess their own activities in terms of their success in supporting and encouraging students to become more involved in the academic experience (Astin, 1999).

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

This paper reports on the findings from the qualitative data (gathered by means of open-ended questions) of a quantitative, explorative, descriptive, cross-sectional, and contextual research study that was conducted to generate measures to



increase awareness and enhance utilisation of student support services amongst postgraduate students. Boswell and Cannon (2017) postulate that a quantitative research design is often identified with the traditional scientific method that gathers data objectively in an organised, systematic, and controlled manner. In this way, the results can be generalised and applied to other situations or populations. It is a process that is systematic and objective in its ways by using numerical data from only a selected subgroup of a population, at a specific point in time.

Given the purpose of the study, an explorative approach was found to be the best option for this study. Babbie (2016) states that exploratory studies are, most typically, done for three purposes: firstly, to satisfy the researcher's curiosity and desire for better understanding; secondly, to test the feasibility of undertaking a more extensive study; and, lastly, to develop the methods to be employed in any subsequent study. The researchers described the respondents in terms of different variables, and for that purpose, the study adopted a descriptive approach. This was done in line with Babbie (2016) who states that the major purpose of many social scientific studies is to describe situations and events. Thus, a descriptive study is the precise measurement and reporting of the characteristics of some population or phenomenon under study. This means that the researchers observe and then describe what was observed. The study was conducted between 14 May 2020 and 6 July 2020, and because it was conducted in a single point in time, it qualifies to be a cross-sectional design study. A cross-sectional design is often called a survey design because data are collected on a sample of cases, at a single point in time for the purpose of collecting a body of quantitative or qualitative data in connection with two or more variables that are often examined to detect patterns of association (Bryman, 2016).

This study was also contextual in nature. A context is the circumstances that form the setting for an event, statement, or idea in terms of which it can be fully understood and assessed. In this study, the context is the specific department at the selected ODL institution in South Africa where postgraduate students are currently registered.

The study took place online at the selected ODL institution in South Africa. Out of the 261 postgraduate students registered in the academic year 2020 in the specific Department at the selected institution, only 71 participated in the study. A census was used to select the participants. Data were collected utilising an Online LimeSurvey that used a self-completion questionnaire with closed and open-ended questions. The quantitative data (demographics) were analysed using the SPSS (version 26.0) and the qualitative data were analysed using Tesch's method.

### **Participants**

The population of the study consisted of 261 postgraduate (master's and doctoral) students registered in the academic year 2020 in the specific Department at the selected ODL institution in South Africa. A census was used to select and sample the respondents. A census is the enumeration of an entire population (Bryman, 2016). It is also a study of every unit, every person and everything in a population. The census was chosen for the study because the researchers were interested in collecting data from all 261 postgraduate students registered in the specific department in the academic year 2020, and the sample was manageable. Hence, no sampling technique was used.

According to the data (report) of the Institutional Research and Business Intelligence, of the selected ODL institution in South Africa, June 2019, 261 postgraduate students were registered for the academic year 2020 in the specific department. Since census was adopted for the study, the sample size was estimated to

be equal to the total population of interest – 261 students in this instance. However, only 27.2% (n=71) responded to the survey, therefore, the sample size was 71 respondents.

The recruitment of the participants, the signing of the informed consent form and the completion of the questionnaire were done simultaneously online from 14 May 2020 to 6 July 2020. An e-mail in the form of an invitation/recruitment, containing an informed consent form with the title and the aim of the study and a summarised version of the ethical considerations pertaining to the study, was sent to all 261 potential participants using a link created for that purpose. The participants were instructed to click on the link to indicate their willingness to participate in the study. Once they clicked the acceptance option, the first page of the questionnaire immediately opened up and the completion of questionnaire started. At the end of the questionnaire, participants were requested to click the 'submit questionnaire' option and the questionnaire was immediately submitted to the questionnaire database, which was created by the statistician for that purpose.

### **Data collection and analysis**

Data were collected by means of an online LimeSurvey using a self-completion questionnaire. The questionnaire comprised close and open-ended (to generate measures) questions. This type of survey was chosen because of its availability and accessibility at the selected ODL institution. This type of survey is not costly and is fast and efficient. According to Creswell (2014), the survey provides a study with a quantitative, or numeric, description of variables of a population. Furthermore, the contingency questions, which are effective, have direct data entries and have a wide geographic reach. Data collection started on 14 May 2020 and ended on 6 July 2020. The researchers requested the services of a statistician to manage the survey processes.

A link to the survey was created by the statistician and sent to the respondents using the respondents' university (portal) e-mail addresses. The survey was sent to all 261 postgraduate students that were registered during the time of data collection. All completed questionnaires were returned electronically (by clicking on, or selecting, the "submit questionnaire" option, which was provided at the end of the questionnaire) to the database (questionnaire file created by the statistician for this purpose). This database was created by the statistician, who had access by means of a secret password and who cleared and analysed the data using SPSS 26.0. Weekly reminders to complete the survey were sent to the respondents.

Data analysis is about data reduction. It is concerned with reducing a large body of information to enable the researcher to make sense of it. It deals with the management, analysis, and interpretation of data (Bryman, 2016). In analysing the data gathered, the two basic approaches of quantitative data analysis, descriptive statistics for summarising information and comparative statistics for examining differences between groups or the correlation between variables were considered.

Data collected from closed-ended questions, being biographical information, was analysed using the latest version of the SPSS 26.0 to generate descriptive statistics. On the other hand, data from open-ended questions were analysed qualitatively by using Tesch's method of data analysis (Creswell, 2013). Data were listed and grouped into preliminary groupings of themes. The analysis was done in three steps:

1. Organising the data
2. Reading the data and coding the data
3. Grouping data into themes so that it could be interpreted

Ethical clearance (HSHDC/936/2019) -(REC-012714-039 (NHREC) to conduct the study was granted by the Ethics Committee of the specific department. Permission (Ref #: 2020\_RPSC\_004) to involve students in the study was also granted by the selected South African University Research Permission Subcommittee (RPCS). These permissions allowed the researchers to obtain the students' university e-mail addresses, in line with the South Africa's comprehensive privacy law known as the Protection of Personal Information Act, 2013 (POPIA) which became effective on 1 July 2020.

Other ethical considerations pertaining to the study included the following:

1. Benefits of taking part in the study (there were no direct benefits from participating in the study)
2. Risks (there were no foreseeable risks involved in participating in this study other than those encountered in day-to-day life)
3. Confidentiality (confidentiality of data and personal details were assured)
4. Anonymity (no personal details identifying the respondents were requested)

#### **Validity and reliability of the measurement instrument**

The validity of an instrument is the extent to which it measures what it is supposed to measure (Creswell, 2013). It is also a test that truthfully measures what it purports to measure (Boswell & Cannon, 2017). The researcher ensured content validity of the questionnaire by consulting the statistician, the mentor, an expert in the field and an ICT specialist to review the questionnaire and make sure it covered all the content of the specific construct it was supposed to measure for standardisation and attended to the specific components of the selected theoretical framework by

ensuring that the constructs were well covered by the questionnaire when measured by different groups of related items. Furthermore, the questionnaire was pre-tested before the main data collection and ethical clearance was granted.

The reliability of a research instrument is the extent to which a measurement instrument is repeatable and consistent (Creswell, 2013): the consistency and repeatability of the test results (Boswell & Cannon, 2017). The researcher ensured the reliability of the questionnaire, especially internal consistency, by calculating (establishing) the Cronbach's alpha coefficient because it was based on inter-item correlations. If the items are strongly correlated with one another, their internal consistency is high, and the alpha coefficient will be close to one. However, if the items are poorly formulated and do not correlate strongly, the alpha coefficient will be close to zero (Nieswiadomy, 2008). The internal consistency of the responses (validity) was tested by calculating the Cronbach's Alpha coefficients. Cronbach's alpha is the most common measure of internal consistency (reliability). It is most commonly used when one has multiple Likert questions in a survey/questionnaire that form a scale and one wishes to determine if the scale is reliable. The alpha coefficient for three scaled sets of questions ranged from 0.681 to 0.904, suggesting that the items have a relatively high internal consistency. Note that a reliability coefficient of 0.70 or higher is considered acceptable in most social science research situations and 0.681 is very close to this value.

#### **ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

This article followed all ethical standards for carrying out research. Ethical clearance (HSHDC/936/2019) -(REC-012714-039 (NHREC) was sought and granted from the Ethics Committee of the specific academic department and permission (Ref #: 2020\_RPSC\_004) to

conduct the study and to involve the students in the study from the selected institution RPCS. These permissions allowed the researchers to obtain the students' university e-mail addresses, in line with the South Africa's comprehensive privacy law known as the POPIA as mentioned above.

**RESULTS**

A total of 261 surveys were distributed on 14 May 2020, with weekly reminder e-mails sent until the survey link closed on 6 July 2020. Only 71 (27.2%) respondents completed the survey; therefore, the response rate of the survey was 27.2%.

**Table 2**

The distribution of the sample in terms of gender, age, marital status, employment status, country of residence and continent of residence

Variables	characteristics	No.	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	25	36.2%
	Female	44	63.8%
Age	26-32 yrs.	3	4.3%
	33-39 yrs.	17	24.6%
	40-46 yrs.	16	23.2%
	47 and above	33	47.8%
Marital status	Single	7	10%
	Married	57	82.6%
	Divorced	3	4.3%
	Widowed	2	2.9%
Employment status	Unemployed	6	8.7%
	Employed	58	84.1%
	Self-employed	3	4.3%
Country of residence	South Africa	33	47.8%
	Outside South Africa	36	52.2%
Continent of residence	Africa	66	95.7%
	Asia	2	2.9%

Table 2 indicates the following about the sample:

- The majority of the respondents were female (63.8%)
- The majority of the respondents were older than 46 years (47.8%)
- Most of the respondents were married (82.6%)
- Most of the respondents were employed (84.1%)
- The location distribution of respondents was almost equal between in South Africa (47.8%) and outside South Africa (52.2%), with only two respondents (2.9%) indicating that they were from the Asian continent.

**Demographical characteristics of the sample (quantitative data)**

The demographic characteristics of the participants were the following: gender, age, marital status, employment status, country of residence and continent of residence, degree level registered for, time of first registration with the selected ODL institution, time of first registration with the specific department, computer skills, access to the internet and frequency of visits to the library of the selected ODL institution.

The results of the demographic characteristics are shown in the tables 2, 3 and 4 below.

Table 3 indicates the following of the sample:

- Most of the respondents were PhD students (72.1%)
- The majority of the respondents registered for the first time with the selected ODeL South African University either in 2013 (19.0%), 2016 (19.0%) or 2019 (19.0%)
- The majority of the respondents (22.6%) registered for the first time with the specific department in 2016

**Table 3**

- The distribution of the sample, in terms of the current degree level registered for, time of first registration with the selected ODL institution in South Africa and time of first registration with the specific department.

Variables	Characteristics	No.	Percentage (%)
Level of degree registered for	Masters	19	27.9%
	PhD	49	72.1%
1 <sup>ST</sup> time registration with ODL Institution	2013	12	19.0%
	2014	4	6.3%
	2015	11	17.5%
	2016	12	19.0%
	2017	8	12.7
	2018	4	6.3%
	2019	12	19.0%
1 <sup>st</sup> registration with specific department	2013	13	21.0%
	2014	4	6.5%
	2015	8	12.9%
	2016	14	22.6%
	2017	8	12.9%
	2018	4	6.5%
	2019	11	17.7%

**Table 4**

The distribution of the sample in terms of computer skills, access to the internet and frequency of visits to the library of the selected ODL institution in South Africa

Variables	Characteristics	N	Percentage (%)
Computer skills	Average	1	16.2%
	Good	1	32.4%
	Very good	2	30.9%
	Excellent	2	20.6%
Access to Internet		2	
		1	
		1	
		4	
	Yes	6	98.6%
	No	8	1.4%

Frequency of visits to the university library	Never	8	11.6%
	Rarely	1	15.9%
	Sometimes	1	47.8%
	More often	3	23.2%
	Always	3	1.4%
		6	1
		1	

Table 4 indicates that:

- A total of 32.4% of the respondents had good computer skills, while 30.9% had very good computer skills
- Most of the respondents have regular access to the internet (98.6%)
- The majority of the respondents indicated that they sometimes visit the university library (47.8%)

In summary, the tables 2, 3 and 4 show that, the majority of the participants were employed (84.1%), married (82.6%), female (63.8%), computer literate (32.4%), PhD students (72.1%), older than 46 years (47.8%), living outside South Africa (52.2%) and in South Africa (47.8%); who have regular access to the internet (98.6%). However, they use the library only sometimes (47.8%). While only 2.9% of the participants lived in Asia. These participants registered with the specific Department for the first time in 2016 and with ODL institution for the time, some in 2013 and 2016 and some other in 2019.

### Table 5

Themes and sub-themes that emerged from the analysis of data from the open-ended question (word cloud generated from all respondents' responses)

Emerg ed themes	Sub-themes
1. Awareness of SSS	
2. Provision of information regarding SSS	
3. Accessible and availability of SSS	1. Support and communication between students themselves

### Measures to increase awareness and enhance utilisation of student support services by postgraduate students

The results are presented in line with the purpose of the study. The participants were asked to generate measures to increase awareness and enhance utilisation of SSS amongst them. The question asked was, "What are the measures to increase awareness and enhance the utilisation of student SSS amongst postgraduate students? (Please suggest, at least five ways, ideas, techniques, or strategies to be used to increase awareness of SSS and enhance its utilisation amongst students)". From the analysis of data utilising Tesch's method, six themes emerged from the open-ended question (word cloud generated from all respondents' responses): awareness of SSS, provision of information regarding SSS, accessibility and availability of SSS, support and communication between students and the university, involvement of the library and marketing and advertisement of SSS. The emerged themes and sub-themes are summarized in table 5 below.

## Student Support Services

- 
- |   |  |
|---|--|
| 4. Support and communication<br>between students and the university | 2. Support and communication<br>between students and lecturers |
| 5. Involvement of the librarian                                     |  |
| 6. Marketing and advertisement of<br>SSS                            |  |
-

### ***The emerged themes and generated measures***

#### **Awareness of SSS**

In response to the question asked: “What are the measures to increase awareness and enhance the utilisation of SSS among postgraduate students?” Participants suggested the following (word cloud generated from all respondents’ responses):

“... also include other services/support in the university guidelines for reference ... also send via personal emails ... and circulate once a month as a reminder to the students’ university email addresses...awareness by librarians...awareness programme ... awareness to students by students affairs ... awareness by supervisors ... be included in the study material as a separate topic ... Briefing students during orientation ... clearly avail guidance on how to utilise the services ... compulsory workshops ... create awareness ... create awareness for local university ... have contact sessions to orientate students on available services and how to use them ... I suggested to give us opportunity to visit the university ...”

#### **Provision of information regarding SSS**

In response to the question asked: “What are the measures to increase awareness and enhance the utilisation of SSS among postgraduate students?” Participants suggested the following:

“... avail clear information about the services ... Brochures ... direct emailing to inform about services ... Education of students ... Giving information about all learning platforms on the medium used by a specific student so that it reaches them ... Include this information in a separate tutorial letter regarding student support services ... Included in study packages ... Information sharing prior and upon commencement of studies ... Personal information regarding available services should be mailed individually to every

student ... Please include all the student support services in the general tutorial letter sent annually to students ... Providing of information about services.”

#### **Accessibility and Availability of SSS**

In response to the question asked: “What are the measures to increase awareness and enhance the utilisation of SSS among postgraduate students?” Participants suggested the following:

“... Accessibility of those people should be within reach ... Assignments/research ... submission link to remain accessible for 24 hours a day including weekends ... Assistance with data to access the services ... Availability /accessibility of university reception desks even in the small towns ... Availability of data ... Availability of free data so that students can access the necessary support ... Ensure availability of user-friendly services ... Ensure free data availability for the learners to access the service ... if possible, learners who are unable to buy laptops should be provided by the University for easy access to the services ... include the availability of services during orientation ... Increase Internet services and access free of charge for the students ... it should be easily accessible... Reduce more steps that should be followed before accessing the information required ... The support services could be available in most digital platforms ... Update the services.”

#### **Support and communication between students and the university**

Two subthemes emerged: support and communication between students themselves and communication between students and lecturers.

#### ***Support and communication between students (themselves)***

In response to the question asked: “What are the measures to increase awareness and enhance the utilisation of SSS among postgraduate students?” Participants suggested the following:



“... Also, students in the same department to be encouraged to support each other ... at least even be introduced to classmates for learning and sharing ... form forums and groups ... Group channel for discussion and information exchange ... Have a notification ... Organise networks among postgraduate students with different disciplines ... The role of the students' affair unit needs to be reviewed ... WhatsApp groups.”

### ***Support and communication between students and their lecturers***

In response to the question asked: “What are the measures to increase awareness and enhance the utilisation of SSS among postgraduate students?” Participants suggested the following:

“... Appreciation emails or text messages ... Attitudes of some staff employees need to be addressed, especially when one inquires by telephone ... Collaboration of regional office with local government and university ... Communicate timely ... Contacting individual students with slow progress ... Continuous monitoring and quarterly feedback on login ... Counselling ... discussion forum ... Do frequent survey on satisfaction of students towards utilisation of the university services/support ... Announcements ... E-mails ... empower regional centres to provide support for postgraduate students, especially master's such as at our regional centre. When I went there asking for a certain service, they said they are not equipped to help doctoral students ... Encouragement by supervisors will help ... Engaging communication with students through the university and personal e-mail ... Group channel for discussion and information exchange.”

### ***The involvement of the librarian***

In response to the question asked: “What are the measures to increase awareness and enhance the utilisation of SSS among postgraduate students?” Participants suggested the following:

“... Easy access to the librarian to ask or make requests ... Librarian allocated to students can send a mail monthly to ensure students are aware of their assistance availability ... The librarian can also give information of library services, the ones available are enough.”

### ***Marketing and advertisement of SSS***

In response to the question asked: “What are the measures to increase awareness and enhance the utilisation of SSS among postgraduate students?” Participants suggested the following:

“... Advertise with local government mass media ... Advertisement of the services in the university home page ... Adverts on television ... advise by lecturers and regional offices ... Advisor ratio to students should be controlled based on the standard ... All services can also be advertised on the university website ... All services to be advertise during orientation to new students ... Also advertise in radio stations around South Africa in particular before going globally ... Career exhibition to be done in all regions including marketing whose duty will be to market the available services ... Workshops via online ... Exhibition shows ... Facebook ... In regions, these services should be advertised and be pasted on the wall ... Increase visibility of the university support in all social media.”

## **DISCUSSIONS**

Enhancing utilisation of SSS among students requires students to be aware of the services. The necessary information pertaining to the available services, accessibility, support and communication between students and their lecturers, different services and the involvement of the library should be readily available to students. These services should also be marketed and advertised.

Krause and Coates (2008) postulate that academic learning should involve a continuous and iterative dialogue between

lecturers and students, and the critical role academic staff play in helping first-year students to engage with their studies and the learning community. Lecturers must be fully committed to their lectures and communication. Communication must comprise verbal and non-verbal communication.

Non-verbal communication attracts the attention of the students towards the learning process. Lecturers' behaviour in a class can increase or decrease the students' motivation. Lecturers can use the following techniques to facilitate students' learning: formal lesson planning, discussions, group work, lesson elaboration and team participation (Ullah, Sagheer, Sattar & Khan, 2013).

Lecturers can promote academic motivation and restructure the teaching and learning environment by providing different learning strategies to students and finding ways to motivate students to engage in active learning. Lecturers, administrators, and counsellors contribute to a positive teaching and learning environment for students by putting structures in place that help them to provide an optimal learning environment for students (Rugutt & Chemosit, 2009).

Vygotsky (1978) states that lecturers are very important in the learning process. They play multiple roles: lecturers create and design a learning environment which maximises students' opportunities to interact with one another and with other experts; they act as experts, models, guides and facilitators of students' social interactions; they are there to design tasks, develop resources and establish the classroom culture and norms for interactions, which include identifying roles and appropriate behaviour for students as they interact with one another, fostering discussion between and among themselves, and managing the complexities of multiple ongoing tasks and activities. In this way, individual development takes place in the context of activities modelled or assisted by the more skilled person.

Lecturers also have the duty of assessing the students' understanding to locate the point in the "zone of proximal development" where they require assistance to build on ways, they can learn among themselves, by creating a conducive learning environment for students. Lecturers are agents that influence student motivation, encourage students in their pursuit of excellence in learning by providing them with positive feedback, are involved in positive interactions, remain enthusiastic about students' educational growth, cultivate a positive classroom environment, and have a strong influence on their academic motivation (Rugutt & Chemosit, 2009).

Krause and Coates (2008) allude to the idea that academic learning involves a continuous and iterative dialogue between lecturers and students and the critical role that academic staff play in helping first-year students to engage with their studies and the learning community.

Zuhairi (2019) postulates that the role of instructional design is critical in open and distance education, as distance learners are physically (geographically) separated from their teachers. The instructional design process involves the identification of the learners' needs, the definition of instructional objectives, the design of assessment, and the design of teaching and learning activities to ensure quality instruction. Furthermore, open and distance education institutions are challenged to transform themselves into digital platforms for learning and teaching by taking into account not only the learning needs of the students, but also the technological support required for learning. It is the task of these educators to support distance learning and to make the distance learning experience enjoyable for students.

According to Mensah and Afful-Arthur (2019), providing library services to students who pursue distance education in tertiary institutions is indisputably one of

the greatest thought-provoking and demanding expansions that has transpired in present-day librarianship. This service became relevant because of the increased demand for distance education to satisfy personal and national educational goals. Services offered by an academic library system should support students and faculty by explicatively addressing the needs of instruction, scholarship, and research. The library's support for the distance learners must respond to the mission of the parent institution, as well as the information needs of the students and lecturers.

Mensah and Afful-Arthur (2019) further state that academic libraries acquire and disseminate resources to support research, teaching and learning, but users need to be aware of the existence of the support services offered by libraries in their institutions before they can utilise them.

Shaheen, Mahmood, and Shah (2020) state that the library is the most important SSS because it constitutes a source of self-education, a supply of knowledge and realistic information, intellectual entertainment and a source of light that provides the knowledge of civilisation and enriches one's mental vision. A library is an institution equipped with the responsibility of educating students and providing them with the ability to solve their informational issues. This is possible through utilising the right source as well as the ability to use the information tools provided to get the right information from the right place at the right time. Librarians and other support specialists work as peers in the enterprise to support self-directed student learning, to facilitate the development of students' potential, to advance students' development of knowledge and to serve as a locus of community for students.

Library support is an essential part of quality education and a central service that should be accessible to all students, whether on or off campus. Libraries have a long history of delivering information services to

patrons within their locations and beyond. Traditionally, librarians and libraries have been responsible for providing for the informational needs of students, faculty, and other staff on campus. They also guide people to find appropriate learning materials to complement notes, they build library collections to support syllabi for degree programmes, they act as curators of archival materials, they enhance access to information through inter-library loans and they increase information literacy by training students in the effective use of libraries through bibliographical instruction (Mensah & Afful-Arthur, 2019).

The purpose of the library at any institution of higher learning is the identification, development, coordination, provision and assessment of the value and effectiveness of relevant resources, as well as services to meet the standard and the unique informational and developmental needs of the distance learning community (Gor, 2012). For Zemcova, Manzuch, Baltrnus and Rudzioniene (2010), the library provides information and communication to users, more specifically to students, and functions in an environment where the information is intense, where the time and efficiency of communication is of paramount importance, and where these impact either negatively or positively on the provision of the information services necessary for ensuring the creative decision-making process and effective teamwork. University libraries draw from the information management principles to provide adequate and appropriate services to the hierarchy. Libraries provide essential support services to open and distance education (ODE) students, which are crucial for the development and expansion of educational programmes. Access to these services and resources is essential, irrespective of the student's geographical location, school/college/faculty or programme of study (Bhatti & Jumani, 2012). Thus, libraries are considered to substitute the face-to-face interaction

between students and the institution, just like in the case of traditional and conventional universities. ODL students require access to the full range of library services, which includes reference assistance and bibliographic instruction for interlibrary loans, course reserves, and circulation and information network connections. However, library research and information literacy remain the essential components of the academic learning experience. These services are unique in kind and nature because they are important parts of any teaching and learning journey, hence, they should form an integral part of the teaching and learning journey. Library staff should seriously consider and acknowledge this situation (Fahad, 2012).

First and Altinpulluk (2016) postulate that by providing learners with opportunities to participate in both learning and course groups, social networks are established and are widely used in education environments and have also become the subject of various studies. The use of social media sites in educational activities increases academic performance, satisfaction, engagement, collaboration, and interaction with instructors. Benefitting from social network sites in educational environments provide learners with opportunities to share their opinions, show their creativity and receive feedback from their friends. Providing learners with a wide array of opportunities, social media use in learning environments continues to increase both in traditional classes (inside the classroom) and in ODL environments (outside the classroom). Social media provide instructors with an opportunity not only to support the development of learners' skills and competencies, but also to include them in online classes as part of either open or distance learning systems. Social media can be used to increase interaction between learners and instructors in open and distance learning environments.

Social media strengthen the communication and interaction in ODL

environments. Social media can be used as an effective technological tool to strengthen online communication in ODL environments within the scope of higher education and, when compared to face-to-face learning, the use of social media in open and distance learning environments provides a better communication environment among learners. In the transactional distance approach, open distance learners are those learners who most frequently deal and cope with the "sense of distance". Therefore, due to its heavy use of interaction and communication, it is important for open and distance learners to use social media in an ODL environment, as it allows them the opportunity to interact socially, which decreases their "sense of distance." One of the most widely known applications is the Web 2.0 applications which are used effectively in open and distance learning environments, as well as the social media network Facebook (First & Altinpulluk, 2016).

First and Altinpulluk (2016) further reveal that by providing opportunities for communication, knowledge sharing, making friends, sending private messages, chatting, tagging, creating photograph albums, joining social groups, experiencing different online applications, and playing games, Facebook presents its users with the possibility to create personalised profiles. In addition, Facebook provides a venue for commercial promotions and advertisement applications. With these features, it has not only become popular among learners and instructors but is also an almost integral part of social life. It is the social media network used by most of the students worldwide. When used for learning purposes, Facebook increases communication, interaction, collaboration, and the sharing of resources, which contribute to the development of learning processes. By also providing informal and unstructured learning environments, Facebook provides avenues for learners to achieve their academic

purposes and to work in a collaborative manner.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

In conclusion, the results indicate that, the majority of the participants were employed (84.1%), married (82.6%), female (63.8%), computer literate (32.4%), PhD students (72.1%), older than 46 years (47.8%), living outside South Africa (52.2%) and in South Africa (47.8%); who have regular access to the internet (98.6%). However, they use the library only sometimes (47.8%). While only 2.9% of the participants lived in Asia. These participants registered with the specific Department for the first time in 2016 and with ODL institution for the time, some in 2013 and 2016 and some other in 2019. From the qualitative data, six themes emerged, namely: (1) awareness of the services; (2) provision of information regarding the services; (3) accessibility and availability of the services; (4) support and communication between students and the university; (5) the involvement of the library; and (6) marketing and advertisement of the services.

Based on the findings from the qualitative data, the following measures were generated: increase awareness and enhance the utilisation of these services amongst the participants through information provision about these services; make the services available and accessible to all students irrespective of their levels; encouragement, motivation, enhance support and communication between students, and between students and their lecturers; involve the librarian; market and advertise the services utilising mass media and social networks. The effective and efficient implementation of these measures could increase awareness and enhance utilisation of these services amongst the participants and other students. Thus, students will be able to deal with academic

challenges and improve their academic performance.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENT**

The authors would like to acknowledge postgraduate students who voluntarily participated in this study.

## **COMPETING INTEREST**

No conflict of interest to be reported.

## **AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION**

The first author (the corresponding author) conducted the study as part of his responsibilities as a Post-Doctoral Research Fellow and has written the manuscript(s) of the article. The co-author (mentor) supervised the entire project. Both authors contributed to the final version of the manuscript.

## **FUNDING**

No financial support to be reported for this article.

## **DATA AVAILABILITY**

Data supporting this study's findings are openly available in the repository of the selected institution in South Africa where the study took place and can be released on special request.

## **DISCLAIMER**

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors

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