

Challenges of Online Learning in the Comprehensive Open Distance and Elearning Context – A Case Study of the University of South Africa



Baloyi Gezani¹ 

¹ University of South Africa, College of Graduate Studies, Quality Assurance and Enhancement, Tshwane, South Africa.

ABSTRACT

Online learning continues to challenge teachers and students in higher education. The selected institution for this research has adopted the ODeL model to reach out to students in large numbers. It considers online learning as a strategy to increase access and improve student outcomes. However, tuition costs make online digital learning equal to the classroom. Thus, this study adopted a qualitative research method to explore online learning in depth. Seven (7) participants at The University of South Africa (UNISA) were sampled and invited to take part in the study. The researcher used the Community of Inquiry as a theoretical lens of the study. The Community of Inquiry is one of the most preferred online frameworks in education. The concept of Community of Inquiry which is grounded on John Dewey's view of practical inquiry uses online learning, teaching presence, cognitive presence, and social presence. The findings revealed that the participants have some challenges when supporting students to use the Learning Management System (LMS). These challenges include connectivity issues, student performance in the programme, etc. These challenges pose a threat to student support. The heavy workload also hampered the efforts of the lecturers in their quest to support students on the LMS. It was recommended that more work should be done to equip teaching assistants to support students in Open Distance and eLearning contexts. This study adds to the growing literature on the importance of inculcating online learning in Higher Educational Institutions.

Correspondence

Baloyi Gezani

Email:

baloygp@unisa.ac.za

Publication History

Received: 7th November, 2023

Accepted: 1st July, 2024

Published online:

19th July, 2024

Keywords: *e-Learning, Adult Education, Online Learning, Learning Management System, Open Distance eLearning*

INTRODUCTION

Comprehensive Open Distance and eLearning (CODEL) is becoming popular in South Africa owing to flexible learning. Students can learn while they are working, from anywhere and at any time. The students are accommodated irrespective of race, colour and age.

UNISA moved from correspondence, to distance education and then to Open Distance Learning (ODL). Since 2011, the institution has embarked on ODeL. The institution has integrated technology into its curriculum. Student support is central to academic departments to ensure student success. UNISA's mandate is to respond to the public and private sector needs in South Africa. As the institution is going online, the students experience challenges of student support. The signature modules in the colleges have recently provided challenges to students and much needed support is needed. Institutions are going online and supporting students in their studies is becoming necessary. The institutions have put in support systems

for students, for example, support on the learning management system. UNISA modules are uploaded on the myUnisa learning management system. There are student-to-student and student-to-lecturer interactions. A learning guide is available to all students on the course and contains the course material, activities with feedback, reflections, and additional reading. In addition, the course page has discussion forums on which students can interact with each other and form a community of practice.

Internet connectivity is one of the problematic issues in South Africa. Many students struggle to stay connected in their studies. This is a major problem, especially in developing countries. Even though the government is trying to provide technology to ease connectivity, it remains a challenge to most students in South Africa. Students can use technologies to form a community of practice during teaching and learning on myUnisa. There are challenges of online learning facing students who have registered for the signature modules at UNISA. The researcher was co-teaching the module to undergraduate students in the College of Education at UNISA. One challenge that led to student dropout is the accessibility of the internet to students. Most students are in rural areas and there is no internet connectivity. Some of the students registered for the module are unaware that it is an online learning module and that there is no written examination but only a portfolio that has to be submitted online. However, UNISA is trying to reach out to students who are in rural areas by mobile buses with Internet connectivity as well as the establishment of teacher centres in rural areas. Despite the challenges of online learning through the eLearning model, upon completion, the students should be able to use computer facilities with much.

It is in this regard that this research investigates the role of student support in ODeL looking specifically at the signature module in the College of Education at UNISA. The study also explores the challenges of online student support in ODL and e-learning at UNISA. The main research question asked here is: *What are the challenges of online learning in the distance education context?*

LITERATURE REVIEW

Technology use in higher education has historically enabled new forms of communication and collaboration. The advent of faster communication tools from two-way audio/video to instant messaging (IM) has allowed colleagues and collaborators to transcend the physical distances that separate them, offering a faster transfer of knowledge and quicker feedback on new ideas and results.¹ In these online technologies, students learn anywhere and anytime, and they communicate with different people at different times.

According to Lomas et al., there is a need to continue creating new frontiers for collaboration.² Therefore, it is important to design online learning, taking into consideration the student's needs as well as the South African learning context, for example, the accessibility of technology in students' learning environments. According to Tait, new technologies make both offers and demands in the field of pedagogy, therefore, new technologies present both challenges and opportunities.³ UNISA where this study is conducted, adopted an eLearning model in 2013. The university is a distance learning institution with a diverse student body and has over the years evolved through different stages, from correspondence, distance education, open distance and learning and more recently an ODeL model.⁴ The institution annually registers students in different parts of the country and beyond. Students in rural areas, who might not have had the opportunity to study, can also be reached through the e-learning model. However, it is important to understand the profile of the students in order to be able to support them.

The government of South Africa has mandated UNISA to register a diverse student body and offer them higher education. Given the context of South African education presently, the university is in a good position to advance its vision and mission of e-learning and compete in the global market. This study also examines the innovativeness of the institution in implementing the eLearning model in distance education and supporting the students during online learning. Currently, UNISA is offering compulsory online modules called signature modules across colleges in undergraduate programmes. The students complete learning activities on the myUnisa learning management system. There is student-to-student and

¹ Cyprien Lomas, Michael Burke, and Carie L Page, "Collaboration Tools," *Educause Learning Initiative* 2, no. 11(2008), 2.

² Lomas, Burke, and Page, "Collaboration Tools," 2.

³ Alan Tait, "Planning Student Support for Open and Distance Learning," *Open Learning: The Journal of Open, Distance and e-Learning* 15, no. 3 (2000): 287-99.

⁴ University of South Africa, "Unisa Annual Report 2011," *Letter from the Unisa Chancellor*, 2011, 3.

student-to-teacher interaction in these modules. The students submit a portfolio on myUnisa as a final examination for this module. The ODeL model was introduced to increase the participation rate of students, especially those who are underrepresented in South African higher education. Even though the signature modules require student support is crucial during teaching and learning in these courses. Each college in the university has a compulsory module in one of its undergraduate programmes and the reason is to increase the access rate and online learning of students in higher education.

In its inception in 2013, many students registered for the signature courses. Some students and university stakeholders appreciated the move towards online learning. Even though there are challenges in the signature modules, the numbers continue to increase. The university has put systems and student support structures in place to address the challenges that face the signature modules. UNISA defines the term “learner support” as the range of activities that complement the mass production of materials, which comprise the best-known elements of ODL.⁵

In this study, the words learner support and student support are used interchangeably. Printed course units, television and radio programmes, computer programmes, and so on, replace the lecturer as a means of delivery, and offer much, both in terms of social and geographical access, and in terms of cost-effectiveness, and support students in essential ways.⁶

However, UNISA highlights the fact that student support is a generic term that is applied to a range of services that the university developed to assist students in meeting their learning objectives and in gaining the knowledge and skills they need to succeed in their studies.⁷ Dzakira asserts that in order to support the learners in an ODL environment, distance learning teachers must have the skills and experience to facilitate the learning process by designing and building support that will encourage learning.⁸

UNISA’s model of ODL is a multi-dimensional process that includes all aspects of the learner’s engagement with the institution. For students to succeed there should be a proper students’ support system that is relevant to the students. At Unisa, developments in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) are taking place at a rapid pace and it is becoming increasingly affordable and available to the Unisa stakeholders. ICT is used widely to support not only teaching and learning as the core business of the university but also research, service production, and administration activities.⁹ A large number of students access myUnisa. Students access myUnisa a learning management system, which is interactive and learner-centred. UNISA registers adult students who should be able to work, learn and study whenever and wherever they want to. Most Unisa students are employed adults. Therefore, it is important to balance their work and learning activities. In this regard, online learning will enable students to balance their day-to-day work.¹⁰

The government is increasing the participation rate in higher education, also in remote rural areas through policies, reports and commissions. The majority of students who are in rural areas see UNISA as their only hope for higher education in South Africa. In ODL situations, the educator and the learner are at a distance from each other; learners experience isolation because of this separation from their institution, their lecturers and fellow students.¹¹ ODL has been successful in increasing the number of students but sometimes struggles to improve throughput rates. Part of the reason for this is that students are isolated from their teachers. Dzakira explains that in order to support learners in an ODL environment, distance teachers must facilitate the learning process by designing and building support that will encourage learning.¹²

⁵ University of South Africa, “Open Distance Learning Policy,” 2008, 2. http://www.unisa.ac.za/cmsys/staff/contents/departmental/tuition_policies/docs.

⁶ University of South Africa, “Open Distance Learning Policy,” 2.

⁷ University of South Africa, “Open Distance Learning Policy,” 2.

⁸ Hisham Dzakira, “The Role of Learning Support in Open & Distance Learning: Learners’ Experiences and Perspectives,” *Turkish Online Journal of Distance Education* 6, no. 2 (2005): 95–109.

⁹ University of South Africa, “Open Distance Learning Policy.”

¹⁰ Larry Johnson et al., *The 2010 Horizon Report*. (ERIC, 2010), 4.

¹¹ Greville Rumble, “Student Support in Distance Education in the 21st Century: Learning from Service Management,” *Distance Education* 21, no. 2 (2000): 216–35.

¹² Hisham Dzakira, “The Role of Learning Support in Open & Distance Learning: Learners’ Experiences and Perspectives,” *Turkish Online Journal of Distance Education* 6, no. 2 (2005): 105.

Embi states that students face challenges during online learning due to a lack of internal access, length of response time, and uninteresting learning content and materials.¹³ The universities from a global perspective face challenges of online learning. Therefore challenge of online learning is a global challenge across the universities. Online learning which involves interactions that are mediated through the use of digital technology, is an increasingly prevalent form of learning worldwide (OECD).¹⁴

Despite the growing literature review of the challenges of online learning, few qualitative studies have investigated the challenges of online learning as guided by the Community of Inquiry framework in a developing world context.¹⁵ Therefore, this paper fills the gap by exploring wide challenges faced by comprehensive open distance and e-learning.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Community of Inquiry Theory

This research is grounded on the Community of Inquiry. This is because students form a community of learning on the myUnisa learning management system. The theory has cognitive, social, and teaching presence, which all relate to student support in the learning management system. Garrison et al. coined the Community of Inquiry theoretical framework.¹⁶ The theory measures three presences, namely, social presence, cognitive presence and teaching presence. These elements and their areas of overlap appear in the iconic diagram of the Community of Inquiry Framework.

According to Garrison et al., this framework emerged in the specific context of computer conferencing in higher education, that is, asynchronous, text-based group discussions, rather than from a traditional distance education theoretical perspective which assumed that students work independently from each other.¹⁷ The Community of Inquiry framework is generic in that it is conceptually grounded in theories of teaching and learning in higher education.¹⁸ It has been stated that the two constituting notions of the Community of Inquiry form a pragmatic organising framework of sustainable principles and processes for the purpose of guiding online educational practice.¹⁹ Philosophically, the Community of Inquiry framework is consistent with John Dewey's work on community and inquiry.

The theory provides a conceptual framework that would provide order, heuristic, understanding, and a methodology for studying the potential and effectiveness of computer conferencing. The basic premise and goal of this theory of formal education, consistent with the potential of computer conferencing, was the creation and sustainability of a community of inquiry. The goal was to define, describe, and measure elements of a collaborative and worldwide educational experience. It must be noted that it is a process model.²⁰

Looking at the discussion and assumptions of the theory, the Community of Inquiry in online learning offers flexible learning to students. Engaging in group discussion forums and other learning activities requires Internet connectivity. In this theory, students form a community and there is student-to-student interaction and teaching and learning happens within the community. Therefore, technical challenges, for example, when the *myUnisa* learning management is down, login, inability to follow instructions, and the inability to use computer facilities can pose a threat to learner success in the module. The lecturers and teaching assistants facilitate teaching and learning activities online. This perspective is important and relevant for this study because it connects the students and the lecturers in this community.

¹³ Mohamed Amin Embi, "E-Learning in Malaysian Institutions of Higher Learning: Status, Trends and Challenges," in *International Lifelong Learning Conference (ICLL 2011)*, 2011, 14–15.

¹⁴ OECD, *Innovating Education and Educating for Innovation* (OECD Publishing, 2016).

¹⁵ Desirée J Cranfield et al., "Higher Education Students' Perceptions of Online Learning during COVID-19—A Comparative Study," *Education Sciences* 11, no. 8 (2021): 403; Chengyuan Jia et al., "Adaptation of a Conventional Flipped Course to an Online Flipped Format during the Covid-19 Pandemic: Student Learning Performance and Engagement," *Journal of Research on Technology in Education* 54, no. 2 (2022): 281–301; Yusef Waghid et al., *Higher Teaching and Learning for Alternative Futures: A Renewed Focus on Critical Praxis* (Springer Nature, 2021).

¹⁶ D Randy Garrison, Terry Anderson, and Walter Archer, "The First Decade of the Community of Inquiry Framework: A Retrospective," *The Internet and Higher Education* 13, no. 1–2 (2010): 5–9.

¹⁷ Garrison, Anderson, and Archer, "The First Decade of the Community of Inquiry Framework: A Retrospective," 4.

¹⁸ Garrison, Anderson, and Archer, "The First Decade of the Community of Inquiry Framework: A Retrospective," 5.

¹⁹ K. Swan, D.R. Garrison, and J.C. Richardson, "A Constructivist Approach to Online Learning: The Community of Inquiry Framework.," in *Information Technology and Constructivism in Higher Education: Progressive Learning Frameworks*, ed. C.R. Payne (IGI Global, 2009).

²⁰ Garrison, Anderson, and Archer, "The First Decade of the Community of Inquiry Framework: A Retrospective," 6.

METHODOLOGY

The study used a qualitative approach using student support as a case study at Unisa. The researcher interviewed lecturers and Teaching Assistants at the College of Education. The researcher selected seven participants for the study using purposive sampling. Participants for this study were limited to lecturers and teaching assistants who were responsible for teaching the signature module in an undergraduate programme in the College of Education. The participants were selected based on their teaching experience in supporting students in the module.

Data was collected from the lecturers and teaching assistants who were responsible for the signature course during the face-to-face interviews. Ethical considerations were explained to the participants and consent was given to voluntarily participate in the study. The participants were given consent forms to sign just before the interviews. During the interviews, the participants' responses were recorded by audio recorder (digital recorder). The data will be stored in hard copies and electronically on the researcher's desktop for five years. It will be in a secured location or file that is password protected. The analysis of the qualitative data was systematic and organised so that the researcher could easily locate information in the data set.

The researcher applied to Unisa to get ethical clearance before starting with the fieldwork. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the College of Education. The participants' participation was voluntary in the study project.

PRESENTATION OF RESULTS /FINDINGS

This study set out to find out the challenges of online learning in the distance education context with specific reference to students who have registered for the signature module. The data collected revealed the following challenges that the students face in using the module, namely, socio-economic challenges, technical challenges, plagiarism, learner attrition, technological problems, and student allocation. These are presented in subsequent sections.

(a) Socio-economic Challenges

The field study revealed that the majority of the students are living in rural areas and Internet connectivity is too costly for them. The students have to drive to regional centres to access the Internet when they write the assignments. The students pay large amounts of money to access the internet in towns. Even though Internet cafes are mushrooming in rural towns, they charge an exorbitant amount of money for services to students. The students who stay in provinces like Limpopo and Eastern Cape Province travel to towns in order to access the Internet on the Unisa mobile buses. The Unisa mobile library is currently piloted in Limpopo and the Eastern Cape Province.

(b) Technical Challenges

The students often experience technical challenges on *myUnisa*. During peak hours, the learning management system is sometimes down, and students cannot access the teaching and learning activities. The students continue to experience challenges of logging on to *myUnisa*, submitting assignments, converting MsWord documents into PDF format for submission, etc. These challenges pose a very serious challenge for teaching and learning, especially for students who live in rural areas. It also emerged that some students have not used computer facilities in their learning years and they grapple with *myUnisa* learning management tools. The participants agreed that students experience technical challenges when they log into myUnisa.

Participant 1 stated the negative effect of technical challenges on teaching:

My students have challenges logging on, and I also don't have access to students' marks. Students will complain and say, they don't see their marks, but the assignment has been marked and awarded. It is because they have challenges logging on to the system.

The findings suggest that technical challenges contribute negatively to supporting students in ODeL. Most participants have reported that the *myUnisa* learning management system is slow during peak hours.

(c) Learner Attrition

Learner attrition was mentioned as another challenge, whereby students drop out of the module due to a variety of reasons, for example, failing to submit assignments. It was also noted with great concern that sometimes the students register for the signature module without being aware that it is online and there is no examination written for the module. Therefore, the throughput pass rate of the module continues to decline. Some students also do not complete the module due to some contextual challenges and this is what Participant 4 had to say:

I think other problems could be financial problems because some students register for many modules and in the end, they are not able to pay, and they end up deactivated, this is what one of them told me.

One participant lamented the lack of learning resources as another challenge, which excludes students from learning. It emerged from the findings that some students did not have laptops and computers as such, and as a result, they were not able to access teaching and learning materials. Participant 1 confirmed this by stating that,

To me, one of the challenges that I have experienced is that students don't have computers at home and do not have access to internet connectivity. They cannot hand in assignments on time. Apart from this, some have family problems, I also tell them that if they have an emergency they can always email me or the lecturer and ask for an extension. Some of them struggle with how to use myUnisa, where to get the module content, and where to submit the assignments.

Participant 6 further stated:

Yes, sometimes I do have the challenge of students who don't read, they don't read the module content so they ask a lot of questions that I have already answered. Sometimes I have to answer the same questions 20 times, like for example, two weeks before assignment submission, I will post details about the assignment. I would attach a rubric so that they can see what is expected from them. However, I will always spend a lot of time explaining.

The participants kept on answering the same questions because students did not read the instructions of the module. It is important to read the instructions in order to understand the content and context of the module. Participant 3 had other challenges, which she shared:

Some of them have a problem submitting a project and portfolio. In my view, it seems that they don't read the instructions. They end up submitting the wrong work, and after posting, they just realise that they have submitted the wrong work, and then they want to resubmit, which is why they start communicating. For example, if they don't know what a collage is, they will start writing the assignment about the college of After that, I will send a post and explain to them what to insert when they write about the collage and give some explanations of the pictures that they have added. Then they will ask where to put the pictures, and when you read the assignment, you will realise they wrote about a college instead of a collage.

The challenges of students are varied and can decrease throughput rates if left unattended. Some students in their rural areas might not have electricity, it is clear that students who live in semi-urban areas have electricity but they may lack internet connectivity.

(d) Technological Problems

Some students do not have access to computer facilities to write the assignments. The students who are in rural areas board the taxis and buses to town in order to access the Internet. Participant 3 stated:

Some of the students find e-learning to be more difficult because they don't know how to scan and they don't understand how to create a PDF document. Computer training before they start with the module is necessary and important so that they can be familiar with how to scan documents, and how to submit the assignment. A lot of them have difficulties with that, so training will be key in that regard.

According to this participant, students find it difficult to use the myUnisa learning management tools to learn and this hampers communication between the teaching assistants and lecturers.

Participant 4 said: *First is information, they should be informed from the beginning; this is an online module and what is expected from students, to ensure that they will be getting the necessary support. They use teaching assistants and if a teaching assistant is not available for students, it creates problems for them. They are trying to get somebody who has to support them, so I wish we could not rely solely on teaching assistants, but that the module is handled by lecturers. For instance, there are challenging things such as the system being closed and there is nothing that can be done. I also realised that some teaching assistants will disappear for a month, and during the whole month students are struggling, so by the time the teaching assistant is available, it may be too late and you need to mark all the assignments before you submit the portfolio of evidence. So the students need constant support, someone who is going to communicate with them on a daily basis, what needs to be done from the beginning, so that even if the student does not get the support from the beginning, the information is there till the end of the semester.*

A teaching assistant mentioned the challenges some students who have registered for the module, are facing. For instance, some students find studying from a distance very difficult and as such struggle to succeed in the module. Participant 3 said:

Some of the challenges are that students don't read instructions and students don't submit on time. They will email us and say we are not able to submit, then I will tell them that I posted on the announcements many times and that I have also emailed them. Furthermore, some of the students copy other students' assignments or hand in the wrong assignments, and they get low marks.

Some students also find it difficult to manage time when they study in an open-distance learning setting. Almost all participants who have been interviewed indicated that some students struggle with learning in the module and they copy from other students' work. They are not aware that copying from other student's work is not allowed. Participant 2 further argued:

A lot, a lot [of challenges] in the first year, they were struggling and most of them focused on the compulsory assignments, but lately, all of them are submitting all their assignments and there is a great improvement, those who are in the rural areas have their cell phones assisting them a lot, and they are coming on board now.

Participant 2 concluded that:

I think some of them have never used this technological gadget, maybe we can have a conference call, show them how to study on this online module, and respond online, that will help. I think they must be trained. Some of them submitted tutorial letters instead of assignments, and I even asked some students to submit their work, but they never did.

e. Student Allocation

The students are allocated to the teaching assistants for teaching and learning. The teaching assistants are allocated a certain quota of students to guide and support them with their assignments. The teaching assistants are employed by the university on a part-time basis. Therefore, participants for this paper were teaching assistants who were responsible for teaching the signature module in an undergraduate programme at the College of Education. The participants were selected based on their teaching experience in supporting students in the module. The Teaching assistants were chosen because they had the most experience of working as teaching assistants for the module.

DISCUSSION

The majority of the students are living in rural areas and Internet connectivity is too costly for them. The students have to drive to regional centres to access the Internet when they write the assignments. The students pay large amounts of money to access the internet in towns. Even though Internet cafes are mushrooming in rural towns, they charge an exorbitant amount of money to provide Internet services to students. The students who stay in provinces like Limpopo and Eastern Cape Province travel to towns in order to access the Internet on the Unisa mobile buses. The Unisa mobile library is currently piloted in Limpopo and the Eastern Cape Province. The responses the researcher got from the participants are that internet connectivity is costly to students.

The first theme of e-learning and its subthemes, namely, technology, online learning, digital learning, and virtual learning, generally indicated some limited understanding of e-learning in terms of student support in open distance and e-learning contexts. The responses further suggested that there should be more work to be done to equip teaching assistants to support students in Open Distance and eLearning contexts.

The students often experience technical challenges on myUnisa. During peak hours, the learning management system is sometimes down, and students cannot access the teaching and learning activities. The students continue to experience challenges of logging on to myUnisa, submitting assignments, converting MsWord documents into PDF format for submission, etc. These challenges pose a very serious challenge for teaching and learning, especially for students who live in rural areas. It also emerged that some students did not use computer facilities in their learning years and so they grapple with myUnisa learning management tools. The participants agreed that students experience technical challenges when they log into myUnisa.

The lack of learning resources could cause attrition of students in the module. During the interviews, it emerged that some students do not have laptops or internet connectivity and this could lead to attrition of students. Some students do not have access to computer facilities to write the assignments. The students who are in rural areas board the taxis and buses to town in order to access the Internet.

A teaching assistant mentioned the challenges some students who have registered for the module, are facing. For instance, some students find studying at a distance very difficult, and as such they struggle to succeed in the module.

The institution employs teaching assistants who are responsible for teaching and supporting students. Therefore, managing time for both students and teaching assistants becomes crucial in this context. Unisa does not offer full-time classes and it is therefore imperative for students to manage their time for teaching and learning activities. It emerged that the training programmes for teaching assistants take a few hours, which is not sufficient to equip them to support the students fully.

Discussion Summary

The rationale for this research was to explore the challenges of online learning in the comprehensive open distance and e-learning. Data was collected from the participants using face-to-face interviews. The data was analysed, presented and it was coded, organised, categorised, and themes were identified. The responses given suggest that the participants do not always understand the concept of e-learning, but there is an understanding in terms of student support in the CODEL context. The responses further show that there should be more work done to equip teaching assistants to support students in an open distance and e-learning context. Lecturers are module leaders who act as overseers for teaching and learning activities. Lecturers as module leaders deal with administration activities of the module on a day-to-day basis. The

institution employs teaching assistants who are responsible for teaching and supporting students on a contractual basis. Therefore, managing time for both students and teaching assistants becomes crucial in this context. Unisa does not offer full-time classes and it is therefore imperative for students to manage their time for teaching and learning activities. The lecturers shared information on how the module is administered in the programme. The CODEL model offers flexible teaching and learning. The students interacted with lecturers and teaching assistants anywhere and anytime. Teaching and learning took place on myUnisa. CODEL gives students an opportunity to learn on their own time if they are working. The participants pointed out that the signature module should be continuously improved in order to remain credible.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Some of the recommendations that should be taken by Unisa is, that there should be student monitoring to ensure success. The feedback should be given to students promptly. Unisa must come up with a mechanism to monitor online students. Learner assessment has to be improved to avoid plagiarism. The students should be made aware that plagiarism is a punishable offence. In addressing plagiarism, the lecturers and teaching assistants must revise assignments timeously. The lecturers should come up with new assessment activities to curb plagiarism.

The students need to be properly informed about the online nature of the signature module. Some are just surprised when they have already registered the module. The students need to be informed before they even register that this is an online module. Also, students should be taught computer literacy before registering for the module. This will enable the students to understand and learn skills to, for instance, attach documents, write and email, and convert a Word document into a PDF document. Lecturers should put systems and structures of the signature module in place right from the beginning. There should be proper communication between the lecturers and the teaching assistants.

There should be enough infrastructure that will enable accessibility and access in learning centres. The technology and computer facilities provided by Unisa should be directed to teaching and learning activities. Partnerships with Internet providers in rural areas will improve the accessibility of the internet to Unisa students. The students who do not have Internet connectivity are not able to complete assignments on time. The students might engage in plagiarism because they do not have computer facilities.

The students should be trained on how to use computers when they register with Unisa. When students register, the computer facilities of the students should be included. A device such as a laptop should be included in registration fees. The students who have laptops should be excluded. Furthermore, the myUnisa learning management system should always be maintained to run smoothly, especially during peak hours.

It emerged that the training programmes for teaching assistants take a few hours, which is not sufficient to equip them to support the students fully. Therefore, there should be a continuous professional development of teaching assistants to ensure student support. The working hours of teaching assistants should be increased to ensure flexible learning. The teaching assistants should be trained on how to submit student's work for originality checks. The students should submit assignments with originality reports.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to explore online learning in depth at UNISA. Based on the findings and discussion, partnerships with Internet providers in rural areas will improve the accessibility of Internet services to students. The students also need to be informed that the module is offered online before they register. The participants have further raised the point that if there is proper planning, there will be fewer problems than the lecturers and the teaching assistants experiencing now. The challenges of student support that the participants gave are varied. For example, there are students who come from areas where there are no computers. Some students who register for the module do not know that it is purely online. If these issues are duly resolved, students will be well-equipped to use the module efficiently and effectively which will enhance online learning in Higher Educational Institutions.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Cranfield, Desireé J, Andrea Tick, Isabella M Venter, Renette J Blignaut, and Karen Renaud. "Higher Education Students' Perceptions of Online Learning during COVID-19—A Comparative Study." *Education Sciences* 11, no. 8 (2021): 403.
- Dzakaria, Hisham. "The Role of Learning Support in Open & Distance Learning: Learners' Experiences and Perspectives." *Turkish Online Journal of Distance Education* 6, no. 2 (2005): 95–109.
- Embi, Mohamed Amin. "E-Learning in Malaysian Institutions of Higher Learning: Status, Trends and Challenges." In *International Lifelong Learning Conference (ICLLL 2011)*, 14–15, 2011.
- Garrison, D Randy, Terry Anderson, and Walter Archer. "The First Decade of the Community of Inquiry Framework: A Retrospective." *The Internet and Higher Education* 13, no. 1–2 (2010): 5–9.
- Jia, Chengyuan, Khe Foon Hew, Shurui Bai, and Weijiao Huang. "Adaptation of a Conventional Flipped Course to an Online Flipped Format during the Covid-19 Pandemic: Student Learning Performance and Engagement." *Journal of Research on Technology in Education* 54, no. 2 (2022): 281–301.
- Johnson, Larry, Alan Levine, Rachel Smith, and Sonja Stone. *The 2010 Horizon Report*. ERIC, 2010.
- Lomas, Cyprien, Michael Burke, and Carie L Page. "Collaboration Tools." *Educause Learning Initiative* 2, no. 11 (2008).
- OECD. *Innovating Education and Educating for Innovation*. OECD Publishing, 2016.
- Rumble, Greville. "Student Support in Distance Education in the 21st Century: Learning from Service Management." *Distance Education* 21, no. 2 (2000): 216–35.
- Swan, K., D.R. Garrison, and J.C. Richardson. "A Constructivist Approach to Online Learning: The Community of Inquiry Framework." In *Information Technology and Constructivism in Higher Education: Progressive Learning Frameworks*, edited by C.R. Payne. IGI Global, 2009.
- Tait, Alan. "Planning Student Support for Open and Distance Learning." *Open Learning: The Journal of Open, Distance and e-Learning* 15, no. 3 (2000): 287–99.
- University of South Africa. "Unisa Annual Report 2011." *Letter from the Unisa Chancellor*, 2011.
- University of South Africa. "Open Distance Learning Policy," 2008.
http://www.unisa.ac.za/cmsys/staff/contents/departmental/tuition_policies/docs.
- Waghid, Yusef, Faiq Waghid, Judith Terblanche, and Zayd Waghid. *Higher Teaching and Learning for Alternative Futures: A Renewed Focus on Critical Praxis*. Springer Nature, 2021.

ABOUT AUTHOR

Gezani Baloyi is the Head for Quality Assurance and Enhancement, College of Graduate Studies, University of South Africa. He taught at secondary and primary schools in the Limpopo Province, South Africa. He has nearly 21 years of teaching experience. While as a teacher, he attended teacher education conferences and workshops. His research interests are Adult Education, Open Distance Learning, E-Learning, Rural Education, Learner support, Quality Assurance etc.