Student support in an open and distance electronic learning (ODeL) context: The experiences of students with disabilities in KwaZulu-Natal

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Abstract

The institutions of higher learning in South Africa and around the globe are under a lot of pressure to provide equal access to all students with diverse learning needs. It is important to realize that students come from diverse backgrounds, which leads to them experiencing the academic support services offered by open and distance e-learning (ODeL) institutions differently. The experiences of students with disabilities (SWDs) were studied through the adoption of the qualitative and interpretivism paradigm to produce data that is rich in insights. The exploratory research design was followed to achieve a better understanding of in-depth information. The research data was collected using the MS Teams platform, which was necessitated by adhering to the strict protocols demanded by the Covid-19 regulations. A small number of study participants were identified and recruited to provide the required in-depth information about the issues explored in the study. Using a purposive and snowball sampling method, 10 ODeL students were drawn as participants. The results revealed that the common denominator and the most important aspect of an ODeL institution is effective student support. The qualitative findings revealed that institutions of higher learning must understand the needs and requirements of SWDs. This study contributes to the literature by providing a better understanding of SWDs' needs and the proposed reviewed allocation of resources by the university to cater to the SWDs' needs. The study recommended the development of disability-friendly technology and infrastructure and the strengthening of the safety program for students with albinism.

Keywords: institutions of higher learning, ODeL, students with disabilities, Covid-19, learning needs

Introduction

The inclusion of students with disabilities (SWDs) in higher learning institutions is in line with the UN's Sustainable Development Goals, which emphasize the reduction of inequality by 2030 (Del Hoyo et al., 2021). The mission of reducing inequality can also be achieved through transforming institutions of higher learning, including ODeL institutions, by making them more conducive for SWDs' access to all facilities, study materials, and technology needed to study or submit material. Thus, transforming institutions of higher learning will require technologies that are disability-friendly; for instance, the emergence of the internet and related networks such as the World Wide Web has had and will increasingly have a radical impact on the transformation of education and training in all sectors. The impact of technology is already significant in developed countries, and the great majority of developing countries are seeking to become a meaningful part of the emerging global educational community, despite the various challenges they still face (Möwes, 2005). Beyond these challenges, it is imperative to look closer at how students with disabilities experience studying at an ODeL institution and what shortcomings still form barriers to their optimal performance.

Objectives of the study

The main objective of the study was to explore the support students are offered in the ODeL context as experienced by students with disabilities.

Specifically, it aimed to:

- Identify the different disabilities among students studying at an ODeL institution;
- Establish how their disability affects the student's life while studying at an ODeL institution;
- Identify the factors that inform the students' decision to study at an ODeL institution; and
- Explore the experiences of SWD students studying at an ODeL institution.

Review of Related Studies

Students with disabilities are also referred to as students with special needs, in the sense that these needs must be addressed, and according to the mission of offering equal opportunities to all students, it becomes the responsibility of the institution to accommodate the students with special needs. "Students with disabilities are defined as students with some physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities" (Gilson et al., 2020, pp. 65–81). Slater et al. (2015) state that the disability might also include a disorder, illness, or disease that affects a person's growth through the processes, their perception of reality, emotions, or judgment, which results in disturbing behavior. Disability has also been defined as a "physical condition that affects the ability of an individual to learn and adjust to social settings for instance, the loss of sight" (Majoni & Mashatise, 2017, p. 38). This disability can be described as a restriction or an impairment that results in the person not being able to do certain things at home and during other environmental activities.

Numerous studies have been conducted on disability issues; however, limited research has been conducted to analyze the experience of the student support services in the ODeL institution setting from the perspective of students with disabilities. Mutanga (2017) presents a review of his published studies, describing the experiences of students with disabilities in South African higher education institutions for the period 1994 to 2017. The author concentrates on three aspects, which include the conceptualization of disability; access to the higher education institution; inclusion and participation in higher education institutions; and supporting mechanisms for students with disabilities by the institutions. Mays' (2000) study touched on students' experiences, which had a South African program perspective, in which she stipulated that in theory, student support is now an integral component of the Department of Education's provision and should be included in all planning and budgeting. Majoni and Mashatise (2017) sought to establish the problems faced by blind students studying through an ODeL institution. Also, from an African perspective, Möwes (2005) conducted an evaluation of the effectiveness of the student support system in an ODeL institution at the Centre for External Studies of the University of Namibia. All research studies conducted on open distance learning or on student support at institutions of higher education confirmed that there is insufficient data available on student support in ODeL institutions, or the impact the support or lack thereof have on SWDs as seen from their own perspective. This leads one to conclude that understanding the students' perspective will help to close the gap in knowledge regarding the support SWDs need. It also proposes that a review of the university's policies and procedures should be undertaken to thereby promote the academic success of SWDs and enable more or better-aligned support to be offered to these students.

Student-centeredness that has an impact on SWDs

The ODeL institution's module puts students at the center, meaning that whatever activities are supposed to be performed or executed, the student is a priority. In line with the ODeL strategy, the University has created an enabling teaching and learning environment that leads to the full participation and equalization of opportunities for students with disabilities (Ngubane-Mokiwa, 2017). The institution has a "framework of personalized, anytime, anywhere, mastery-based support, and student-centredness," where "it capitalizes on an increasingly sophisticated understanding of learning and a whole-student theory, as well as the development of new technologies to answer students' needs" (Parci & Wolfe, 2018, para. 1). This framework is aligned with the demands made regarding universities in the 21st century having to stay focused on ensuring that students are developed to become knowledgeable, have the necessary skills, and are positioned for success, to ensure that they will have the capacity to make informed decisions and will become valuable participants in society. This framework might not guarantee success for all students, especially those with more challenging levels of abilities. However, it helps to create or open up learning opportunities that emphasize the social interaction of all students, including those with learning disabilities, who have been denied access to some courses, and some with certain physical disabilities, who were discouraged from taking up certain opportunities because of their disabilities. It remains an unfortunate fact that the students who stand to benefit most from being included in this student-centredness of the institution are the very same students who are often denied the opportunity to participate. This leads to the related concepts of self-advocacy skills and self-determination, which are some of the most well-researched and effective principles of successful special education practices. Wehmeyer and Schwartz (1997) stated that self-advocacy skills are defined as skills that enable students to fully understand their own needs and rights, and this develops their capacity to communicate their needs. While self-determination is a capacity to act toward the achievement of freely chosen goals, this ability is critical in helping students with disabilities to succeed in higher education. It is also essential for students' long-term success in the working environment and their life in general (Wehmeyer, & Schwartz, 1997). Without these skills and capacities, students struggle when they have to ask the university for support regarding their needs, for example, textbooks and papers in braille for blind students. It also applies when they have to plan their own budgets or need to advocate for their needs in other life situations or for job applications. Having lost the protection that they were used to in their childhood and school years prior to entering university, and the pervasive support of parents and dedicated university staff while on campus, can be a huge culture shock for these students once they graduate, so the institution will have to prepare them for this.

The experiences of SWDs regarding academic support

International law, for example, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA), provides SWDs with better and more opportunities to pursue higher education, even though "they still face significant barriers in achieving academic success and are less likely to graduate when compared to students without disabilities" (Abreu et al., 2017, p. 323). In the USA, there are policies that require higher education institutions to provide allowances for university SWDs in an effort to support their academic needs. Depending on their level and type of disability, and their specific eligibility, these allowances or dispensations might include extended time for exams, having a note-taker available during class, or taking an exam verbally as opposed to in a written format (Abreu et al. 2017, p. 323, cited in Egan, & Giuliano, 2009). While efforts to embrace diversity should be applauded, there is less consideration given to the representation of individuals with a disability. Representation among faculty or staff is very low, and visibility of

disability-related issues, policies, and events are minimal in most academic institutions. Abreu et al. (2017) state that as the population of students with a disability continues to increase, hopefully, also recognition and awareness of these issues will increase. Improving the university's culture surrounding disability would likely enhance the overall academic experiences for SWDs, and that in turn, might help increase their graduation rates (Abreu et al., 2017).

The argument presented by scholars revealed that ODeL institutions recognize the importance of inclusivity in terms of accommodating SWDs. However, not much has so far been established pertaining to how SWDs experience studying at an ODeL institution.

Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative approach and interpretivism paradigm, with the intention of producing data that is rich in insights, understanding, explanations, and in-depth information. The study sought to explore the experiences of SWDs studying at an ODeL institution, and employed an exploratory design, as no previous information was available on the specific angle of the study. The originally intended data collection method had to change because of the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. This implied that the study had to adhere to the strict Covid-19 protocol, and the data could no longer be collected using the face-to-face interviews method. Instead, the MS Teams meeting approach replaced the face-to-face method. The most frequently chosen method for data collection in qualitative research is interviewing for collecting information from study participants. "Interviews provide the researcher with the freedom to decide how questions are asked and in which order to ask the questions" (Creswell & Clark, 2011, p. 173). This method also allows the researcher to collect information from participants who are characterized as information-rich participants. Creswell and Clark (2011) and Gray et al. (2017) confirm that in qualitative research, a small number of study participants can be identified and recruited to provide in-depth information about the issues explored in the study. Primary data was used to conduct this research. Insight was drawn from a purposive or snowball sample. The sample comprised 10 students with disabilities registered at ODeL institution in the Durban hub in KwaZulu-Natal, which consists of five offices (Smiso Nkwanyana campus; Wild Coast; Pietermaritzburg; Richards Bay; and New Castle). Due to the sensitivity of the research topic, SWDs were furnished with all the information regarding the project and the purpose of the project. All data were collected from participants after an ethical clearance certificate had been obtained from the University of South Africa (Unisa). All participants had the opportunity to consider the informed consent form prior to being interviewed as the study and its ethics were cleared. Interviews were recorded in a journal and/or via tape recorder, for which the participants had granted the researcher their prior permission. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is the most common type of analysis used in qualitative research. It emphasizes pinpointing, examining, and recording patterns (themes) within the data.

Ethical Considerations

The conduct of the study was approved and had research ethical clearance from the UNISA Professional Research Committee – Research Ethics Workgroup (PRC-REW). The researcher complied with provisions provided on the UNISA Policy on Research Ethics and the UNISA Standard Operating Procedure on Research Ethics Risk Assessment, whereby research reference number *2020_PRC_REW_006* was indicated on all forms of communication with the intended research participants, including the Committee.

Results and Discussion

ODeL institutions are by their very nature student-centric; hence, it is imperative for ODeL to cater to students' needs. The study explored the academic support provided in the ODeL context through SWDs' lived experiences. The study was conducted with 10 research participants. The sample comprised seven female and three male SWDs, of whom two were classified to have albinism, five have a physical disability, and three are visually impaired/challenged. It should be noted that these are not the only forms of disabilities that should be catered to in an ODeL institution. However, the above-mentioned forms of disability are found to be common in an ODeL institution.

The common denominator for all SWDs is that they all have different experiences of studying at an ODeL institution. However, when they study from home, the flexibility of being able to study through ODeL appears to be one of the main reasons for choosing an ODeL institution.

Students' responses on the effect of disability on their life as students

It can be assumed that any form of disability affects a student's academic life in one form or another. Therefore, the institution should provide the resources that cater to the needs of SWDs. A resource-based view emphasizes the importance of resources being made available for any institution to realize its objectives (Furr, & Eisenhardt, 2021). While students with disabilities are affected in many ways, out of the total sample of SWDs interviewed in this study, four students with different disabilities emphasize their experiences related to their independence, discrimination, and resources. Participants sum this up as follows:

> "Even though … I am independent in many things, I can manage to move around, since the kind of disability is called physical; therefore, sometimes I need assistance of mobility … instructor to move me from point A to B, and to meet other students" (R1).

> "Whatever happens to me is going to have an effect on my academic performance. For instance, the society still discriminates against disability; in turn, this affects my student life. Furthermore, the institution directly or indirectly reinforces exclusion of SWDs. For instance, my left side body is not moving, but it does not mean I cannot participate in any sporting activities. There are other sports … such as table tennis" (R2).

> "Library, tutorials, extra classes and even study … that is conducive to study quietly are the main concern. As a student, I felt discriminated [against] by the institution as the height and level of desks are not made to accommodate my wheelchair" (R3).

> "There is a lack of resources designed for SWDs, such as assistive devices. Covid-19 also worsened the situation, such that SWD students were given email addresses that are not working at all" (R4).

These results reveal that regardless of their level of independence, the SWDs studying at an ODeL institution should be consulted and better supported, as their individual needs cannot be assumed. Hence, ODeL institutions should become more realistic in their assessments and in terms of catering to the SWDs' needs. Discriminatory practices seem to be another issue of concern. Educating communities about the different forms of disabilities and the SWDs' other abilities seem to be idealistic, but prejudices and discrimination cannot be curbed if the consequences are not emphasized or at least addressed.

Students' responses regarding the factors that inform their decision to study at an ODeL institution

The decision to study at an ODeL institution is influenced and informed by many factors. The iron triangle model, which consists of three components (access, quality, and costs) can influence the students' decision to study at an ODeL institution (Daniel et al., 2009). According to this theory, easy access, good quality education, and reasonable costs can be achieved simultaneously at an ODeL institution, according to all study participants stating that: "Unisa is accessible because you can study while you are at home".

One student further elaborates on the other factors that inform the decision to study online. The nature of disability compels the student to choose to study at an ODeL institution:

> "Due to the nature of my disability, I prefer to study on my own, as I was ashamed to express my feelings. The ODeL institution was chosen, because I have a poor vision; secondly, there was no time limit when it came to the exams and library material" (R1).

The reliance on the ODeL institution for the delivery of what the SWDs need means that the institution also has the responsibility of making these services fully accessible, as students decide to study there based on the accessibility of all facilities and study options.

Study participants' responses on their experiences at the ODeL institution

Studying at or through an ODeL institution seems to have or creates a range of specific challenges. Most participants attest to the fact that studying through ODeL can be a very lonely and frustrating journey. Participants state that:

> Although we have a challenge with being neglected in other services, such as academic support, late delivery of study material, staff members who did not receive any training on disability issues, but the ODeL institution still gives us a positive experience, ... allowing for structures such as disability forums to represent SWDs in various structures of the institution. The SWDs do not have to join a long queue, assistive devices were provided. SWDs are also funded by the ODeL (all).

One student with disability further elaborates on the topic by including the issue of safety when on campus or leaving for public transport. The student comments that:

> "As a student with albinism, no place is safe for us. People with albinism are more targeted than students with other forms of disability. The university personnel, if possible ... we need to be escorted to the public transport or they should communicate with the transport providers to ensure the safety of people with albinism."

SWDs acknowledge the challenges, and their positive and negative experiences of studying at or through an ODeL institution.

Emerging Themes

The qualitative analysis explored issues or challenges that need addressing regarding the SWDs' lived experiences. The emerging themes from the study could be grouped or categorized into the

following three major themes: discrimination of students in the ODeL institution; accessibility; and safety of SWDs in the ODeL institution.

Discrimination of students with disabilities in the ODeL institution

People with disabilities have been the victims of discrimination across the ages. Hamilton et al. (2021) state that some students feel undervalued compared to their peers because their university did not prioritize or even address their disability-related needs. Participants explain that their universities fail to prioritize accessibility and that some disabilities are not optimally addressed, supported, or sometimes even taken cognizance of. The perception that their disability is not prioritized nor addressed by their institution feeds into the SWDs' feelings of inequality and being less worthy than other students. Failure to treat all students equally and with dignity can also be regarded as another form of discrimination. Kaushansky (2017) attests that disabled individuals can also be represented as objects of 'pity'. All these views perpetuate discrimination.

Accessibility

Resource constraints compound the problem of access for SWDs. This is obvious when seen from the statement made by study participants that ODeL institutions do not have sufficient resources designed to meet the needs of SWDs. As stated, the findings by Daniel et al. (2009) highlighted the three important constructs that comprise the iron triangle model, namely, access, cost, and quality. The model highlights the ODeL's level of success as being fully dependent on these three constructs. Thus, it is important to note that accessibility issues should be coupled with usability or user-friendliness and ease of use, as otherwise, students have access to an institution that cannot benefit them fully. ODeL institutions have computer laboratories, but access to them is a major challenge for SWDs if these facilities are not disability friendly. Meleo-Erwin et al. (2021) confirm that students with disabilities face a wide range of physical barriers in their respective higher education institutions. Therefore, the ODeL institutions need to identify all potential barriers to access and thereafter, set about removing them.

Safety of SWDs in an ODeL institution

Safety is a concern for everybody in South Africa. However, the feeling of being unsafe is extremely high among students with albinism. Albinism represents a group of inherited abnormalities of melanin synthesis in the skin, hair follicles, and parts of the eye responsible for vision (Hammond, 2020). More melanin, resulting in darker skin color, protects individuals from the harmful effects of ultraviolet (UV) light. People with albinism have a reduced amount of melanin or no melanin at all. During the interviews, SWDs state that people with albinism seem to be safer in other countries than in South Africa. Students with disabilities are being targeted by others, not only by criminals, and are being killed because of the illogical and ill-founded myths surrounding albinism. The myths include killing for 'muthi', based on the mistaken belief that killing such people can make someone rich. The country has witnessed an increase in the number of people with albinism being killed, which poses a serious threat for people with this condition.

Findings of the study

The study found that consultation plays a key role in ODeL institutions. Considering the UN's 2030 Sustainable Development Goals and the drive toward establishing equal opportunities for all, SWDs are important stakeholders in the institutions of higher learning. However, the ODeL institution is

still lagging in its purpose of effectively addressing the needs of students with various disabilities. For example, SWDs and their specific challenges and needs were never considered at the time the policies were designed, and therefore, none of the physical facilities that were designed by ODeL institutions are disability friendly. The buildings were not designed with SWDs in mind. As ODeL institutions are supposed to be student-centric, this should also imply that all decisions regarding ease of access and user-friendliness should revolve around the students' needs. This includes, for example, better access for students in wheelchairs, blind students, students using crutches, or other physical challenges.

The Covid-19 pandemic raised another challenge, or even a range of challenges that completely changed the entire education system, and as such was an unforeseen risk, needing change management. SWDs' needs caused by their disabilities were left in limbo. SWDs were so severely affected that the ODeL institution resorted to online examinations, without considering students with special needs and their access to suitable technology at home. When SWDs are writing exams in a physical venue, extra time is granted to them. However, with online exams, no extra time was given.

Institutions of higher learning strive to provide all students with a very positive experience. However, there are cases where students only experience discrimination, prejudice, and barriers to participation. The findings from the qualitative study analysis indicated that SWDs have been neglected in quite a number of the services offered by the ODeL institution. For instance, it took time for the ODeL institution to send the correct study materials to the students with poor vision. However, SWDs indicate that they still have a positive experience because the ODeL institution allowed them to be members of the Students with Disability Forum (DWDF) and provided them with approachable staff members, especially during the registration period. Arrangements were also made to ensure that SWDs did not have to join a long queue for services. The ODeL institution has also provided some students with information on how to apply for assistive devices.

However, the ODeL institution should put better safety mechanisms in place, particularly concerning the fact that students with the albinism condition view safety as the most important aspect that needs attention. It is common knowledge that students with the albinism condition cannot walk freely in public, as they are living in fear for their lives. However, the perception exists that the university is not concerned about how they get to campus and on what mode of transport, and nobody is available to escort them to or from public transport. In the ODeL structures, the issues of safety have not been fully addressed. An absence of mobility instructors compounds the problems experienced by SWDs. The mobility instructor is someone who is trained to assist SWDs when they are on campus. The presence of a mobility instructor can make SWDs feel less dependent on other students and ensures that the challenge of how to access various facilities on campus is removed from the shoulders of the SWDs.

Conclusion

SWDs reported their experiences regarding the functioning and responsibilities of the ODeL institution, as most of them highlighted that studying while already working influenced their choice of studying at or through the ODeL. Despite many positive experiences, the ODeL institution's shortcomings were also identified. The visually impaired students had negative experiences when the ODeL could not provide them with the necessary study material suitable for students with special needs. The institution and the students were faced with an additional range of challenges because of the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown regulations, which compelled the ODeL to move all

study functions and access them completely online. In turn, this affected the SWDs, who needed access to disability-friendly technologies. As the ODeL was unable to accommodate the SWDs technologically, this held the SWDs back academically.

Recommendations and implications for future research

The concerns raised regarding the availability of study material, including late delivery of study material for SWDs, should be addressed and a system should be put in place that ensures timely delivery, particularly during lockdown regulations. There also still seems to be a lack of inclusivity felt by the SWDs. Hence, the study recommends that the ODeL institution should consider the needs of the diverse students studying at the ODeL institution, and plan to strengthen the support programme in terms of fast-tracking solutions to the various raised challenges. The outbreak of Covid-19 compounded the problems when the institution was compelled to move from a physical to an online examination without considering the need by SWDs to have extra time granted. The SWDs' challenges were ignored or not taken cognisance of, since the technology to write online examinations was not disability-friendly. The SWDs should be consulted regarding any possible additional challenges when new lockdowns or other risks emerge, which could affect them and have serious repercussions on their ability to study and pass their examinations.

The safety of SWDs is also a concern, which should compel the ODeL institution to re-examine the issue of safety for all and the involvement of a mobility instructor. The safety of SWDs should not be compromised when they are on campus or seeking public transport. Hence, the study recommends the strengthening of safety measures by the ODeL institution.

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