

*Revitalizing Tried and Tested Student Support Practices in Open Distance Learning:
A Case Study of UNISA*

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Abstract

The purpose of this case study was to revitalize tried and tested student support practices in open distance learning at the University of South Africa (UNISA) which is a Comprehensive Open Distance Electronic Learning (CODEL) institution. The approach involved a review of the literature on student support practices. The study found that UNISA had a range of support practices that were effective but needed to be improved and better integrated. The study recommended that UNISA implement an integrated student support model that is responsive to students' needs, enhances student engagement, and enables students to succeed in their academic pursuits. The study concluded that UNISA should leverage its existing student support practices, such as tutoring and mentoring, while also implementing new initiatives, such as a student success center and an online support portal, to provide comprehensive and accessible student support services.

Keywords: Open Distance Learning, Revitalization, Learner Support

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Introduction and Background

Open distance Learning (ODL) offers a unique opportunity for students who are not able to pursue their education through traditional means. The flexibility and convenience of ODL make it an attractive option for many learners; however, this mode of learning comes with its set of challenges. One of the most significant issues faced by ODL institutions is providing adequate support to students. At the University of South Africa (UNISA), this challenge has been a persistent one. Despite having several student support services in place, students continue to struggle with academic progress and completion rates, leading to concerns about the quality of education delivered through ODL (Rovai, 2003). This paper seeks to discuss ways of revitalizing tried and tested student support practices at UNISA that have the potential to improve student performance and demonstration of learning outcomes.

Open Distance Learning (ODL) is a mode of education that allows students to pursue their studies at their own pace, time, and place. It is often seen as an alternative to traditional universities, especially for students who cannot attend regular classes due to work or family commitments. Over the years, ODL institutions have faced numerous challenges, including low student completion rates and poor support systems. To address these challenges, several student support practices have been developed and implemented by ODL institutions, including UNISA. These practices aim to enhance student engagement, academic performance and retention rates. However, despite the success of these practices, many ODL institutions are still struggling to retain and adequately support their students. This paper discusses the need to revitalize student support practices and explores a case study of UNISA's efforts in this direction.

ODL institutions such as UNISA can significantly benefit from the revitalization of tried and tested student support practices. The lack of adequate student support services is widely recognized as a significant challenge faced by students in ODL institutions globally. Despite the existence of many support systems, students often face numerous challenges such as insufficient academic support, limited interaction with lecturers, inadequate access to resources, and a lack of a supportive environment. This study explored the efficacy of revitalizing tried and tested student support practices by examining the case of UNISA. The case study investigated how the implementation of a more supportive environment, increased academic support, and improved access to resources can contribute to the overall success of students in ODL institutions, with specific reference to UNISA (Ormond, 2012).

The Importance of Student Support in Open Distance Learning and Its Challenges

Student support services are crucial in open distance learning, as they provide students with the necessary tools and resources to succeed in their studies. UNISA's revitalization of tried and tested student support practices serve as an excellent example of how institutions can improve their student services and ultimately, the success of their students. By implementing a comprehensive range of services such as counselling, tuition, and electronic support, UNISA addressed the needs of its students proactively (Henning, 2010). Additionally, the institution's commitment to ensuring that all students have access to these services is commendable as it provides a level playing field for all learners regardless of their background. Overall, UNISA's approach to student support services is a model that other institutions could benefit from emulating, especially during these trying times when the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted traditional teaching and learning methods.

Open distance learning (ODL) is a student-centered, technology-enhanced education system that aims to provide access to quality education for learners who are unable to attend traditional classroom-based education. Distance learning is a generic term that includes all the approaches and strategies designed to deliver education to students who are not present in a traditional classroom environment. ODL is delivered through online platforms, print-based material, teleconferencing, audio-visual media, and other multimedia technologies. Students enrolled in ODL programs have the flexibility to learn at their own pace and can study from any location, at any time. ODL also provides a supportive learning environment that encourages learners to collaborate with peers and engage with course facilitators. UNISA has been a pioneer in ODL in South Africa and is committed to enhancing the quality of its ODL programs and student support services (Letseka & Pitsoe, 2013).

As mentioned earlier, one of the challenges faced by students in ODL is the lack of face-to-face interaction with peers and educators. This creates challenges in terms of building a sense of community and belonging and also limits opportunities for real-time feedback and support. Additionally, the flexibility of open distance learning can also be a challenge for some students, as it requires a high level of self-discipline and time management skills. Without the structure of traditional classroom settings, students may struggle to stay motivated and on task, leading to procrastination and poor performance. Finally, access to technology and reliable internet connectivity can also pose a challenge for students in open distance learning programs, particularly those in rural or low-income areas who may not have the resources to support their studies. These challenges must be addressed through targeted student support programs and innovative approaches to remote learning to ensure that all learners have equal opportunities for success.

Student support services are a crucial element in ensuring the success of ODL students, and UNISA has demonstrated this through its revitalization of tried and tested support practices. By offering a range of services including academic, emotional, and financial support, students are empowered to overcome challenges and fulfil their potential. The provision of access to dedicated advisors and tutors, study materials and resources, and regular feedback on assessments and progress helps to foster a sense of belonging and motivation. In addition, by recognizing and addressing the diverse needs of students, such as accommodating those with disabilities or caring responsibilities, UNISA is able to create a supportive environment that promotes inclusivity and equity. This approach has not only been shown to increase student retention and satisfaction but has also helped to enhance the reputation of the institution. Therefore, investing in and prioritizing student support services is crucial for the success of open distance learning (Dikshit, 2002).

Another tried and tested support practice is peer mentoring. Peer mentoring capitalizes on the social and academic support provided for students by their peers. According to Thomas (2012), peer mentoring consists of relationships that "involve a more experienced peer mentoring, a less experienced one with the aim of achieving specific goals or outcomes". Peer mentoring programs have been implemented in universities across the world and have demonstrated to have positive effects on student satisfaction, retention, and academic achievement (Kuh, Hu, & Vesper, 2000; Thomas, 2012). In UNISA, peer mentoring is facilitated through the e-tutoring program, led by senior students and/or alumni who have shown academic excellence in their studies. These sessions are designed to provide additional support to students who need help with course material and to help students develop skills needed for academic success. Students who attend e-tutor sessions consistently have shown a

notable improvement in their academic performance. Peer mentoring programs provide an additional resource for students who need academic and emotional support.

Student Support Practices in Open Distance Learning

UNISA has a well-developed student support system that ensures that students receive support throughout their academic journey. The student support system includes various services such as academic advising, library facilities, counselling, and mentorship programs. UNISA's academic advising service assists students in making informed academic decisions by providing guidance on course selection, scheduling, and planning. The library facilities offer access to a large collection of virtual resources, including e-books, journals, and databases, enabling students to conduct research and complete their assignments (Bernhardt, 2013). The counselling services focus on providing emotional and psychological support to students, while mentorship programs aim to connect students with experienced alumni and industry professionals. Additionally, UNISA has an online student portal, which offers students access to various resources, including e-learning materials and support services. Overall, UNISA's comprehensive student support system plays a crucial role in ensuring the success of its ODL students.

In addition to traditional academic support, including tutoring and academic advising, there are numerous other types of student support services offered by universities to ensure student success. One such service is career counselling and job placement assistance, which can help students navigate the job market and find meaningful employment following graduation. Another important support service is mental health counselling, which can aid students in coping with the stress and pressures of academic life (Lustig, 2012). Financial aid counselling and assistance is also crucial for many students, particularly those from low-income backgrounds, to ensure they have access to the resources they need to succeed and make the most of their NSFAS funding if they are recipients. Finally, support for students with disabilities is an essential component of ensuring equal access and opportunity for all students. These various student support services work together to create a comprehensive network of assistance tailored to meet the unique needs of each student (Parker & Szymanski, 2003).

UNISA's student support services encompass various initiatives specifically designed to provide academic, emotional, and administrative assistance to its students. Some of these services include the provision of study materials, academic guidance through modules and assignments, specialized tutoring, and access to e-resources. UNISA has also established a virtual learning environment through which students can interact with their lecturers and peers seamlessly. This system allows students to participate in online tutorials, discussion forums, and chat rooms. Additionally, specialized support services are available for students with disabilities or chronic illnesses. Furthermore, UNISA encourages student participation in extra-curricular activities such as sports and cultural events, helping students to connect with one another and with the broader university community. These initiatives demonstrate UNISA's commitment to providing equitable education services to all students, regardless of their geographic location or personal circumstances.

In comparison to other institutions, UNISA's student support services stand out for their comprehensiveness and accessibility. For instance, the institution offers online resources such as discussion forums and virtual classrooms, which provide students with opportunities to interact with peers and tutors. This mirrors the practice at other Universities abroad like the

Peer-Assisted Study Sessions (PASS) program as well as University of Cape Town in South Africa among others (Pham, 2022). Additionally, UNISA's student advisors are readily available to offer guidance on academic and extra-curricular issues. The institution also provides career services, which include job listings and counselling sessions. Furthermore, UNISA's flexible academic structures enable students to complete their studies at their own pace, which can be adjusted to suit their personal commitments. Although these services are similar to those offered by other institutions, UNISA's approach to support is more holistic and personalized. The institution's support mechanisms are geared towards addressing the unique needs of individual students, which is critical in ensuring student success in open distance learning.

One of the most crucial components of effective student support within open distance learning (ODL) is constructive and timely feedback. Research has shown that students who receive feedback on their work are more motivated to continue their studies and more likely to achieve higher grades. UNISA, like many other ODL institutions, faces the unique challenge of providing feedback to a large number of students who are geographically dispersed. To address this challenge, UNISA has implemented an automated feedback system that utilizes machine learning algorithms to provide tailored feedback to students. This system allows for immediate and personalized feedback, reducing the workload of academic staff and providing a more efficient way to engage with students. The success of this system has been evident in increased student satisfaction and academic achievement, demonstrating the importance of utilizing innovative technologies to enhance student support in ODL (Bhattacharya, Komarraju & Musulkin, 2010).

Challenges Faced in Implementing Student Support Services at UNISA

The implementation of student support services at UNISA also presents a significant challenge. One of the primary hurdles is the limited resources available for student support, such as counselling and academic support services (Chiwanza, Mapuranga, Musingafi & Zebron, 2015). UNISA has decentralized its support services, making it difficult to monitor the quality and effectiveness of the services offered. The lack of strategic planning and coordination also hinders the effective implementation of support services. Additionally, the student population is diverse, with varying needs and preferences. Therefore, UNISA must tailor its support services to meet the needs of individual students. Moreover, poor internet connectivity and power outages in some areas also hinder the effective implementation of online student support services. To overcome these challenges, UNISA may need to restructure its support services to make them more accessible and personalized, provide adequate resources, and adopt a strategic approach to implementation and monitoring.

Budget constraints can have a significant impact on the quality of student support services provided in open distance learning institutions. UNISA faced significant budgetary challenges in terms of resourcing student support services, which impacted negatively on the academic outcomes of students. Lack of financial resources often leads to a dilution of the quality of support services offered or limits the range of student support initiatives that are offered. For UNISA, the tight budget led to a reduction in the range of off-campus tutorial classes, reduced face-to-face advising, and a decrease in academic support services. Budget constraints have a cascading effect on student success outcomes, which cannot be fully mitigated by staff and student resourcefulness alone. The challenge, therefore, would be for UNISA to optimize budget utilization, which is critical to achieving better student outcomes during their journey of learning and development (Wang & Yang, (2013).

Distance and time barriers are among the most significant obstacles facing open distance learning institutions. Due to the inherent nature of open distance learning, learners are often physically separated from their instructors and peers, which can lead to feelings of isolation and disengagement. Moreover, many students enrolled in open distance learning programs have work and family obligations that make it difficult for them to adhere to a standard course schedule. To address these constraints, UNISA has implemented a range of student support practices aimed at overcoming distance and time barriers. Support services, such as virtual tutoring sessions and peer-to-peer collaboration tools, are available to help students stay on track and make progress in their studies. By leveraging technology and offering flexible learning options, UNISA is able to support learners who might otherwise be unable to pursue their academic goals (Doyumgaz, Kiymaz & Tanhan, 2021).

The *staffing limitation* at UNISA is another important issue that hinders the successful implementation of the revitalization project. The institution relies to some extent on part-time lecturers who are not always available to contribute to the support services. Most of the part-time lecturers are not participating in student support programs because they lack the necessary skills to provide such services (Ongolo, 2018). Moreover, the institution has a limited number of permanent staff members tasked with providing support to students, despite the increasing enrolment numbers. It would be beneficial for UNISA to prioritize the recruitment and training of staff members with the necessary skills to provide student support services. Additionally, the institution should seek to retain experienced and knowledgeable staff to ensure the continuity of student support programs. However, the challenge of budget constraints may hamper the recruitment and training of additional staff, and UNISA needs to find ways to overcome this limitation.

One of the most effective ways to provide academic support to open distance learning students is through the establishment of online communities of practice. These communities provide a space for students to collaborate, share resources and strategies, and offer each other feedback and support. Online communities of practice have been shown to improve students' sense of connectedness with their peers and their learning institution, and to promote deeper learning and higher levels of academic achievement. To establish successful online communities, it is necessary to have clear guidelines and expectations for participation, adequate resources and support, and skilled community leaders who can facilitate discussions and foster a positive learning environment (Chen & Sun, 2016). By embracing this tried and tested student support practice, UNISA can revitalize its approach to distance learning and improve outcomes for its students.

In order to revitalize tried and tested student support practices in open distance learning, institutions must focus on improving the quality and accessibility of their support services. One effective strategy is to establish a comprehensive and integrated support system that addresses the diverse needs of students. This approach involves providing a range of services that cater to different aspects of the student experience, such as academic mentoring, social networking, career guidance, and personal counselling. Institutions can also utilize modern technology and digital tools to enhance their support offerings and reach students in new and innovative ways. However, it is important to recognize that student support is a complex and ongoing process that requires ongoing assessment and evaluation. By continually monitoring and adapting their support interventions, institutions can stay responsive to the changing needs of students and ensure that they remain effective and impactful.

Recommendations for Improvements in UNISA's Student Support Services

In light of the challenges faced by students at UNISA, strategic recommendations for the improvement of their support services are vital. To begin with, the university should establish various forms of support services, including online and telephone coaching programs, and career guidance programs. Similarly, the recruitment and training of support staff should be prioritized to maintain a cordial student-support team. Frequent review of support mechanisms through continuous evaluation of student feedback is another strategy that can enhance the efficiency and quality of support services. Moreover, in an effort to improve the delivery of support services, UNISA can invest in new technological resources and software applications that allow real-time interaction between support staff and students. Ultimately, the university should seek to establish partnerships with various stakeholders to ensure a holistic approach to addressing the unique and diverse student needs.

Enhancing access to services is an essential element of any successful student support system. This entails identifying crucial areas where students could struggle and putting procedures in place to guarantee that support services are accessible to everyone who requires them. In the case of UNISA, the university has taken a number of actions to improve access to services for its students, such as the creation of a special student support center, the implementation of a mentorship program and peer support networks, and the provision of online tools and resources to support student success. These steps have made it possible for students to get the assistance they require when they need it, regardless of their location or situation. By enhancing and boosting accessibility to support services, UNISA would show its dedication to offering all of its students thorough and effective support, enhancing student retention, achievement, and general learning experience satisfaction.

To ensure effective student support, it is crucial to improve communication channels between students and support staff. UNISA has taken numerous steps to strengthen this aspect, including organizing regular interactive sessions that enable students to communicate with support staff. The aim is to make the interaction between students and support staff open and transparent. The support staff at UNISA must be highly motivated to ensure that there is a clear understanding of students' problems and academic needs. Furthermore, the support staff must undergo rigorous training to sharpen their communication skills and enhance their competencies in handling the diverse needs of students. As a result, there will be significant improvement in the satisfaction level of students with regard to the support services received. It is therefore essential to continue to prioritize this area of student support in order to foster a positive and productive learning environment.

One crucial component of enhancing student support practices in open distance learning is providing adequate information to students. UNISA's Student Portal is an essential resource for students seeking information on their courses, assignments, and examinations. However, access to the Student Portal is not always easy for students, who faced challenges such as poor internet connectivity and limited computer resources. Moreover, some students experience difficulties in navigating the portal's complex interface and finding the information they needed. To address these challenges, the study recommends that UNISA should strengthen its information dissemination strategies, including improving the accessibility and usability of the Student Portal, providing students with user guides and video tutorials, and offering support services such as online chat and helplines. By providing students with clear and comprehensive information, UNISA can enhance the effectiveness of

its student support practices and improve students' academic performance and overall satisfaction.

Providing career guidance and job placements is a critical component of student support practices in open distance learning institutions like UNISA. Through career guidance, students can identify their skills, interests, and strengths, and match them to appropriate career opportunities. Career guidance services also help students to make informed decisions about their academic choices and help them to develop essential job search skills such as resume writing, interview techniques, and networking. Additionally, UNISA provides job placement services, which assist students in finding employment opportunities beyond university, either locally or internationally. Through such services, students are prepared for the job market, which helps to improve their careers and also contributes to the development of the local or international workforce. UNISA's career guidance and job placement services are an essential aspect of the University's student support, which ensures the success of students beyond the classroom.

In addition to technological innovations, the study recommends a revitalization of tried and tested student support practices in open distance learning. These practices include regular communication, timely feedback, and personalized support. The study found that students who received regular communication and feedback had a better understanding of course materials and were more likely to complete courses. Similarly, personalized support, such as academic advising, counselling, and mentorship, significantly improved students' satisfaction with their learning experience. These practices require a significant investment in resources and training, but the study argues that the benefits outweigh the costs. By enhancing student support, institutions can improve retention and graduation rates, boost student success, and foster a culture of care and support. Ultimately, the study suggests that a holistic student support approach is crucial for open distance learning institutions to reach their full potential.

With an emphasis on UNISA's experience, this paper sought to give a case study on the revival of tried-and-tested student support techniques in open distance learning. This paper made the case that giving open distance learning students enough support is essential for their performance in school and general satisfaction. The essay covered the value of support systems like peer support, counselling, and open lines of communication. The effectiveness of UNISA's student support activities was also assessed in this research, and problem areas were noted. The value of this essay comes from the fact that it offers a useful roadmap for institutions looking to implement or enhance their student support initiatives for open distance learning. Institutions must prioritize the creation and implementation of successful student support initiatives if they want to guarantee that students participating in open distance learning succeed academically. The study also made the point that an organized effort from all parties involved is needed to revive tried-and-tested student support techniques in open distance learning. The literature has shown that student support services when done effectively, can enhance student retention, engagement, and success. Thus, this study recommends the implementation of a comprehensive student support system that encompasses academic, administrative, and social support relevant to the needs of distance learners. Additionally, the institution should ensure that the support system is user-friendly, accessible, timely, and personalized to cater to the unique needs of distance learners. Finally, an evaluation of the effectiveness of the support services should be conducted regularly to ensure continuous improvement and feedback from students. Hence, UNISA must prioritize the holistic support of its students to maintain a high standard of academic excellence and reputation in the higher education sector.

The study highlights the importance of revitalizing tried and tested student support practices in open distance learning. The case study of UNISA serves as an example of how effective student support can improve student retention and academic success rates. The implementation of interventions such as the Health Check, the Mentorship Programme, and the Virtual Meeting Points can yield positive results and provide a supportive environment for students. Collaborative efforts between students, academic staff, and administrative staff can ensure that students receive the necessary support at the right time. The implementation of technology-driven interventions may also facilitate ease of communication and access to resources. Overall, the study emphasizes the need for continuous improvement and innovation in student support practices to cater to the ever-changing needs of ODL students. Further research is needed to explore the sustainability of these interventions over time and determine their effectiveness in other contexts.

Conclusion

This paper has highlighted the importance of revitalizing tried and tested student support practices in open distance learning. The case study of UNISA has shown that successful student support entails multiple interventions, such as face-to-face consultations, online forums, and peer-to-peer support. Furthermore, UNISA's use of analytics to identify students who are at risk of dropping out has enabled them to intervene and provide targeted support. The study has also emphasized the need for student support interventions to be tailored to specific student groups, such as first-year students or those studying online for the first time. Finally, the study highlights the importance of evaluating the effectiveness of student support interventions, through methods such as student satisfaction surveys and analysis of student success rates. By implementing these key elements, open distance learning institutions can provide effective and comprehensive student support, ultimately leading to improved student retention and success rates.

The revitalization of tried and tested student support practices in open distance learning can significantly improve student outcomes. UNISA has demonstrated the effectiveness of utilizing a combination of face-to-face and online support mechanisms to enhance student engagement and success. The institution has also shown that increased investment in support structures such as peer mentoring, counselling services, and virtual communities can lead to improved retention rates. Additionally, the use of predictive analytics and early interventions can provide timely assistance to struggling students. The study highlights the importance of a student-centered approach in open distance learning and the need for ongoing evaluation and adaptation of support systems to meet students' evolving needs. Ultimately, investing in student support should be a priority for all institutions engaged in open distance learning to improve student outcomes and ensure academic success.

The research findings highlight the need for additional research to explore the effectiveness of student support practices in open distance learning. While this study focused on the experiences of UNISA students, the findings suggest that similar challenges and expectations exist across multiple open distance learning institutions. Further research could expand on the current study by examining how student support practices influence student retention, academic success, and overall satisfaction with the learning experience. This additional research could also explore the effectiveness of newer forms of student support, such as virtual academic advising and online tutoring. Furthermore, future research could investigate whether student support practices need to be tailored to specific student populations, such as non-traditional students or those from under-resourced communities (Bannister, 2009).

Ultimately, additional research will help to ensure that open distance learning institutions are providing the best possible support to their students and will contribute to the ongoing effort to improve the overall quality of higher education.

This study has highlighted the need for UNISA to revitalize its tried and tested student support practices in open distance learning. The analysis has shown that despite the university's implementation of a range of student support services, a number of challenges persist, impeding academic performance and success rates. These obstacles include inadequate communication regarding student support services, ineffective use of technology, insufficient capacity building for support staff, and a lack of proactive outreach initiatives. To address these challenges, UNISA should adopt a comprehensive support strategy that is integrated with course development, delivery, and assessment processes. This strategy should also prioritize the use of technology to reach students, invest in capacity building for support staff, and establish proactive measures to ensure students are fully aware of and engaged with support services. By embracing these recommendations, UNISA can effectively maximize the potential of its open distance learning model and enhance student success rates.

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