ASSADPAM 2015 CONFERENCE, UNIVERSITY OF JOHANNESBURG

19-20 November 2015

LEARNER SUPPORT IN OPEN DISTANCE LEARNING AT UNISA, KWAZULU-NATAL: ACCESSING EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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Overview

- Introduction
- ODL
- Characteristics and principles of ODL
- Learner support
- Primary functions of learner support
- Learner support and adult learning
- Learner support and blended learning approach
- PA, PG and Developmental State perspectives
- ODL and NDP, 2030
- Methodology
- Sampling
- Findings and discussions
- Recommendations and Conclusion
Introduction

• Change in higher education landscape since 1994
• Distance education affected
• ODL approach
• Poor rate - second language learners
• Under-prepared for world of learning
• Are learner support initiatives and services provided to learners sufficient and effective in improving throughput rates?
• Features of ODL
• ODL policy of Unisa
• Self-determination and self-sufficiency in learning processes of learners
• Empowerment
• Approach rather than system or technique
• Based on needs of individual learners and not on interests of lecturers or institutions
• Learner-centeredness, lifelong learning, flexibility and learning and removing barriers obstructing learners’ accessibility
• Learning programmes constructed with expectation to succeed
• Away from study material
• Learner as customer
• “Openness” - choices to students linked to learning processes
Learner Support (LS)

- LS creation and delivery supporting learners (Simpson)
- 2 areas: academic and administrative or non-academic
- Academic - cognitive, intellectual and knowledge components of courses, learning skills and literacy
- Non-academic - strengthens facilitation of communication between students, academic staff and the administrative needs of students – registration and orientation
LS and Adult learning

- Where is the starting point when learner support is considered?
- What kind or type of learner support services should be provided?
- How should these services be provided?

• Important components:
  - Characteristics of the learner
  - Technological infrastructure
  - Geographical environment
  - Program demands and management requirements
- Cognitive – through courseware.
- LS embodied in development and design of content
- Affective – environment to support students
- Systemic – establishing administrative processes and information management systems

- Interdependent of each other and LS so learning takes place
Framework

- White paper on Education and Training
- Higher Education Act, National Plan for Higher Education
- White paper for post school Education and Training of 2013
- National Development Plan (NDP) 2030
  - Reconstructuring the Higher Education landscape in SA;
  - Addressing the imbalances of the past;
  - Access to education;
  - Open Distance learning; and
  - Learner Support
Restructuring higher education system
Unisa – only distance education institution in SA
Unisa regulatory framework informed by:
- Strategic Plan 2015 (new Strategic Plan of 2016-2030)
- Institutional Operational Plan
- Open Distance Learning Policy
- Open Distance and eLearning Business Model
LS and BL

- BL - mixture of classroom and online learning
- Without complete loss of face-to-face contact
- BL dedicated to performance of learner
  - Promotes connections and conversations
  - Guides, directs and tracks learning
- Informed decisions by learners
- Utilise technologies
- Fosters independent habits for learning and reference
- Encourages learning at work
- Improves performance and control costs

- Factors such as conditions, availability of resources (time, money), characteristics of the learner and characteristics of content (different learning objectives) should be considered
PA, PG and Developmental State perspectives

- **System of structures and processes**
- **Operates within a particular society as environment**
- **Facilitate formulation of appropriate, legal and legitimate governmental policies**
- Higher Education Act of SA guided Unisa in ODL
ODL and NDP, 2030

- Post-school system - quality-learning opportunities
- Raising education and training levels to produce highly skilled professionals
- Crucial to long-term growth in SA
- Eradicate poverty and reduce inequality
- NDP is based on government intervention - higher education (Thornhill and Van Dijk 2014)
- Learner support within developmental state.
- Developmental state – cohort of qualified and skilled public servants - addressing talent management (Subban & Vyas-Doorgapersad (2014)
- LS vital role in ODL to develop knowledge and skills in society
Methodology

- Research design: Pragmatism world view
- Mixed methods
- Staff involved in LS interviewed in region
- Open-ended questions informed interviews
- Students who attended tutorial classes in Durban, Newcastle, Pietermaritzburg, Richards Bay and Wild Coast areas
- Durban - Hub of region
- Other offices regional agencies of Unisa in KZN
- Observational data collection
Sampling

- Population – distance education students of Unisa in KZN
- Sample size - tutorial classes
- Currently only high risk modules
- Students selected randomly to participate
- Staff randomly selected and interviewed
- Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure and Bartlett’s test examined appropriateness of factor analysis and measure of students’ attitudes towards the ODL policy
- 2nd phase, interviews with staff involved in LS and tutors - qualitative phase
• Questionnaire in first phase
• Various regional offices in KZN during 2\textsuperscript{nd} semester in 2014
• 369 questionnaires dispatched and 313 returned with 84.8\% response rate
• Through SPSS, inferential techniques included correlations and Chi-Square Test values; interpreted using p-values
• Revealed phenomenon under investigation and established significant relationships between and amongst key variables
Findings and discussion

• Biographical data – age, gender, geography, income, racial identity, employment and unemployment, housing, access to communication technology - findings revealed ratio of females to males is approximately 3:7 (27.8% : 72.2%)

• ODL - financial and low literacy levels

• Ages 18 to 20 years = 14.1% = 44 students

• Age categories of 21 to 25 years reveals 33.9% = 106 students

• Total number of students between 18 to 25 years = 150 students
• Number of unemployed students = 67.1%.
• Reasons - high number of young students between age groups of 18-25.
• Students with more work experience more successful (Erdogan, Bayaram and Deniz, 2008), and could be attributed to why dropout rates are higher amongst first years
More than half of respondents (57.3%) indicated they had accommodation
32.8% of students don’t have accommodation whilst studying at Unisa
9.9% were able to find accommodation
Could impact on throughput and success rates

Table 1  Accommodation during studies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>168</td>
<td>57.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>32.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sometimes</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>9.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>293</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2  Expectations of students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Expectation</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Unsure</th>
<th>Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attend classes every day</td>
<td>47.1</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>47.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More face-to-face tutorial classes</td>
<td>17.0</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>78.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecturer is at the regional centre</td>
<td>23.0</td>
<td>14.9</td>
<td>62.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Only online learning</td>
<td>63.5</td>
<td>12.8</td>
<td>23.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None of the above</td>
<td>60.2</td>
<td>23.9</td>
<td>15.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Face-to-face contact - important expectation of students
### Table 3  Usage of Learner Support Services

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tutorial classes (face-to-face by tutor in the region)</td>
<td>254</td>
<td>80.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MyUnisa (online services)</td>
<td>236</td>
<td>75.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Library services</td>
<td>151</td>
<td>48.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion classes (classes by the lecturer)</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>47.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MyLife (own student e-mail address)</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>43.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Registration support while registering</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>29.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer Laboratories</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>29.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-tutoring (online tutoring)</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>28.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Counselling services</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>24.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching assistant support (TA support)</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>22.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial support</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>20.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Video conferencing</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>16.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None of the above</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>4.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Face-to-face tutorial experience by students

- Excellent (very informative and helpful): 89.5% Agree, 5.0% Unsure, 0.0% Disagree
- Good (Informative and clear expectations): 87.6% Agree, 6.7% Unsure, 5.7% Disagree
- Poor (not enough information for continuation): 68.9% Agree, 13.6% Unsure, 17.5% Disagree
- Very poor (waste of time): 85.3% Agree, 5.4% Unsure, 9.3% Disagree
- Did not know about face to face tutorial classes: 69.6% Agree, 23.2% Unsure, 7.2% Disagree
Experience of E-tutoring by students

- **Excellent (very informative and helpful)**
  - Agree: 41.1%
  - Unsure: 23.4%
  - Disagree: 19.6%

- **Good (Informative and clear expectations)**
  - Agree: 50.0%
  - Unsure: 19.6%
  - Disagree: 19.6%

- **Poor (not enough information for continuation)**
  - Agree: 32.3%
  - Unsure: 29.9%
  - Disagree: 18.3%

- **Very poor (waste of time)**
  - Agree: 46.7%
  - Unsure: 18.3%
  - Disagree: 18.3%

- **Did not use e-tutoring**
  - Agree: 44.5%
  - Unsure: 33.6%
  - Disagree: 18.3%

- **Did not know about e-tutoring**
  - Agree: 40.7%
  - Unsure: 39.0%
  - Disagree: 18.3%
Experience of Academic Literacy services

- Excellent (very informative and helpful): 8.8% Agree, 36.4% Unsure, 57.4% Disagree
- Good (Informative and clear expectations): 10.0% Agree, 33.8% Unsure, 64.0% Disagree
- Poor (not enough information for continuation): 19.1% Agree, 40.0% Unsure, 45.9% Disagree
- Very poor (waste of time): 17.0% Agree, 44.6% Unsure, 57.4% Disagree
- Did not use Academic Literacy services: 33.8% Agree, 45.9% Unsure, 57.4% Disagree
- Did not know about Academic Literacy services: 38.0% Agree, 40.0% Unsure, 57.4% Disagree
Services at the computer laboratories at Unisa KZN

- Excellent (very informative and helpful): 62.8%
- Good (Informative and clear expectations): 64.5%
- Poor (not enough information for continuation): 54.4%
- Very poor (waste of time): 60.5%
- Did not use the computer laboratories: 39.9%
- Did not know about the computer laboratories: 64.6%

Percent

- Agree
- Unsure
- Disagree
LS and staff perspectives

• Simpson (2002) – quality of services
• Important part of ODL system
• Aspects highlighted during interviews with staff and tutors: resources are in a poor condition; access to system are difficult; staff uninformed on e-learning; availability of lecturers; necessity for course development to stimulate learning; BRP are challenging
• LS services and students’ learning experiences via ODL integral
• Cognitive, affective and systemic functions
Conclusion

• ODL university - LS compulsory
• Cost-effective mode of education delivery
• Profile and calibre of students dictates learning
• Staff in region doing utmost best with available resources
• Urgent need to address gaps
• LS = “Batho Pele Principle – People First / Students First.”
• Oosthuizen, Loedolff and Hamman (2010) - students’ perceptions showed low levels of satisfaction: discussion classes, tutorial classes, administrative support and helpfulness after registration
• Revealed insignificant level of change for students
• Increase attention to teaching and learning needs
Thank You