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Academics' perceptions and responses to students' academic underperformance in Open Distance e-Learning environment

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Abstract

Open Distance e-Learning (ODeL) has gained significant popularity worldwide due to its convenience and flexibility in offering higher education. However, even with its popularity, it also has challenges like the underperformance of students, resulting in low throughput rates. This study aimed to explore academics' perceptions of students' academic underperformance and their strategies of addressing student's underperformance in an ODeL environment. Data for this study were collected qualitatively through semi-structured interviews with academics in a South African ODeL institution. The data collected were then analysed thematically. Factors influencing the underperformance of students in ODeL institutions are discussed, including a lack of student support, the digital divide, gender role, home environment and poor time management. The study further found that academics employ multifaceted strategies in addressing student's underperformance. This paper emphasises the importance of understanding and addressing these factors, which will result in improving quality of education and, thereafter, high throughput rates in ODeL institutions. The findings of this study will help not only policymakers and institutions but also students through the interventions to be taken by institutions when addressing the underperformance of students.

Keywords: Open Distance e-Learning (ODeL); academic underperformance; academic support; retention

1. Introduction

Open Distance e-Learning (ODeL) refers to the offering of education through technologies such as the internet that separates learners in time and place (Moore & Kearsley, 1996). It allows students to study from anywhere and at any time. ODeL has grown recently due to technological advancements, cost-effectiveness, flexibility, personalised learning and worldwide reach (Al Rawashdeh, Mohammed, Al Arab, Alara & Al-Rawashdeh, 2021). While the growth of ODeL institutions can be attributed to these mentioned advantages, the Covid-19 pandemic has also contributed to its growth (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020). Traditional face-to-face institutions had to seek alternative ways of offering education in

the midst of the pandemic, and going online was the only way, as Covid-19 measures meant there could be no face-to-face contact in an attempt to contain the spread of the virus (Aristovnik, Keržič, Ravšelj, Tomaževič & Umek, 2020). Bashir, Bashir, Rana and Peter (2021) add that the lessons learnt in online learning during the Covid-19 pandemic should contribute to teaching, learning and assessments in institutions of higher learning. Bashir et al. (2012) emphasise the importance of understanding the challenges so they could be resolved. If challenges faced by students are addressed, quality education will result, giving the students better educational experiences. Jaume and Willén (2019) state that skills and knowledge are likely to deteriorate during an extended absence from education or forced disruption. According to Mascolo and Castillo (2015), students' academic underperformance in the context of higher education is when students fail or score lower grades in their assessments. ODeL institutions, like many in others, have challenges that include students' poor academic performance, which results in low throughput rates. Such a challenge is bound to take place in ODeL institutions because there is usually a lack of student engagement and little support from the lecturers. It is therefore important that institutions are aware of these challenges so that they can address them and ultimately provide the best education to their students. The gap identified in the previous study is that most studies into student academic underperformance in South Africa focused on traditional face-to-face institutions. Consequently, the recommendations derived from those studies may not be directly applicable to the ODeL environment. Against this backdrop, the current study aimed to bridge this gap by specifically addressing student academic underperformance within the ODeL context. Furthermore, this study aimed to enhance the body of knowledge related to effective teaching and learning practices, ultimately contributing to the improvement of students' academic performance in the ODeL environment.

The purpose of this paper was to explore academics' perceptions of students' academic underperformance in ODeL environments and their strategies for addressing students' underperformance. It is important to get the perspective of academics because this will help find strategies that can be implemented to intervene in this situation. Academics play a very important role in the academic performance of students, as they are teaching and evaluating them. While they do not go to class to see them face to face, they do interact with them in online learning platforms such as Moodle, a learning management system popular in South African higher education institutions. There are other platforms such as Microsoft Teams and Zoom through which they can offer their online lectures. All these play an important role in the students' academic performance. Therefore, it is important to get academics' perspectives since they have an understanding of the students' challenges that contribute to their motivation or lack thereof towards their studies. This study would be helpful to policymakers in institutions of higher learning, academics and students, as it provides better insight into the perception of academics on the underperformance of students and how they respond to it. In addition, this study

shed light on how underperformance in ODeL institutions can be dealt with so that students are better supported and the throughput rates are improved.

2. Literature review

This study's literature review aimed to provide a comprehensive overview of academics' perceptions of and responses to students' academic underperformance in the ODeL environment.

2.1. Factors influencing academic underperformance in Open Distance e-Learning

2.1.1. Technological difficulties

Poverty can hinder e-learning (Arko-Achemfour, 2017; Ngubane-Mokiwa, 2017; Makoe & Nsamba, 2019), as learners may not be able to afford to buy resources for learning and they might rely on smartphones to learn. However, cellphones may have limited functionality and may not allow students to fully engage in the educational activities of the courses. Some students borrow technological devices from family members and friends, which affects their educational experience, while other students do have these gadgets, but they lack digital skills. Students who lack digital skills struggle to navigate online platforms, as institutions use learning management systems to offer education. Karipi (2019) highlights the lack of training for students studying in distance learning institutions. Studies by Maphosa and Bhebhe (2019) and Bervell, Umar and Kamilin (2019) revealed a lack of digital literacy among students enrolled in ODeL institutions. Students in ODeL institutions are not only faced with the lack of digital skills, but internet access can also be a challenge to them. Students require data to access the learning management systems, which are platforms on which they get resources and engage with lecturers and other students. However, with no data, students cannot get study material or interact with lecturers and students through discussions (Ponte & Jordam, 2020). Unfortunately, many ODeL students cannot afford to buy data. Daneyeefard (2020) found that the cost of data was among the challenges faced by students studying online. This results in students being left behind, as they would not be able to log in and learn on the platforms.

2.1.2. Lack of face-to-face interaction

Some people may do well in learning online, while others may really struggle and underperform in such environments. The lack of face-to-face interaction may result in less motivation to study. The lack of sharing ideas with peers and receiving feedback motivates students to learn; which may result in decreased productivity and demotivation to learn for some individuals. Mncube, Dube and Ngulube (2017) and Valai, Schmidt-Crawford and Kennet (2019) emphasise the opportunities of enhanced communication created by online platforms that must be taken advantage of. Students

may feel lonely and isolated, thus, they function poorly cognitively, resulting in underperformance. Face-to-face settings allow students to communicate with their peers, a lack of which results in limited networking and opportunities to collaborate with classmates. When people in the same field come together, they tend to build relationships, get exposed to new ideas and learn from the conversation they have. Students learning online miss out on these and may feel isolated and not supported, which may result in underperformance (Priyanka & Sanju, 2019). Furthermore, some students require sufficient interaction with their lecturers to do well. They may need to ask the lecturer questions, seek clarification or require prompt feedback; without these, they may not perform well. Lugosi and Uribe (2020) state that increased communication helps to increase throughput rates.

2.1.3. Self-regulation and time management difficulties

Learning online requires students to manage their time and be self-disciplined. Self-regulation and time management difficulties can result in underperformance, as students may procrastinate. Students who cannot self-regulate may find themselves delaying tasks and activities until it is too late, resulting in poor performance because they submit rushed work. This usually stems from the lack of poor planning and organisation on the part of the student. Sithole, Mupinga, Kibirige, Manyanga and Bucklein (2019) and Herlo (2017) emphasise the importance of self-discipline, the lack of which affects student achievement. To avoid this, good time management is required; unfortunately, not all students are able to practice food time management, some will be affected and struggle to create a working schedule for their studies. They may be easily distracted by things on the internet such as social media, which would not be good for their studies. Students may find themselves unmotivated and put little effort into their studies. Moreover, personal challenges such as their health and family issues may come into play, particularly for female students who are expected to perform domestic duties at home, further distracting them from focusing on their schoolwork (Orser, Riding & Stanley, 2012).

2.2. Strategies employed by academics to address underperformance

Underperformance can result from many factors, and academics use many strategies to support their students to do well in their studies. They often monitor them closely to ensure they attend lectures, participate in lessons and keep track of their marks, and should a student's marks drop, they intervene to assist the student to get back on their feet (Martin, 2021). Since students are not the same, academics give them individualised support and assist them according to their needs (Parsons, Vaughn, Scales, Parsons, Davis & Allen, 2018; Deunk, Doolaard, Smalle-Jacobse & Bosker, 2015; <<Author: This source is not in the reference list. Please insert>>). Support tailored specifically for that student tends to work better than when the academic treats the entire class the same

(Smale-Jacobse et al., 2019; Van Geel, Keuning, Frèrejean, Dolmans, Van Merriënboer & Visscher, 2019). Academics state the expectations and module objectives in the beginning so that students are clear about what is expected of them and the module as a whole. When they do student assessments, they give students information on the marking guidelines so they have an idea of how they would be evaluated. When their assessments have been marked, students are given clear and constructive feedback to see their strengths, and work on where they need to improve. For areas of improvement, academics offer remedial classes to those students that need them; some institutions offer tutorship, especially to students who have just joined higher education (Martin, 2021).

2.2.1. Dealing with underperformance

Helping students perform better in their studies can be difficult but with the right attitude and strategies, academics can succeed. Academics first have to know the cause of the underperformance to be able to assist the student, whether it is technological difficulties, a lack of face-to-face interaction or poor time management. Students must have clear and measurable goals to provide direction and stay focused on them (Reeves, 2009). They must develop a plan and stick to it. Reeves (2009) adds that it is important to have different tasks in the plan, arranged according to their importance, and they must have deadlines. Academics must seek support from colleagues who will give them feedback on their plans. They must manage their time, develop good habits and remain motivated, as it is very easy to give up if the students do not improve. Most importantly, they must keep track of what they have done and still have to do.

3. Theoretical framework

This study was influenced by the Expectancy-Value Theory. This theory predicts the behaviour and motivation of an individual according to their motivation and behaviour based on what they believe they may get out of it, as well as its value to them (Eccles & Wigfield, 2020). The benefits and value of something determine the individual's motivation and willingness to engage in a particular activity. According to this theory, two components are considered by individuals before taking action, which are expectancy (the individual's likelihood to reach a desired outcome in the end) and value (the importance the individual places on the behaviour) (Eccles & Wigfield, 2020).

The way that academics perceive the students' underperformance is influenced by expectancy and value. If the academics believe that students have the ability to perform well in an ODeL setting, they will give them support to perform well. They will identify their challenges and offer them individualised support accordingly to improve. Academics consider their ability to help students improve in their studies; they ask themselves whether they are capable of assisting students to improve. However, if they have attempted to help students in the past but were unsuccessful, they should find the

reasons for this failure, address them and expect to succeed because they have done something about them. However, if the academics do not believe that students may perform well in an ODeL setting, they will not put effort into supporting them. If they value student achievement, they will give them all the assistance they need to achieve good results. There are four types of values: attainment value, which considers personal importance of doing well; intrinsic value, which looks at enjoyment that one derives from engaging in that activity; utility value, which looks at the relationship between the activity and future goals; and cost, what sacrifices need to be made for the activity to succeed. Academics will assist students improve their performance if it is important to them to help the students, if they find enjoyment from helping students, if they believe that helping the students perform better academically will help them in the future, and their sacrifices such as working extra hours and offering the students resources such as data or gadgets.

4. Method

4.1. Method and research design

A qualitative research approach was utilised for this research project, as, according to Creswell (2016), qualitative research is geared towards studying participants in their natural setting and aiming to understand certain situations and social reality through the participants' views and experience. This method of inquiry was chosen for the present study due to its ability to discover the reality from the participants within a specific context. A qualitative approach is considered the most suitable approach for addressing the research question; in this case, since the study aimed to explore academics' perceptions of students' academic underperformance in ODeL environments and their strategies of addressing student's underperformance. Due to the nature of this study, we further employed a phenomenological research design. Epistemologically, a phenomenological research design, is based on a paradigm of personal knowledge and subjectivity. In addition, the importance of personal perspective, experience and interpretation is taken into consideration in the research process (Creswell, 2016). In the present study, we the employed phenomenological research design to understand students' academic underperformance in an ODeL environment according to the academics (lectures, senior lecturers, associate professors and full professors) at the University of South Africa's lived experience and personal perspective. Academic perspective, interpretation of the social reality and lived experience helped us to achieve the study objective. Lastly, the phenomenological research design was suitable for this study due to its effectiveness in bringing to the fore the experiences and perceptions of academics from their own perspectives.

4.2. Study setting

The study was conducted at the University of South Africa (Unisa), which was founded in 1873. The Universities Amendment Act, No. 12 of 1916, decreed the establishment of a federal university named the University of South Africa (Unisa), which incorporated the University of the Cape of Good Hope. At that time, Unisa did not enjoy full independence as an institution of higher learning as it was an examining agency for Oxford and Cambridge Universities. However, in 1946, it was given the mandate to offer distance education (Nicolau & Pretorius, 2016). Unisa is renowned for its excellence in promoting student-centeredness, fostering innovation and cultivating responsible leaders in various fields of study (Unisa, 2021). Unisa is one of the world's top 30 mega-institutions and enrols over one-third of all of South Africa's tertiary students (Unisa, 2021). We chose Unisa as a comprehensive, open distance learning institution for this study because of the recent trend on social media in South Africa that indicated that auditors quit Unisa due to poor pass rates. Therefore, we intend to understand what academics perceive to be the main causes of these poor pass rates (underperformance in the context of this study) as well as their response in addressing this issue.

4.3. Population, sampling and data collection

Participants were selected from a population of more than 100 academic staff members who had more than one year of experience at Unisa as lecturer, senior lecturer, associate professor or full professor from the College of Education in various departments. A total of nine academic staff members were selected purposively from the targeted population because of time and cost limitations. In addition, we opted for a sample size of nine academic staff for this study because the qualitative approach permits us to sample a small size of participants to solicit rich, in-depth information, which is not the case in the quantitative approach. We used purposive sampling to select participants for this study because this type of non-probability sampling empowers the researchers to sample the participants who have experience in a social reality under investigation to provide accurate judgment (De Vos, Strydom, Fouché & Delport, 2011). Therefore, nine academic staff members were sampled for this study because of their positions as academic staff and having experiences in the ODeL environment. The inclusion criteria for participation in this study were that the academic staff had to work at Unisa and have more than one year of experience at UNISA because, with one more year of experience, the participants can inform an understanding of factors leading to underperformance of students in ODeL environment and the response of these academic staff to address this problem. To solicit rich, depth-information, we used individual semi-structured interviews with a constructive dialogue approach between the researcher and the participants (Clarke & Braun, 2014). The semi-structured interviews were be guided by open-ended data-collection questions. Authenticity is important in an individual semi-structured interview; therefore, to achieve this, we kept record of the interview responses. We sent the interview questions to the participants who completed them online.

Table 1: Semi-structured interview guide

Questions
• How do you define students' academic underperformance in an open-distance e-learning environment? • Explain factors that contribute to the students' academic underperformance in an open-distance e-learning environment. • What are your strategies for addressing academic underperformance among students in an open-distance e-learning environment? • Explain your effective student support services that can improve students' academic performance.

4.4. Data analysis

Data were analysed using thematic analysis, which allows for rich and in-depth ontological and epistemological viewpoints (Clarke & Braun, 2014). During data analysis, we paid special attention to all six steps of thematic analysis: (1) the researchers were familiarised with the data by reading and re-reading the transcripts; (2) the initial codes were generated by selecting verbatim quotes; (3) after completing the codes, the researchers went through the codes and the verbatim quotes; (4) theme generation was carried out by sorting different codes into their related clusters; (5) the themes were then refined by breaking them down further or merging them; and (6) the themes were then named and defined to explain the ideas captured by each theme. After completion of these steps, the findings were written up.

4.5. Ethical consideration

According to Creswell (2014), researchers must conduct research in an ethical manner wherein the dignity, privacy and respect of the participants are taken into consideration. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Unisa College of Education Ethics Review Committee (ethical clearance REG number 2018/03/14 90060059MC). Thereafter, informed consent was practiced whereby the researchers informed the participants about the aim of the study. The participants were ensured that participation is purely voluntary in the present study. Pseudonyms were used to describe the participants.

5. Results

The study aimed to explore academics' perceptions of students' academic underperformance in ODeL environments and their strategies of addressing students' underperformance. The following questions guided the present study: **"**How do you define

students' academic underperformance in an open-distance e-learning environment?" "Explain factors that contribute to the student's academic underperformance in an open-distance e-learning environment." "What are your strategies for addressing academic underperformance among students in an open-distance e-learning environment?" "Explain new pedagogy of student support using new technologies that can improve student academic performance." A variety of themes identified under these research questions are presented in this section. Each theme presented in this section is supported by the quotations expressed by the participants.

5.1. Academics' understanding of the concept academic underperformance

The academic underperformance of students in an ODeL environment is a serious issue that demands urgent attention from academics to provide effective support for students. Moreover, the concept of academic underperformance is complex and can have various interpretations among different academics. In this section, we intend to find an understanding of academics' interpretation of the concept academic underperformance of students in an ODeL environment. The sub-themes that emerged in this section are described as follows:

Theme 1: Module failure

The participants understand academic underperformance of students in an ODeL environment as encompassing module failure. In addition, participants indicated that a student's inability to achieve high grades, limited participation in online lessons and difficulties in grasping the learning outcomes can all be considered forms of academic underperformance. Some of the participants relayed their opinions as follows:

> "Student's academic underperformance can be defined as students' failure to obtain a pass mark on the assessment." (Participant 1)
>
> "It is when students fail the module. Also, when they register but don't participate in any academic activities." (Participant 2)
>
> "Student academic underperformance is when students fail their modules." (Participants 9)
>
> "It is when students fail the module. Also, when they register but don't participate in any academic activities." (Participant 3)

As indicated above, there was a shared consensus among the participants that failing a module constitutes students' academic underperformance in an ODeL environment. Additionally, one of the participants noted that a student's inability to engage in academic activities after registering in an academic calendar year is also considered as academic underperformance.

Theme 2: Performance below the expected level

In this study, another theme that emerged regarding academic underperformance from the participants' responses was performance below the expected level. Participants noted that in an ODeL environment, academic underperformance occurs when students fall short of the anticipated standards. This implies the students' inability to attain the grade specified by lecturers for a particular module, which is considered as academic underperformance. This is illustrated by the responses below:

> "When students achieve below the minimum requirement to pass the module." (Participants 4)

> "When a student performs below the expected level." (Participants 5)

Participants commonly described students' academic underperformance in an ODeL environment as an inability to achieve the prescribed minimum grades required to pass a specific module. Additionally, participants reported that students who fail to attain the expected results in a module could also be considered as experiencing academic underperformance.

5.2. Factors that contribute to the student's academic underperformance in an ODeL environment

This section attends to participants' perception of factors that contribute to the student's academic underperformance in an ODeL environment. There are various factors that contribute to the problem investigated in this study. The results revealed that participants perceived factors contributing to the student's academic underperformance in an ODeL environment as external and internal factors. This theme consisted of five identified sub-themes, namely a lack of student support, home environment, digital divide, gender roles and poor time management.

Theme 2.1: Lack of student support

This theme emerged, as participants emphasised the crucial role of adequate student support in ensuring academic success in an ODeL environment. Unfortunately, as reported by the participants, the geographical separation between lecturers and students often leads to a lack of necessary support, ultimately resulting in academic underperformance and potential attrition if the issue remains unaddressed. Although studying in an ODeL environment offers students the flexibility to learn in their own space without the need for physical attendance, participants expressed that this practice could lead to a sense of disconnection and isolation from their lecturers, especially when students do not receive sufficient feedback. This, in turn, can impact their academic performance. The following responses from the participants highlight this concern:

> "Student support plays a huge role on student performance. So, if there is a lack of student support, students will perform poor. In the ODeL setting, student support is even more important because students do not have access to lecturers to seek assistance. They rely on communication platforms such as emails. If a student does not get adequate support, this may lead to her

> dropping out due to frustration that results from the lack of support." (Participants 1)
>
> "Limited interaction can lead to students feeling isolated and denied them with opportunities to ask questions, and to receive timely feedback." (Participants 4)
>
> "Lack of student support in ODeL contributes to students' underperformance because students are not provided with the skills, they need to study successfully in an ODeL environment such as being able to study independently and time management skills as most of them are juggling between work and home responsibilities." (Participants 6)

The statements above highlight the correlation between a lack of student support and academic underperformance in an ODeL environment. Furthermore, participants emphasised that students experience frustration due to the lack of support, ultimately hindering the learning process by depriving them of the essential skills required to effectively engage in online learning. Additionally, emails were identified as crucial communication tools between students and lecturers in the ODeL environment. However, it was reported by participants that students do not consistently receive feedback from lecturers through this communication channel. Consequently, this leads to poor performance, module failures and attrition among students.

The study results clearly indicate that, from the participants' perspective, a lack of student support in the ODeL environment constitutes a significant challenge to student retention. This phenomenon arises, as students who do not receive adequate support from their lecturers are more likely to experience difficulties in their academic success, leading to poor academic performance. The following responses from the participants highlight this concern:

> "When students don't get the help they need in online learning, it can make them do worse in their studies. If they have problems with their lessons, technology, or how to study, and they don't get help in time, they can lose interest, get frustrated, or lose motivation. Not having enough support can also make it hard for them to ask for help, which can lead to their grades dropping." (Participants 5)
>
> "Some of the resources and support that are given to students are not sufficient and adequate to ensure that students are able to perform academic responsibility independently." (Participants 8)
>
> "They end up failing their modules because they lack things like resources," (Participants 9)

Reflecting on the above statements from the participants, it is evident that the resources provided by lecturers as part of student support are insufficient to assist students to grasp their modules. This ultimately leads to poor performance in their modules.

Theme 2.2: Home environment

Home environments play a crucial role in students' academic success. Those from affluent backgrounds tend to excel academically compared to their peers from financially struggling families. Several participants emphasised the significance of a conducive home environment, especially in the context of ODeL, where students are expected to primarily study from home. More so, if the home environment is not conductive, it can hinder students' academic performance. The extract below illustrates this:

> "In some cases, students leave home and stay in a rented space due to home conditions that are not conducive for them to learn. When they get to those rented spaces, they also suffer because of many activities that happens around or they run out of money to rent those spaces. As a result, they are forced to go back home where the conditions are not conducive." (Participant 1)

> "If they come from a family that doesn't value the importance of education, they might not see the value of education as well." (Participants 2)

> "The students are able to work at times that suit them unlike being in class." (Participant 7)

> "There are many challenges that students are facing at home. Social and financial challenges impede students from performing their duties efficiently." (Participants 8)

> "Some families do not give support to those studying. They make them work at home when they should be studying." (Participant 9)

The above extract from the participants indicates that students enrolled in ODeL face a range of challenges at home, including financial constraints, that affect their ability to sustain themselves. Furthermore, participants noted that some students come from families lacking support and encouragement regarding the significance of education. This lack of support can lead to a devaluation of education, resulting in academic underperformance.

> "The place where students live can affect how well they do in online learning. If there are lots of distractions, they don't have a good place to study, or they have to do other things at home, it can be hard for them to concentrate on their studies. Also, if they don't have the right things they need, like a computer or good internet, it can be tough for them to learn online, which can lead to them doing badly." (Participant 5)

> "Most students have roles to perform in their homes, work and communities which compete for their time. This poses challenges to them as they don't have enough time to focus on their studies, which in turn results in academic underperformance." (Participant 6)

The above quotations from the participants indicate that there are multiple factors within the home environment that can potentially impact students' academic performance. Furthermore, the participants reported that some students come from family backgrounds where there are numerous distractions and limited space to

study, leading to poorer performance. Additionally, participants noted that due to their family backgrounds, some students lack essential tools for effective online learning, such as access to the internet, which adversely affects their academic performance. Balancing family responsibilities with studies can pose a challenge for some students. The participants observed that some students struggle to find an equilibrium between their studies and family duties, resulting in lower grades in their assessments.

> "Some students may come from families where they are the primary breadwinners. In such cases, they might have to work to support their family's basic needs, leaving them with limited time and energy to focus on their studies. Balancing work and education can be overwhelming, leading to academic underperformance." (Participant 4)

The statement above from the participant suggests that some students in ODeL are facing financial challenges, as they are often the sole providers for their families. Consequently, trying to strike a balance between caring for their families and studying simultaneously becomes a burden for them, ultimately leading to academic underperformance.

Participant 3 held a dissenting viewpoint compared to the other eight participants in this study, asserting that "Students from affluent families might not face the same financial pressures as their less privileged counterparts. However, this could lead to a lack of motivation to excel academically, as they might not feel the urgency to succeed due to their privileged position." This suggests that some students in ODeL who come from affluent backgrounds may lack the motivation to work hard in their studies in order to achieve good grades. This is because they are aware that even if they do not perform well academically, their families will provide for them financially.

Theme 2.3: Digital divide

All nine participants reported that not having access to technology, like computers and the internet, make students perform poorly in online learning. In addition, students experience some difficulties in joining online classes, using study materials on the internet, or sending their work on time. This results in their grades being worse than those of students who have better access to technology. This is evident in the following statements by the participants:

> "ODeL students' socioeconomic status plays a role in terms of accessing resources for online learning which then impacts their performance. They struggle to have access to the internet especially those in the rural areas where internet accessibility is still a problem. Most students are having financial constraints and are not able to buy the data they need to connect to the internet." (Participant 6)

> "Students without digital devices and stable internet struggle in an ODeL environment." (Participants 2)

> "Student may struggle to receive certain information on time leading to them being left, or sometimes be left behind with critical information." (Participants 4)

The digital divide significantly contributes to students' academic underperformance in an ODeL environment through unequal access to technology and reliable internet connectivity. Students without access to essential devices, such as computers or smartphones, struggle to fully engage in online classes and access course materials, hindering their understanding and participation. Moreover, students with limited or no internet access face challenges to attend live sessions, participate in virtual discussions and access online resources, further widening the gap in their learning opportunities. Additionally, inadequate digital literacy skills and the lack of exposure to digital learning create barriers for some students, which lead to disengagement and reduced motivation to learn. Addressing the digital divide is crucial to ensure equitable access to education and support students' academic success in the evolving landscape of ODeL.

Theme 2.4: Gender roles

Participants expressed different views on the influence of gender roles on students' academic underperformance in ODeL. Most of the participants (5) reported that gender roles are one of the factors that contribute to student's academic underperformance in ODeL. The participants further indicated that women have more responsibilities than their male counterparts, which affect their academic performance. Some of the participants relayed their opinions as follows:

> "Female student may struggle in balancing schoolwork due to unequal distribution of household responsibility. They may have less time and energy to dedicate to their studies due to the disproportionate workload at home, resulting in academic underperformance." (Participants 4)

> "Traditional roles for boys and girls can make it harder for them to do well in online learning. For example, if girls are expected to do more housework or take care of others, they might not have enough time and energy for their studies. This can affect their grades and make it harder for them to learn." (Participant 5)

> "Most of our students are females and married and they have to take care of the home and children." (Participant 8)

> "Gender roles do contribute to students' underperformance because women are the ones who are tasked with taking care of the family, they are the ones who are responsible for raising children and therefore, find it difficult to perform these roles and still focus on their studies." (Participant 6)

Gender roles in unequal society like South Africa contribute to students' academic underperformance in an ODeL environment by reinforcing traditional expectations and stereotypes. These expectations may lead to unequal opportunities and support for students based on their gender. This is the result of society expecting women to

focus on domestic responsibilities, which can interfere with their ability to fully engage in online learning.

> "I don't think gender roles have a huge impact on students' underperformance because really, the society is changing now, you find that male students engage in the duties that were reserved for females and the opposite is true. So, gender roles are not that impactful to students' studies." (Participant 1)

> "I don't think gender roles play a factor. South Africa has evolved, and we have more female students registered in higher education than before." (Participant 2)

The statement above suggests that unlike in the past when gender roles played a significant role in influencing students' academic underperformance, nowadays, gender roles have no impact on how students perform in ODeL. This reflects the societal transformation where both men and women now have equal access to educational opportunities.

Theme 2.5: Poor time management

Time management is key for student academic success and attention in high education. In this theme, the participants reported that some students in ODeL suffer from poor time management, which results in academic underperformance. This is evidenced by the following statements:

> "Other things that can make students do badly in online learning include not being disciplined enough, not managing their time well, having trouble studying. Mental health issues, like feeling stressed or anxious, can also affect their ability to do well in online learning." (Participant 5)

> "The lack of time and prioritising their studies." (Participant 9)

Time management and self-discipline are crucial skills for successful e-learning and students who struggle with organising their study schedule find it challenging to keep up with coursework and end up performing badly in their studies.

5.3. Strategies for addressing student underperformance in an ODeL environment

Addressing student underperformance in ODeL requires multifaceted strategies. In this section, we aim to explore the various strategies employed by academics to tackle the issue at hand. The study revealed that, depending on the participants' expertise and capabilities, they utilise a diverse array of strategies with the goal of enhancing students' academic performance and bolstering retention in the ODeL environment.

5.3.1. Assessing the students' prior knowledge

Numerous participants indicated assessing the prior knowledge of the student in an ODeL environment is important in improving students' academic performance. In

addition, it helps the participants to understand areas where students need the most assistance. Some of the participants relayed their opinions as follows:

> "Start by assessing the specific needs of students using different diagnostic tests. Then understanding this will assist to develop lesson that address unique requirements." (Participant 5)

> "To help students do better in their studies, I first see what they already know and how they like to learn. Then, I make lessons that fit their needs. I use different teaching methods, materials like videos, and activities to keep them interested and help them learn better." (Participant 6)

> "I begin by assessing the individual and collective needs of my students because ODeL students have diverse learning styles, abilities and backgrounds. Based on the identified needs, I establish clear and specific learning objectives for each lesson. These objectives should be measurable and aligned with broader course goals. I also encourage the application of the lesson content to real-life situations." (Participant 7)

Reflecting on the statement above, it is clear that in attempt to improve student academic performance, participants plan their lessons with a student-centred approach, taking into consideration the individual needs and learning styles of students to enhance their academic performance. In addition, assessing the students' prior knowledge and understanding of the subject matter and identifying any knowledge gaps or areas of weakness is crucial in student academic success.

5.3.2. Designing interactive lesson

The participants reported that in order to improve student academic performance, they tailor the content and pace of the lessons to ensure they align with their current level of comprehension. Participants indicated that they incorporate diverse teaching strategies, such as interactive activities, recording and group discussions, to cater for different learning preferences. Some of the participants relayed their opinions as follows:

> "When planning a lesson, I keep in mind that I am teaching diverse students who come from different backgrounds. Firstly, I inform students early so they will prepare themselves for the lesson. During lesson presentation, I record the lesson and share the link on Moodle so all students including those who did not attend due to shortage of data can listen in and catch up." (Participant 1)

> "My lessons are engaging, and the students are encouraged to participate in activities, i.e. discussion forums." (Participant 2)

> "The lessons are designed for students to engage." (Participant 7)

> "A lesson should incorporate diverse teaching and assessment strategies." (Participant 8)

These statements highlighted the participants' recognition of the importance of creating inclusive learning environments for all students, which plays a crucial role in enhancing academic performance in ODeL. Additionally, the participants emphasised their commitment to designing lessons that offer diverse learning opportunities and avenues for students to show their understanding, including active participation in discussion forums facilitated by the learning management system.

5.3.3. Holistic and personalized approach

Participants reported that there are multiple factors influencing students' academic underperformance. As a result, they focus on various aspects of a student's life, including mentorship and building confidence, in order to support their success in their studies. Some of the participants relayed their opinions as follows:

> "My effective student support services focus on providing a holistic and personalised approach to enhance students' academic performance. Firstly, I offer regular one-on-one mentoring sessions to understand individual challenges and provide tailored guidance. Secondly, I maintain open communication channels, encouraging students to seek help and clarify doubts promptly. I aim to empower students, build their confidence and create an environment conducive to academic excellence." (Participant 1)

> "Provide one-on-one consultation section via teams." (Participant 3)

> "Giving students timely and constructive feedback on their assessments is key because it will help them improve their performance. Also attending to students' queries promptly is very important and enhances their performance." (Participant 6)

The statement above indicates that participants recognise the distinctive needs of students with the goal of enhancing their academic performance. They adopt a holistic approach, which includes offering mentoring to help students understand and overcome challenges. Additionally, participants promote open communication between themselves and students to facilitate easy access to assistance from lecturers. Moreover, participants use technology, such as organising sessions with students through platforms like Microsoft Teams, to address any challenges they may face.

6. Discussion

Our study findings provided valuable insight to academics' perceptions of students' academic underperformance in ODeL environments and their strategies of addressing student's underperformance. This study aimed to explore how academics conceptualise academic underperformance in the ODeL environment. The findings indicated that academic underperformance is defined as students' inability to achieve the anticipated grades, leading to module failure within the ODeL context. This concurs with the study

conducted by Mascolo and Castillo (2015), who assert that academic underperformance is a systemic concern involving students failing their modules in higher education institutions. This study found the correlation between a lack of student support and academic underperformance in the ODeL environment. Additionally, it reveals that the geographical separation between lecturers and students poses a significant challenge in the ODeL environment. This results in students struggling to access the necessary academic support, acting as a hindrance to their academic success and leading to underperformance. These findings echo those of previous studies, which showed that students in ODeL environments often struggle in their studies due to a lack of adequate support from their lecturers, leading to feelings of isolation and frustration (Mncube et al., 2017; Valai et al., 2019; Priyanka & Sanju, 2019). In order for students to score good grades in their assessments and do well in their studies, they need a conductive home environment where there is necessary support and resources available to study. However, this study revealed that some of the students in the ODeL environment come from a poor family background where there is no emotional support in the form of encouragement to perform before in their studies, which have an influence on their academic performance. This study further revealed that students from a poor background lack the financial means that can enable them to buy resources to participate in online learning such as access to data. As a result, such students end up performing poorly. This finding is supported by the study of Daneyeefard (2020), which argued that some students face financial constraints at home that prevent them from purchasing data to access study materials online, consequently affecting their academic performance. The study findings further revealed that in the era of the information age, where digital skills are crucial for academic success in ODeL, the digital divide has profound implications for students' academic performance. Moreover, some students lack access to the necessary gadgets for online resource utilisation, which in turn affects their performance. This assertion is supported by studies conducted by Maphosa and Bhebhe (2019) and Bervell et al. (2019), who argue that the digital divide negatively affects students' academic performance. Additionally, even if some students have access to gadgets, they may still lack the necessary digital skills to effectively navigate online learning platforms. Our study findings revealed mixed opinions among academics regarding the impact of gender roles on student academic performance. It initially suggests that female students, more than their male counterparts, tend to underperform in their studies due to the gender roles assigned to them within a family setting, which may include household responsibilities like taking care of everyone at home. On the other hand, the study revealed that in a developing nation like South Africa, where progress has been made in achieving gender equality, gender roles do not seem to have a significant influence on student academic performance in Open Distance e-learning. The study conducted by Orser et al. (2012) supports the first option expressed by some academics and contradicts the second option. They argue that there is an association between gender roles and

student academic underperformance, attributing it to female students performing domestic responsibilities while pursuing their education. Furthermore, the findings of this study also indicated that students in ODeL struggle with time management, which in turn contributes to their academic underperformance. In a previous study by Herlo (2017), it was found that certain students struggle with effectively planning their study schedules and tending to procrastinate, ultimately leading to poor academic performance.

This study also looked at the strategies employed by academics in addressing students' underperformance in the ODeL environment. The findings revealed that academics assess students' prior knowledge to identify their strengths and weaknesses, which proves instrumental in enhancing academic performance. This finding is inconsistent with Reeves' (2009) assertion that improving student academic performance necessitates a thorough understanding of the root causes of poor performance, followed by the implementation of an effective support system. The study further revealed that academics enhance students' learning experiences by creating inclusive environments through the design of interactive lessons. In these lessons, academics incorporate videos and discussion forums to engage students, ultimately fostering active participation in the online platform. Martin (2021) argues that using videos and providing students with constructive feedback can improve their academic performance. This study concluded by revealing that academics in ODeL employ a holistic and personalised approach in an attempt to improve student academic performance. This includes providing students with online mentorship, which helps build their confidence. This finding is supported by the study conducted by Parsons et al. (2018), who argue that offering students one-on-one mentorship is essential for enhancing their academic performance. The expectancy-value theory employed in this study contributed to our understanding of how academics perceive and address students' underperformance. Our current research expands on the expectancy-value theory by demonstrating that academics can elevate students' academic performance in ODeL by motivating them through digital platforms to hold high expectations for their own success. As students cultivate elevated expectations for academic achievement, their belief in attaining commendable grades is heightened. Furthermore, through mentorship sessions, academics can empower students to recognise the significance of achieving high grades in their assessments, ultimately leading to an improvement in their academic performance.

In this study, we obtained information from a small sample size of nine academics. As a result, the findings presented herein may not be representative of the entire population of academics in ODeL. Consequently, there is a need for future research employing a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods to comprehensively address the topic at hand. This approach provides a broader perspective from a larger pool of academics, ultimately contributing to enhanced strategies for student retention in ODeL.

7. Conclusions

This study explored academics' perceptions of students' academic underperformance in ODeL environments and their strategies of addressing student's underperformance. In this study, it was found that a lack of student support, where students do not receive adequate assistance from their lecturers, leads to academic underperformance. Additionally, the digital divide poses a significant challenge in developing nations like South Africa, exacerbating the gap between the rich and the poor. This study also revealed that students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds often face difficulties to access the internet, which hinders their participation in online learning and lead to academic underachievement. In an effort to address students' academic underperformance, this study revealed that academics employ a holistic approach, which includes providing mentorship to students.

Gender roles were identified as a factor contributing to students' academic struggles in an ODeL environment. Addressing and challenging these gender norms and biases are crucial in creating an inclusive and supportive e-learning environment that enables all students to thrive academically, irrespective of their gender. To address students' poor time management in the ODeL environment, educational institutions must offer technical support, provide time management guidance, foster strong teacher-student communication and promote interactive learning activities to help students succeed in an ODeL environment. Academics need to encourage collaborative learning in an ODeL environment. They might facilitate group projects, online discussions or peer-to-peer learning activities to foster a sense of community and collective problem solving. Collaborative learning can help underperforming students gain new perspectives, receive peer support and improve their understanding of course content.

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