

Student support gaps in an open distance learning context

Akwasi Arko-Achemfuor

University of South Africa

Studying through distance education can be problematic for any student, but it can be worse for rural students for diverse reasons. To ensure that students studying through the open distance learning (ODL) system have an enduring learning experience, ODL builds student support as one of its components. The University of South Africa (Unisa) provides a number of student support services to its students but it appears most of the students are not able to access the services adequately. This article investigates the access challenges that students face in their ODL mode of study. A mixed-methods approach using a focus group and a set of questionnaires were applied to solicit the views and experiences of students on the challenges they face in accessing the support services the university offers. The results indicate that although most of the support services are in place, students in the rural areas are not able to access them adequately, thereby impacting adversely on their studies. This study recommends that Unisa increase its support services and train academic and support staff as well as students on using the support services available to them.

Introduction

Studying through distance can be a nightmare for any student but it can be worse for rural students for obvious reasons. To ensure that all students studying through the open and distance learning (ODL) system have enduring learning experience and succeed, the system builds student support as one of its components. There is increasing demand and need for continuous learning through the ODL mode which is gaining popularity across the world for diverse reasons. The provision of tertiary education through the conventional contact mode appears to be preferred by some students but for mature age students, the changing educational landscape has provided an alternative platform without which study would not have been possible. The continuous innovations in information and communication technology (ICT) has opened opportunities for the provision of quality tertiary education that is comparable to the traditional classroom mode of delivery. This increased demand has seen ODL fast becoming an accepted and indispensable part of mainstream education in both developed and developing countries, with particular emphasis in the latter (Moore and Tait, 2002). In the South African context, former apartheid policies limited the opportunities for the majority black population to study in tertiary educational institutions. In the new dispensation, high levels of poverty and unemployment are making it difficult for those who want to study through the conventional contact mode to realise their dreams.

In addition, the growing need for skills upgrading and retraining have made it possible, as a result of technological advances, to offer quality tertiary education at a distance. ODL then presents a good opportunity for people, and most especially for mature age students. ODL is not only becoming popular in the developing countries but in the developed

countries as well. Meanwhile, ODL has undergone a paradigm shift from its dependence on print media with minimal learner support to the application of educational technologies, delivering content and facilitating support for distance learners (Kamau, 2012:33). The University of South Africa (Unisa) is largest ODL provider on the African continent and one of the largest ODL providers in the world. Brindley (1995), South African Institute for Distance Education (SAIDE) (1995) and Lentell (2003) have emphasised that learner support is critical for the delivery of any quality ODL system (Unisa, 2008). Unisa's student support services include face-to-face tutorials, guidance and counselling, information and communication technology (ICT) and e-tutoring, just to name a few.

Woodley and Simpson (2014:459) referred to the high dropout and low graduation rates in distance education as "an elephant in the room in distance education". Simpson (2015) pointed out that when distance education is compared to full time studies, distance education institutions tend to have lower graduation rates in the United Kingdom. The low graduation and high dropout rates in distance and ODL apply to most distance education providing institutions. Unisa has a number of student support services in place to support its students but it appears that most of the students from the rural areas find it difficult to access the services adequately. There are also growing numbers of black students in South African universities who come from poor socio-economic backgrounds who are trying to access tertiary education to better their living conditions. Most of these students live in rural areas and the countryside, where access to student support services is difficult to attain. Statistics from the Council for Higher Education (CHE) (2016) indicate that the African student proportion of public higher education headcount enrolments rose from 64% in 2008 to 70% in 2013.

Learner support is a generic term which is applied to the range of services that are developed by institutions in order to assist their students to meet their learning objectives; to gain the knowledge, expertise and skills to be successful and complete their course or studies. There are different tools for student support that distance education institutions use, including face-to-face tutorials, workshops, guidance and counselling, telephones, information and communication technologies (ICT), and audio-visual technologies. Unisa uses most of these tools to support its students.

This paper argues that there is the need for Unisa to find out why students appear to be unwilling or unable to access the support services the institution offers as many of them, especially from the rural areas, do not use fully the support services on offer.

Theoretical framework

Various approaches and theories have been used by interested parties and researchers as theoretical and conceptual bases for learner support in the ODL context. Some of the theories include Freire's (1970) dialogic process of communication, Holmberg's (1983) theory of didactic conversation, Moore's (1990) theory of transactional distance and Trumper's (2004) theory of dialogue. Gorsky, Caspi and Trumper (2004) pointed out that

the key factor in a distance education instructional system is neither the learner, the instructor, the physical nor the temporal distance that separates them but rather the *learning* itself. They add that learning is an individual endeavour which is mediated by interpersonal dialogue. Such a dialogue, it is assumed, is made possible by physical, human and other resources.

Freire's (1970) theory of dialogical process of conversation is premised on the assumption that for any communication to be effective, it should be in the form of a dialogue and be reciprocal (Mbatha & Naidoo, 2010). The focus of this theory is that individuals who have to develop themselves have to be active participants in their own development even if they have to be assisted by others.

Holmberg's (1983) theory of didactic conversation centres on the learner. The theory establishes a certain type of relationship between the educator and the learner which can enhance learner motivation and lead to success in the end. Holmberg (2003:73) later refined the term 'didactic' and simply referred to the concept of '*learning conversations*' which allows for a more liberal use of the term than the more authoritarian term 'didactic'.

The theoretical framework underpinning this paper is Moore's theory of transactional distance which refers to the distance which exists in all educational relationships. This distance is determined by the amount of dialogue which occurs between the learner and the instructor, and the amount of structure which exists in the design of the course (Tait, 2003). Keegan (1993) and Garrison (1993) indicated that the separation between learners and their tutors and the ODL institution is geographical, while Moore (1994) viewed it as a psycho-social or transactional distance. Unisa (2007) described the physical distance as a barrier because it tends to create fear and anxiety among distance learners, by preventing them from benefiting from any form of dialogue during the learning process. Tait (2003) added that a greater transactional distance occurs when an educational program has more structure and less student-teacher dialogue. He concurred that although distance is necessarily geographically determined, what creates distance is the relationship between dialogue and structure. He suggested that one way by which a variety of transactions can occur is through the use of ICT systems, thereby improving dialogue to minimise transactional distance. Structure, according to Moore (1993), "expresses the rigidity or flexibility of the programme's educational objectives, teaching strategies and evaluation methods. It describes the extent to which an education programme can accommodate or be responsive to each learner's individual needs" (Moore, 1993:26).

I find Moore's theory of transaction distance relevant for this article because Unisa as an ODL institution appears to exhibit some elements of transactional distance on the basis of the challenges students face in accessing its support services. Appreciating the transactional distance in Unisa's learner support system and thus increasing its transactional presence to address the challenges students face in accessing the support service the institution offers, will go a long way to address the gaps in its student support initiatives.

Research design and methodology

The research question investigated in this study was: What challenges do adult distance education students experience in accessing the learner support services provided by Unisa?

Sub-questions

- What are the experiences of adult education students in accessing the support services?
- What gaps prevent the students from accessing the support services offered by Unisa?
- What can be done to improve access to the student support by adult education students at Unisa?

Both quantitative and the qualitative methods were used in the study. In effect, both positivist and interpretivist epistemologies were used. Data from a questionnaire were organised and analysed quantitatively in the first phase, followed by a focus group which was used to collect the qualitative data based on the research questions. Both the questionnaire and the focus group were designed for the students.

The following specific procedures were adopted to answer the research questions:

1. A literature study examining learner support systems and the challenges adult learners face in accessing the support services.
2. A survey using questionnaire and a focus group interview administered to Unisa's Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) students in one of the predominantly rural provinces of South Africa.
3. Quantitative analysis of survey data using the *Statistical Package for the Social Sciences* (SPSS) computer program. The analysis involved the identification of different variables being explored in the study and assigning each variable a name that was used to describe the variable to the SPSS package. The qualitative data was categorised into themes through the constant comparative method to identify general patterns to make sense of what the data means. This was done manually.

The target populations for this research comprised all registered students in Unisa's ABET certificate and diploma programs from the North West Province of South Africa numbering 7200 in 2011. A sample frame of 419 students was used for the study, obtaining a stratified random sample of 150 ABET students out of the 419 registered in the province. The ABET program in this study comprises the ABET Higher Certificate program of 120 credits (for ABET practitioners), also used as an access program for students who could not obtain passes that enabled them to study for diplomas and bachelor degrees, and the ABET Diploma of 360 credit units, an initial teacher qualification for adult educators (Unisa, 2014). Another 10 students from one regional centre were recruited for the focus group. Data was collected from current ABET students in the certificate and diploma programs across the province. The details of the

respondents were obtained from the Department of Adult Basic Education and the ICT sections at Unisa.

Research design

A mixed design based on the interpretivist and positivist paradigms was used for the study. The paper employed the mixed-methods approach using a focus group and a questionnaire to solicit the views and experiences of students on the challenges they face in accessing the support services the university offers. The reason for using a mixed methods design was for triangulation purposes so that the weaknesses of one design could be mitigated by the other. Needs-gap analysis was performed in addition to the importance and accessibility ratings to determine the gap between the importance and accessibility ratios. A questionnaire as well as a structured focus group schedule were designed to assist the researcher to obtain a range of information from the respondents, included biographical information. The questionnaire comprised items that surveyed the level of awareness of the learner support services provided by Unisa, with a particular focus on the problems they face in accessing these services. Other items in the survey included statements which required students to indicate the importance they placed on the different services, and the extent to which each of the services is available to them. Another part of the questionnaire was based on their ODL experiences.

Data collection and analysis

The primary data came mainly from a questionnaire and focus group interview. These techniques allowed both the qualitative and quantitative approaches to be used. The questionnaire was administered to the respondents via postal mail. Self-addressed envelopes were included for them to return the questionnaires to the researcher. The focus group was conducted at one of the study centres to assess students' thoughts and feelings on how the learner support services met their learning needs as well as the challenges they faced in accessing the services the university provides. The focus group was conducted on 15 April 2012 where permission was obtained from the participants and the session was recorded. Responses from the questionnaire were analysed utilising simple frequencies and cross-tabulations. Descriptive statistics from the survey were used in the study to support findings from the focus group.

Findings and discussion

This research used Moore's (1993) theory of transactional distance as the basis for assessing gaps in access to Unisa's learner support services for its adult learners studying through distance education. On the basis of transactional distance theory and the empirical study, themes were developed to answer the study's research questions.

Assessment of learner support services

The questionnaire asked students to rate the importance and accessibility of the support services offered by Unisa on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (very important/

accessible) to 4 (not at all important/accessible). The 4-point Likert scale was used to avoid a neutral answer, so that respondents had to indicate whether they agreed or disagreed with the statements. The average or mean scores were calculated for all the support services that were assessed in this part of the questionnaire. For the purposes of this study, a mean score of 1.0 to 1.5 represents a high degree of importance/accessibility. A mean score of 1.51 to 2.00 indicates medium importance/accessibility and a mean score of 2.1 and above represents a low level of importance/accessibility.

A gap analysis or needs-gap analysis generally is a technique used mostly by businesses and organisations to compare actual performance with potential or desired performance. Fraser (2013: 70) noted that

... a need as a gap between a current situation and a future situation where a discrepancy exists between “what is” (which is the present state) and “what should be”, the desired state... (Fraser, 2013: 70)

It should be noted that needs-gap methodology, derived mostly from business, marketing and organisational perspectives, has a close relation with a typical learning environment methodology, which is derived from pedagogical and educational perspectives. It consists of (1) listing factors (such as attributes, competencies, performance levels) of the present situation (“what is”); (2) listing factors needed to achieve future objectives (“what should be”); and then (3) highlighting the gaps that exist and need to be filled. Jannetti (2012) added that a needs-gap analysis is a process of collecting a survey whereby both importance and satisfaction ratings are assessed, and that the process involves comparing how often each attribute is given high satisfaction rating vs. how often that attribute is given a high importance rating.

A needs-gap score according to Ozoglu (2009) is calculated for each support service by subtracting the accessibility rating for each case from the importance rating and calculating the mean of the differences. For the purposes of this article, a needs-gap mean of 1.00 or higher represents a large gap, a needs-gap mean of 0.50 to 0.99 indicates a moderate needs gap, and a needs-gap mean of 0.49 or less indicates a small needs gap. The needs gaps for the learner support services are analysed below.

Descriptive statistics

Table 1 indicates that students regard all the information under general information on recruitment and enrolment as important. The students indicated the advice with course registration and personal counselling as the areas with the greatest need, with mean scores 1.09. The needs gap of -2.01 for personal counselling showed the most dissatisfaction by students, followed by advice with course registration at -1.30. From the table, all the mean scores for accessibility are above 2.0 which imply that the services on general information on recruitment and enrolment are not very accessible.

Table 1: General information on recruitment and enrolment (N=117)

		Mean	SD	Needs gap for means
General information about Unisa program	Importance	1.67	.473	-0.50
	Accessibility	2.17	.758	
Help with admission/application process	Importance	1.46	.501	-0.66
	Accessibility	2.12	.528	
Advice with course registration	Importance	1.09	.281	-1.30
	Accessibility	2.39	.731	
Orientation to the course media/delivery format	Importance	1.59	.511	-0.73
	Accessibility	2.32	.585	
Assessment of prior learning/life experience	Importance	1.91	.550	-0.41
	Accessibility	2.32	.582	
Personal counselling	Importance	1.09	.310	-2.01
	Accessibility	3.10	.814	
Information about University policies and procedures	Importance	1.85	.441	-0.42
	Accessibility	2.27	.700	

Table 2: General assistance on studies (N = 117)

		Mean	SD	Needs gap for means
One point of contact at Unisa for general assistance	Importance	1.05	.222	-1.97
	Accessibility	3.02	.830	
Information about academic program requirements	Importance	1.69	.533	-0.52
	Accessibility	2.21	.599	
Communication with lecturers/tutors	Importance	1.03	.225	-1.21
	Accessibility	2.24	.582	
Communication with fellow course mates	Importance	1.06	.272	-1.12
	Accessibility	2.18	.837	
A contact person in your local area to assist you with your educational needs	Importance	1.09	.337	-2.26
	Accessibility	3.35	.780	
Help with self confidence	Importance	1.49	.535	-1.20
	Accessibility	2.68	.739	
Communication on clear academic performance standards	Importance	1.38	.506	-1.00
	Accessibility	2.38	.628	

The most important issues under general assistance on studies as Table 2 depicts are a contact person in your local area to assist you with your educational needs with an importance (1.09) mean score and an accessibility 3.35 mean score and a needs gap of -2.26, followed by communication with lecturers/tutors with a mean score of 1.03 and an accessibility mean score of 2.24 and a needs gap of -1.21. The third most important issue is on one point contact at Unisa for general assistance with a mean score for importance at 1.05 and accessibility 3.02 resulting in a needs gap of -1.97.

Table 3: Materials (N = 117)

		Mean	SD	Needs gap for means
Information about getting textbooks and study materials	Importance	1.18	.385	-0.90
	Accessibility	2.08	.632	
General orientation to library and other learning resources	Importance	1.28	.471	-1.09
	Accessibility	2.37	.761	

The need gaps for general orientation to library and other learning resources according to the respondents is higher under materials -1.09 with mean scores of 1.28 (medium importance) and 2.37 (accessibility) respectively in Table 3. The item information about getting textbooks and study materials also shows satisfaction among students with mean scores of 1.18 (importance) and 2.08 (accessibility) respectively. The combined importance and accessibility scores for both items show dissatisfaction as well.

Table 4: Concerns (N = 117)

		Mean	SD	Needs gap for means
Information about how to address concerns	Importance	1.07	.253	-1.51
	Accessibility	2.58	.746	
Communication about Unisa events	Importance	1.83	.400	-0.78
	Accessibility	2.61	.956	

Table 4 on addressing students' concerns indicates mean scores of 1.07 (very important) and 2.58 (not very accessible) and a needs gap of -1.51 which is a concern. The needs gap for communication about Unisa events has a medium needs gap of -0.78 but information about addressing students' concerns (-1.51) indicates high levels of dissatisfaction.

Table 5: Financials (N = 117)

		Mean	SD	Needs gap for means
Financial assistance	Importance	1.14	.472	-2.71
	Accessibility	3.85	.485	
Information about billing and fee payments	Importance	1.85	.407	-0.42
	Accessibility	2.27	.535	

Services regarding financial assistance to students (Table 5) shows there is a need for financial information and financial assistance from Unisa by students as the importance mean score is 1.14 and accessibility is 3.85 (very inaccessible), thereby creating a needs gap of -2.71. The needs gap on information about billing and fee payment indicate a small needs gap of -0.42 which suggests that the university possibly is a bit more efficient on billing and enforcing the payment of fees.

As Table 6 depicts, the needs gaps for all the three items under tutorials are very high. The highest needs gap under tutorials is the ability to attend tutorials -1.87 with mean scores of 1.04 (very important) and 2.91 (accessibility) respectively, followed by access to tutorial

centres with a needs gap of -1.58 and information about tutorials with a needs gap of -1.10. Face to face support which includes orientation, group tutorials, study skills training, weekend tutorials and individual help from tutors are crucial for any distance education system. This kind of interaction is vital as it has the highest perceived value among learners. It is therefore crucial for Unisa to take the issue around tutorials and tutors seriously.

Table 6: Tutorials (N = 117)

		Mean	SD	Needs gap for means
Information about tutorials	Importance	1.07	.253	-1.10
	Accessibility	2.17	.884	
Access to tutorial centers	Importance	1.04	.203	-1.58
	Accessibility	2.62	.849	
Ability to attend tutorials	Importance	1.04	.203	-1.87
	Accessibility	2.91	.965	

Table 7: Technical services (N = 117)

		Mean	SD	Needs gap for means
Computer access	Importance	1.06	.329	-1.49
	Accessibility	2.55	.905	
Internet access	Importance	1.04	.203	-1.49
	Accessibility	2.53	.886	

The needs gap on technical services as Table 7 above is very high with needs gaps of -1.49 and -1.49 for computer access and Internet access respectively. The responses on the mean scores for the two items under technical services indicate that students rank this service as very important. The mean scores for the two items under accessibility are all above 2.00. This information should be of great concern to Unisa as it is moving towards Internet-based delivery.

Table 8: myUnisa (N = 117)

		Mean	SD	Needs gap for means
Awareness of myUnisa	Importance	1.04	.242	-1.32
	Accessibility	2.36	.933	
Use of myUnisa for study purposes	Importance	1.03	.182	-1.92
	Accessibility	2.95	1.151	

In Table 8, the use of myUnisa [<http://www.unisa.ac.za/sites/myunisa/default/>] by Unisa as a support tool for study and information by students indicates there is a high needs gap as the satisfaction about the service is not encouraging. The mean score for importance on the use of myUnisa for study purposes stands at 1.03 (very important) and not very accessible at 2.95, thereby creating a needs gap of -1.92. On the awareness of myUnisa as a support tool, the mean score for importance is 1.04 and accessibility 2.36

and a needs gap of -1.32. These high needs gaps warrant investigation as myUnisa is the main student portal for accessing most of the services between the University and students, and among the students themselves.

Table 9: Assignments (N = 117)

		Mean	SD	Needs gap for means
Relevance of assignments to your studies	Importance	1.03	.225	-0.84
	Accessibility	1.87	.550	
Usefulness of assignment feedback	Importance	1.04	.305	-0.81
	Accessibility	1.85	.513	
Turnaround time for assessed work	Importance	1.04	.305	-1.24
	Accessibility	2.28	.558	
Attendance at discussion classes	Importance	1.12	.397	-1.70
	Accessibility	2.82	.997	
Attendance at video conferencing	Importance	1.13	.534	-1.70
	Accessibility	2.83	1.028	

Table 9 above on assignments clearly indicates high levels of dissatisfaction among the respondents on issues relating to assignments. The mean scores for all the items on importance range between 1.03 and 1.13 while the mean scores for the items for accessibility range between 1.85 and 2.83. The three items under assignments with the highest needs gap were attending discussion classes, attending video conferencing, and turnaround time for assessed work. It should be noted that since Unisa is an ODL institution where students are taught mainly through assignments, there is the need to explore the reasons for this situation.

Table 10: Other services (N = 117)

		Mean	SD	Needs gap for means
Access to regional service centres	Importance	1.14	.524	-1.43
	Accessibility	2.57	.913	
Facilities for individual learning at regional centres	Importance	1.13	.361	-1.61
	Accessibility	2.74	.790	
Facilities for group discussions at regional centres	Importance	1.21	.522	-1.57
	Accessibility	2.78	.789	
Ability to collect materials from regional centres	Importance	1.23	.547	-1.03
	Accessibility	2.26	.863	
Availability of library facilities at regional centres	Importance	1.18	.385	-1.44
	Accessibility	2.62	.764	
Availability of computer facilities at regional centres	Importance	1.15	.354	-1.59
	Accessibility	2.74	.814	
Access to computer and Internet facilities at regional centres	Importance	1.08	.268	-1.59
	Accessibility	2.67	.809	
Availability of tutors at regional and other centres	Importance	1.06	.238	-1.61
	Accessibility	2.67	.891	

In Table 10 for other services, the mean scores for all the items under importance range between 1.06 and 1.23, which implies that students place high value/importance on these services. The accessibility scores on the other hand range between 2.26 and 2.78. The items with the highest needs gap were the availability of tutors at regional and other centres (-1.61), facilities for individual learning at regional centres (-1.61) and access to computer and internet facilities at regional centres (-1.59). With Unisa's move towards e-learning and ICT-facilitated teaching and learning, it is worth assessing what can be done here.

From the focus group interview, the respondents confirmed the existence of some of the learner support services which they were able to describe in detail. For example, they indicated that there are regional hubs where they can go to access computer and ICT services, register for courses and modules, use library services and send assignments, just to name a few. When they were asked the question: Where do you access the support services? The response was "At the Unisa regional office in Mafikeng."

When asked about the support services they receive they said:

We go to the library to read and borrow books, use the computers at the centre, submit our assignments, do our registrations and other things.

They were, however, very critical of the long distances they have to travel to the regional hubs to access some of the services as well as some of the facilities not being sufficient. They mentioned the ICT infrastructure which they need to use at the centres but end up not having access to them as they are occupied by those who arrive there first. On the question: How accessible are the computers at the centre? The response was:

They are few and all the time occupied by those who arrive at the centre first. Those of us who have to travel long distances to this place hardly have access to them. They are simply not enough.

They also indicated that they occasionally use the myUnisa platform for their studies. On the question: To what extent do you use myUnisa for your studies? The response was:

We mainly use it to send our assignments but we do not know how to use the other functions on the platform. We do not understand the system well so we mostly use it for our assignment.

They also expressed frustration at their inability to navigate and use the ICT services because of their poor technical background in using computers. When asked: Why do you not use the myUnisa platform adequately for your studies? The response was:

We do not know how to use the system. It is complex and we are not trained on its use. Our computer skills are very limited so it really poses problems for us.

The other concerns the focus group expressed was on poor administrative and academic support they received from staff. They indicated that the administrative staff gave them conflicting messages when they needed assistance at the regional centre. When asked: What are your experiences regarding the administrative support that is offered to you at the centre? They were scathing. The response was "Some of the staff are rude and impatient with us and hardly answer their phones when we call." They indicated that for one reason or the other, they were not able to access most of the support services fully although they placed high value or importance on those services as far as their studies were concerned.

The discussions are summarised in four themes for the study after taking into account the literature survey and the empirical study. The four themes are transactional distance/presence, conflict/tension, experience of distance education and delivery modes at Unisa, and staff development.

Theme 1: Transactional distance/presence

Transactional presence deals with the way distance learners are afforded the support services they need, such as the tutoring and mediated programs that enable them to perform and realise their academic goals. Shin (2003) cited in Gatsha and Evans (2010:165) defined transactional presence as the degree to which learners sense the availability and connectedness with an ODL institution and its staff, learning centre coordinators, tutors, peer learners and significant others. In the ODL context, tutors, faculty, administrative and other resources are key to students' success. The availability of such services has the potential of enabling learning transactions that satisfy learners' academic needs. In the Unisa context, there appears to be a paradox concerning transactional presence as far as the Unisa students who participated in the study are concerned.

Evidence from the study points to high levels of dissatisfaction among the respondents with the support services. It also indicates the importance the students attach to the support services as well as the low levels of their accessibility. Meanwhile, SAIDE (2009) pointed out that any proper learner support system should take into account the following three factors:

- learning mediation which deals with course and learning materials;
- a social environment that emerges as a dialogue and interaction between learners and staff, and between learners themselves; and
- an administrative framework that is needed to support the management and dissemination of information to and from students.

Gorsky and Caspi (2005) added that the extent of transaction distance in distance education programs is a function of three key variables named "structure", "dialogue", and "learner autonomy". Gorsky and Caspi (2005:3) further noted that "the greater the structure and the lower the dialogue in a programme the more autonomy the learner has

to exercise". Such a scenario decreases transactional presence and increases transactional distance. Evidence in this study shows that there appears to be more structure in place in the Unisa context and less dialogue, which is creating transactional distance rather than the needed transactional presence.

Theme 2: Conflict/tension

Three issues isolated for discussion under Theme 2 are on conflict. Conflict/tension situations arise when there is disagreement between parties on issues, approaches, resources and so on. In the Unisa ODL context, and on the basis of literature and the empirical studies, the following conflict situations may be described:

- traditional modes of delivery and the need to catch up with technology and globalisation;
- opening access and right to education and Unisa's capacity to provide the needed support to most of the students who are scattered across South Africa and beyond; and
- Unisa's policy pronouncements and reality on learner support.

Most of the institutions that have been offering education through distance started with correspondence, including the University of South Africa. The evolution to what is now referred to as ODL required innovative approaches and technologies. Globalisation and competition across the world has forced institutions to be on board, or be left behind. Although Unisa has done well to be on board towards the ODL approach, for some reasons, many of the students, academics and the support staff appear not to be on board as most of the technologies are in place but it appears there is limited use of it by the stakeholders.

The tenuous situation as indicated above on students' perceptions about the delivery systems is quite in line with Chen's (2001) dimension of learner-interface transactional distance, and Tait's (2003) systemic support system in learner support. As Chen (2001) pointed out, the learner-interface transactional distance relates to the degree of user-friendliness/difficulty that learners perceive when they use the delivery systems. Some of the items which address the learner-interface, according to Chen (2001), include delivery systems such as searching resources on the Internet, uploading assignments, and using chat rooms, among others. This study clearly indicates that the learner-interface dimension is not working well. SAIDE (2008) pointed out that a number of institutions across the world are now using mobile technologies such as handheld PCs, PDAs, mobile phones and *iPods* as very convenient and suitable for the purpose of learner support in a developing country such as South Africa. It is imperative for distance education providers to adapt to changes to the needs of their students.

On Unisa's policy pronouncements and actual reality for learner support, as indicated above in the policies such as *Tuition, Learner Support and Vision 2015*, there are clear policy directions on the ODL policy of Unisa in which learner support is one of its central features. For example, Unisa's (2008:8) ODL Policy document stated in part that Unisa

“must ensure adequate staffing levels to allow defensible staff-to-student ratios, and proper support to our students”. It added that the establishment of leading-edge ICT architecture is vital for the institution to have a competitive edge and sustainability. Among its principles in the ODL policy document, Unisa (2008) stated that Unisa as a comprehensive ODL institution will:

- increase the participation of students and access to post-registration student support services; and
- encourage and support temporarily inactive students, monitor retention and throughput and implement the necessary interventions for improvement.

This study found serious gaps in the provision of support services to students as well as the access the students have to the support services offered by Unisa. The ODL approach requires open access and flexibility as well as an effective learner support system, but Lephala and Pienaar (2007) pointed out that Unisa’s increase in student numbers has not been accompanied by a corresponding increase in personnel and other support services. The students’ expectations and Unisa’s policy directions on learner support appear not to be up to the required standards, thereby creating the “conflict” situation that needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency.

Theme 3: Students’ experiences of distance education delivery

Croft, Dalton and Grant (2010) pointed out that different factors contribute to students’ learning experiences. Such experiences, they added, differ according to the individual circumstances of each student, including their learning style, personal situation, ICT skills, confidence and attitude (Webster & Hackley, 1997) and familiarity (Mason & Bacsich, 1998); background knowledge, motivation, effectiveness of teaching, communication with staff and between students, time to study, access to ICT support and group working encounters (Alexander, 2001).

In the Unisa context, students come from diverse backgrounds ranging from school leavers to mature adult learners. Their circumstances equally differ in their economic situations, social backgrounds as well as the areas of residence. This research has found both good and poor experiences by students accessing support services.

This study indicates that there is little dialogue or interaction in Moore's (1993) sense and Chen's (2001) learner-instructor dimension which leads to transactional distance and bad learning experiences in any learning situation, most especially in the ODL context.

Theme 4: Staff development

The problem of staff's inability or unwillingness to help featured prominently in the study. It emerged that the staff often give contradictory information at the regional offices. The statistics also indicated a high needs gap in almost all the learner support services the university offers in the areas of importance and accessibility.

Learner support in all its forms has been noted to be crucial for students' success in all learning situations, most especially in the ODL mode. Croft, et al. (2010) argued that the use of personal tutors, online/telephone assistance, work place mentors, peer learning, group induction sessions, study skills workshops and access to local libraries have been found to be helpful in dealing with student isolation and enabling success in learning. The services mentioned above all depend on the availability and quality of the staff. Chen's (2001) dimensions of transactional distance (learner-instructor; learner-content; and learner-interface) all depend on the availability and quality of the support that staff offer to students. This view is in line with Tait's (2003) model which identifies the three components of learner support systems as cognitive, administrative/systemic and affective support.

The need for staff development was emphasised by Roberts (2004) who states that institutions should ensure that:

- tutors are selected and trained for their role of mediating learning from course materials. This training should place particular emphasis on equipping tutors to analyse and assist learners with language and learning difficulties;
- adequate administrative and professional support is provided to tutors;
- administrative staff are trained to be helpful in a constructive way; and
- learners are provided with technical support for each educational technology.

Students' inability to access the support services offered by Unisa adequately is a paradox because there is evidence that some of the facilities are available to students, but they indicated that they were not able to use some of the ICT-based services. There is, therefore, the need to train all staff involved in learner support to enable them to adequately assist students.

Conclusions

The main findings from this research are grouped under the four themes namely: transactional distance/presence, conflict/tension, students' experience of distance education and delivery modes at Unisa, and staff development. The themes clearly reflect the experiences of the ABET students in accessing support services the Unisa offers and the challenges they face in accessing the support services. Moore's theory of transactional distance is applied in the study to explain the importance of learner support to students in any distance learning situation. There appears to be more structure and less dialogue/conversation between Unisa and its students, which is making it difficult for students to benefit from the support services that are on offer.

Students clearly articulated the importance they attach to learner support in their studies. The high needs gaps for all the learner support service items surveyed indicate that there are serious problems for students in accessing the services. The challenges that students face in accessing the support services include economic constraints, social factors, physical barriers, transactional distance on the part of Unisa in the form of academic, affective and administrative problems. The results indicate that, although most of the support services

are in place at the institution and at its regional offices, some of the students, most especially those in the rural areas, are not able to access the support services adequately, which impacts negatively on their studies and learning experiences.

Policy implications and recommendations

On the basis of the findings and discussions from this study, the following recommendations are made.

1. Systems should be put into place to monitor and continuously evaluate the effectiveness of the support services for student success, and address the administrative and other challenges. Unisa can adopt a system similar to Curtin University's *eVALUate* online system to monitor and evaluate their experiences of the support system offered by the university. Curtin Teaching and Learning (2010) noted the *eVALUate* unit survey asks students their perceptions of what helps and hinders their achievement of unit learning outcomes, their motivation and engagement, and their overall satisfaction with the unit. Such a system can be put in place to evaluate the programs, units, modules and staff as well, with the aim of improving the systems.
2. Unisa should address its ICT infrastructure shortages by increasing its computer laboratories at the regional centres to enable more students to use the facilities at peak demand times. The regional centres are few and mainly located in big towns and cities, For example, there only two regional centres in the North West Province where this study was conducted.
3. The university needs to increase the support services to students in rural communities and ensure that services and training are offered to both students and support staff to address the access challenges rural students face.
4. Unisa should introduce a compulsory semester course on introduction to basic computing and myUnisa for those without the basic skills to address students' challenges in using computers as well as using the myUnisa platform.
5. Unisa uses its position as one of the leading clients with the Post Office which falls under Telkom to get a deal at affordable rates of Internet services for students. Other Internet service providers should be invited to compete for the huge business opportunity that Unisa offers for Internet services.
6. Intensive training should be provided for all the administrative staff to equip them to deal with student queries, especially in counselling on courses and procedures.
7. Unisa should identify, train and appoint qualified people in the districts as tutors and academic counsellors. More tutorial centres should be opened in the districts so that students will not have to travel long distances to attend tutorials. The criteria for establishing tutorial classes should also be relaxed so that more students can attend. The tutorial centres should be based in communities where there are enough students to constitute centres.

8. Assessment plans should be prepared in such a way that all assignment dates should be at least five weeks before examinations for modules to address the delays in providing timely feedback to students. Systems should also be put in place to track the movement of all assignments.
9. Students who have access to ICT infrastructure and can afford it should be allowed to go on while the rural students who do not have access to or cannot afford it should be allowed to continue to use blended learning to address the ICT challenges for poor and rural students.

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Akwasi Arko-Achemfuor is an Associate Professor at the Department of Adult Education and Youth Development at the University of South Africa. He has taught in many educational institutions in Ghana, Lesotho and South Africa. His research interests are in economic empowerment and poverty reduction, adult education and small enterprise development.
Email: aachea@unisa.ac.za

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