

INCARCERATED STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF UNISA'S OPEN DISTANCE E-LEARNING AT ONE MEDIUM CORRECTIONAL CENTRE

M. Mdakane*

Department of Psychology

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0662-3327>

S. A. Ngubane*

S.A., ODL Research Unit, College of Education

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0998-7828>

Z. S. Dhlamini*

Department of Psychology

Masters student

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1186-8246>

*University of South Africa

Pretoria, South Africa

ABSTRACT

Technology mediated pedagogies of the 21st century present new and unprecedented challenges for incarcerated tertiary students. The researchers, employing a qualitative exploratory research design, sought to explore the learning experiences of UNISA students incarcerated at Baviaanspoort Medium Correctional Centre. Six participants were sampled purposively and recruited to participate during a focus group interview. Qualitative content analysis revealed the ever-changing landscape of higher education due to the advent of digitised e-learning; the unique challenges encountered by incarcerated students studying at tertiary level; strategies for overcoming barriers associated with ODeL; and that lastly, in the context of imprisonment, student-centeredness is still primarily informed by a constructivist approach to ODL. The study concluded that students' learning experiences, and by extension, academic success, can be enhanced provided learner support is augmented for incarcerated tertiary students.

Keywords: incarceration, Open Distance e-Learning, student-centredness, student support, South Africa

INTRODUCTION

In South Africa, prescripts enshrined in the White Paper on Corrections (Department of Correctional Services 2005, 39, 38) suggest that incarceration has two primary functions: (1) protection of the public through the secure containment of offenders and (2) rehabilitation of

those entrusted in the care of the Department of Correctional Services (DCS). In addition to the above, the South African Department of Correctional Services in terms of Section 29 (1) of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (Act No. 108 of 1996, 12) lends support to international human rights law and stipulates clearly that “everyone has a right (a) to basic education, including adult basic education and (b) to further education, which the state, through reasonable measures must make progressively available and accessible”. However, technological advancements in the 21st century, together with a complex balance between security, justice and control present new and unprecedented challenges for incarcerated tertiary students – especially since Open Distance Learning (ODL) is increasingly being characterised by online course offerings, online assessments and e-student support systems. In this respect, incarcerated tertiary students constitute a particularly disadvantaged group and encounter challenges and experiences unique to the correctional environment relative to non-incarcerated students (Hopkins and Farley 2015, 37; Jay 2013, v; Wake et al. 2013, np). Given this context, we ask: what are the learning experiences of UNISA students incarcerated at one Medium Correctional Centre and what institutional support do they receive or require?

TRANSACTIONAL DISTANCE THEORY (TDT)

This study incorporated TDT as part of its theoretical framework. First, TDT acknowledges context by configuring “transaction” in distance education as a relationship between the academic teaching team and students in environments that share a special attribute of their being spatially separate from one another. Second, TDT concedes that online distance education programmes vary enormously with regards to both structure and dialogue. Correspondingly, the advent of e-learning implies that incarcerated tertiary students are subject to varying learner needs requiring different types of learner support. One such example is providing access to computers and internet connections with sufficient bandwidth to make e-learning possible. From a constructionist point of view, designing the balance of structure and dialogue appropriate for incarcerated tertiary students necessarily involves success stories where technology was used to engage learners in a dialogue about the learning experiences of students rather than simply offering the content to students (Witthaus 2009). There are three theoretical constructs underpinning TDT, namely: structure, dialogue and autonomy. Comprehensively considered, these theoretical constructs provide a good insight into the pedagogical complexities of trying to bridge the gap between the students and their lecturers, the institution and their peers characterized by the distance learning context.

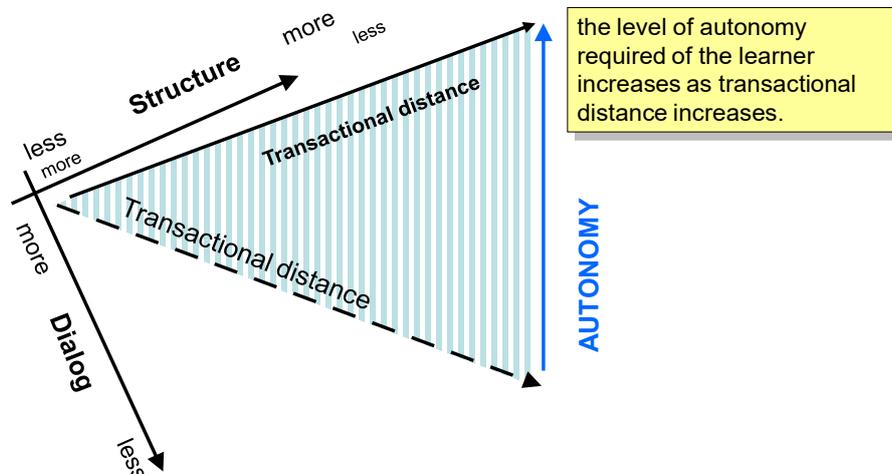


Figure 1: Relation of dimensions of transactional distance and learner autonomy (adapted from Moore 2013).

PRISONS AND THE EVOLVING LANDSCAPE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Many scholars acknowledge that the landscape of higher education is changing and for the most part has already changed (Baird 2009, 4; Harrison 2014, 159; Makoe 2009, 10; Ngubane-Mokiwa and Letseka 2015, 3; Seelig and Rate 2014; Singh, Donoghue, and Warton 2005, 14). A few decades ago, UNISA used to attract a large pool of students who were already employed and would not have to leave their jobs but instead studied part-time while working. In recent years, these demographics have been changing slowly. A review of ODL literature commonly configure themes around student support (Motswagosele and Marakakgoro 2009, 12; UNISA 2008, 2); students with disabilities (Payne 2009, 14); students in rural areas (Baloyi 2009, 4; Seeletso and Evans 2016, 63); but not so much on the experiences of higher education by incarcerated students. Consequently, in 2017, UNISA placed a premium emphasis on intersectoral collaboration with South Africa's Department of Correctional Services to provide technologically-mediated study courses to incarcerated students. In essence, the memorandum of understanding (MoU) ensured that incarcerated students are afforded access to education and in particular, access to Open Distance Education through both physical and online access to resources (MoU 2017, 5).

E-learning systems in correctional environments

To understand the effects of UNISA's e-learning systems on students incarcerated at one

Medium Correctional Centre, the present study reviewed literature on electronically mediated pedagogies of the 21st century to profile selected seminal work on e-learning technologies and how these might assist illuminate the experiences of incarcerated students studying through Open Distance Learning. As Africa's leading ODL institution with approximately 400 000 students (Ngubane-Mokiwa and Letseka 2015, 10), UNISA launched their Learning Management System called myUnisa in January 2006 in support of the traditional paper-based mode (Chokwe 2009, 5; Steyn and Myburgh 2009, 17). myUnisa is an online system used by lecturers to teach and communicate with all UNISA students (UNISA 2008, 6). As a tutoring system, it provides a wide range of students' services ranging from course information, access to digital library material, videos, webinars and podcasts, including opportunities where students participate in online discussion forums with other fellow students, e-tutors and lecturers. Literature emanating from Australia, Norway and New Zealand shows that using modified digital technologies for delivering tutorials and learning materials is useful and beneficial for higher education institutions (Hopkins and Farley 2015, 38; Seelig and Rate 2014). "These new technology mediated pedagogies ensure distance is no longer a barrier to full and equitable participation in higher education" (Hopkins and Farley 2015, 37). The objective thereof, "is to widen educational participation by overcoming geographical, social and economic barriers" (Baloyi 2009, 4; UNISA 2008, 2; Watts 2010, 5). Similarly, in their UK study, Singh et al. (2005, 21) concluded that e-learning systems provide students with greater access to education; while studies by Ngubane-Mokiwa and Letseka (2015, 8) lend support to the notion that e-learning systems allow students the opportunity to access their learning wherever they live or wish to study. In Tanzania, Sife, Lwoga and Sanga (2007) investigated modern learning and training technologies including the associated challenges for integrating these technologies in higher learning institutions. The authors explain that the advantage of synchronous and asynchronous learning is that lecturers and students can interact either at the same time or different times irrespective of their geographical locations (Sife et al. 2007, 58). On a similar note, Haughey (2006, np) also concluded that offering access to e-learning resources gives higher learning institutions the opportunity to improve and deliver more flexible learning. However, as e-learning systems in distance education gain momentum in South Africa, lecturers and students encounter unprecedented challenges (Witthaus 2009, 2). Major technical challenges evolve around the insufficient allocation of computers, impeded access to the internet, as well as internet connections with insufficient bandwidth which systematically excludes incarcerated students from chat groups and other forms of synchronous and/or collaborative learning activities.

Challenges posed by e-learning technologies

Despite the apparent advantages provided by e-learning technologies, recent studies report that the advent, and by extension the implementation of e-learning systems constitute the primary challenge facing correctional institutions (Harrison 2014, 159; Wake et al. 2013, np). Teare (2000) explains that initially, the concept of teaching via e-learning may demonstrate features of educational enrichment but in reality, e-learning methods prove highly problematic. Needless to mention, access to online learning requires reliable access to technology and computers (Heydenrych 2015). Consequently, incarcerated tertiary students cannot work effectively (that is, complete assignments and conduct research) without access to these modern technologies (Watts 2010, 5). Wake et al. (2013, np) further point out that the “increasing reliance on the learning management system and other digital technologies is based on the assumption that students have reliable access to the internet [of which] for many ... this is not the case ...”. The internet too, is indispensable for delivering content and tutorial material as we see more and more technological advancements in coursework which relies on electronically mediated tools (Singh et al. 2005, 18; Wake et al. 2013, np). Yet in her experience working as a tutor behind bars, Barrow et al. (2019) dispels the myth that incarcerated students readily have access to e-learning technologies. They argue that access to the internet, especially in high security prisons is a closely contested issue. In this regard, literature shows that partly due to practical, societal and economic reasons, Higher Education institutions may not meet their educational mandate due to students' inability to gain access to educational resources (Kamper and Du Plessis 2014, 88; Singh et al. 2005). The problem is compounded for incarcerated students with unreliable access to the internet and computers (Hopkins and Farley 2015, 44; Seelig and Rate 2014, np; Watts 2012, 5). As a final point, the thorny issue facing many South African students is the exorbitant cost of affording Higher Education. The South African study by Ngubane-Mokiwa and Letseka (2015, 1) and the Botswana study by Seeletso and Evans (2016, 64) seem to converge on the finding that a large number of Southern African students originate from poor socio-economic backgrounds and with little disposable income to purchase computers. By way of concluding, these studies exemplify that increased reliance on technology to deliver Higher Education potentially leads to further divisions in society by excluding the already socially excluded (Ngubane-Mokiwa and Letseka 2015, 2; Wake et al. 2013, np; Barrow et al. 2019). In view of the above, we posit that due to unreliable access to educational resources (i.e. computers, internet and sufficient data), incarcerated students are subjected to further exclusion resulting in negative learning experiences, frustrations and eventually under performance.

METHODOLOGY

According to Creswell (2003, 22) and Akhtar (2016, 73), if little is known about a concept or phenomenon, or little research exists around it, then the study merits a qualitative exploratory design. Exploring the learning experiences of UNISA students incarcerated at one medium correctional centre was, prior to this study, unprecedented. For this reason, a qualitative exploratory research design was used to conduct the study.

Study context

This Correctional Centre Management Area is situated in Lynn East, approximately 22 kilometers east of Pretoria, South Africa. It comprises three correctional facilities: a maximum, medium and youth centres. The research site for this study was the medium centre. It is classified as a medium security risk facility and accommodates adult male offenders only. The centre has a school registered with the Gauteng Education Department and provides offenders with educational opportunities while incarcerated (Department of Correctional Services 2005).

Selection of study participants

Study participants' eligibility to participate in the study was based on the following criteria: (1) participants had to be adult male offenders incarcerated at one Medium Correctional Centre; and (2) registered as UNISA students at under- or postgraduate levels of study for the 2020 academic year. Purposive sampling was used to identify and recruit study participants who were more likely to answer the study's research questions on the basis of their attributes and thus eliminated those who would fail to answer the following questions, namely: how do students incarcerated at one Medium Correctional Centre experience UNISA's ODeL systems? As well as to what extent do tertiary students require or receive institutional support? With the assistance of the internal guide, given the restricted movement of offenders inside correctional centres, recruiting study participants was accomplished with relative ease. In total, six UNISA students participated in the study. The biographical details of the participants are listed in Table 1. Knowing the sensitive nature of correctional facilities and the importance of attaining ethical clearance before research activities are undertaken, the research team applied for and received ethical clearance from UNISA's Research Ethics Committee and from the Department of Correctional Services Research Ethics Committee. The research participants were briefed about the concept of informed consent and that they withdraw from the study if they so wished. They then each signed the letter of informed consent before participating in the in-depth focus group interview. The participants were informed that their identify will be protected through giving pseudonyms when reporting the findings. Also, a decision not to mention the name of

correctional centre was made as it may lead to them being easily identified through the courses they do.

Data collection

Data triangulation, defined as the insourcing of multiple data collection tools to collect information was used in this study. These comprised one focus group interview, participant observation as well as the review of literature. In this study, a multilingual approach to the interview was used which comprised mainly English, Setswana, isiXhosa, isiZulu, seSotho and Afrikaans. The interview session lasted 1 hour 44 minutes. In theory, the focus group interview was used because it yields large amounts of data in a relatively short space of time (Parker and Tritter 2006, 23) and provides richer and more spontaneous reactions compared to individual participation (Onwuegbuzie et al. 2009, 2). Furthermore, the dynamics of the focus group: six offenders, three researchers including one correctional official (as internal guide) presented the research team with various opportunities to probe and systematically collect all information of interest as experienced by the participants while simultaneously observing their learning environment (Chaleunvong 2009, 3–4) (e.g., the classroom where the interview occurred). Under the supervision of a facilitator (Chaleunvong 2009, 9), three central questions guided the focus group interview and these were:

- How is myUnisa experienced by incarcerated UNISA students and how best can it be used to enhance student success?
- What institutional support do incarcerated UNISA students receive or require and what strategies can be developed to attract and retain them in the 4IR-based Higher Education?
- What strategies do incarcerated UNISA students use to manage studying via ODL?

Data analysis

Qualitative content analysis was used to analyse the data. Content analysis is a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through a coding scheme and systematic classification of categories. Categories refer to “patterns and themes directly expressed from the text and derived through analysis” (Hsieh and Shannon 2005, 1285). The analytic procedure also entailed finding, selecting, appraising (making sense of), and synthesising data contained in the transcript. Content analysis was deemed appropriate since, as will be shown, it yielded excerpts, quotations, including entire passages which were then organised into major themes, categories and case examples. The entire procedure was concluded by counting the number of instances in which these had occurred.

RESULTS

Table 1: Participant profile

Participant number	Qualification & Level of study	Gender	Race & Ethnicity	Age (in years)	Nationality
1	M. Tech Banking (Masters')	Male	Black (Sotho)	29	S. African (Gauteng)
2	LLB (3rd year)	Male	Black (Shona)	32	Zimbabwean (Bulawayo)
3	Bachelor of Accounting Science (1st year)	Male	Coloured	30	S. African (Cape Town)
4	Diploma in Law (1st year)	Male	Black (Xhosa)	21	S. African (Eastern Cape)
5	Public Administration (Honours)	Male	Black (Zulu)	36	S. African (KwaZulu-Natal)
6	LLM (Masters')	Male	Black (Xhosa)	54	S. African (Eastern Cape)

Exploring the learning experiences of UNISA students incarcerated at one Medium Correctional Centre resulted in four significant findings: *the evolving landscape and paradox of Higher Education* confirms that the advent of digitised e-learning by institutions of higher learning bring with it “double exclusion” since digitised e-learning excludes the already socially excluded; the study’s second theme, *tools to navigate the ODL space* illustrates that despite traversing through that which could be beyond their abilities – study participants were able to resolve and come up with strategies thereby overcoming some of the barriers accompanying ODeL (such as gaining reliable access to the internet); *sailing against the wind* confirms the unique terrain encountered by incarcerated tertiary students studying through Open Distance Learning; and lastly, in the context of imprisonment, the theme *e-learning equals student centred learning* suggests that synchronising security and control measures together with the pedagogical advancements of the 21st century make technological services such as myUnisa by far the most indispensable portal for linking students with the university. Below, each of these themes are discussed individually.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The evolving landscape and paradox of Higher Education

The results derived from this study confirm earlier findings suggesting that the landscape of Higher Education is continually evolving and carries with it complications for incarcerated students. With massification, Kamper and Du Plessis (2014, 78) and Subotzky and Prinsloo (2009, 17–18) point out that student populations are more heterogeneous today than ever before. We see, for example, students enrolled for different qualifications and who vary in age, race,

ethnicity and nationality. Accordingly, UNISA's ever-changing landscape can be traced back in 2008 when the university developed its maiden policy on students with disabilities. According to Payne (2009, 14), this policy "aimed at addressing and accommodating the need for a more positive learning experience for students with disabilities". Likewise, the advent of e-learning technologies is also noticeable in many correctional centres as provided for by institutions of Higher Learning. Notwithstanding these developments, significant limitations exist around e-learning technologies which many academics are not fully cognisant of and consequently these remain discreet from contemporary research (Hopkins and Farley 2015, 43; Singh et al. 2005, 19). True to this premise, our results suggest that the bouquet of services provided by myUnisa aimed at enhancing learner support erroneously assume that all UNISA students have "anywhere, anytime" access to technologies which make such learning possible. However, participants in this study felt these services excluded rather than benefited them. They highlighted a number of issues including, among others, that the centre has only three desktop computers with no access to the internet. Consequently, they felt gravely disadvantaged by this limitation particularly if they had to access the internet for study purposes. To highlight this need, participant 6 remarked as follows:

"Um ... if people get their own computers or laptops or tablets ... I think that would be much appreciated."

Although participants acknowledged the provision made by DCS for students writing on-line examinations

"But the problem comes with the technology advances ... like nowadays, one ... they use WhatsApp outside for discussions ... they use skype, somebody, the ... the requirements was saying they must be on skype and we do not have computers with those cameras." (Participant 3).

Reaffirming this notion was participant 2. He said:

"Sometimes the study material is available only in soft copy and we need access to computers to download and engage with the study material."

Probing further revealed underlying tensions primarily attributed to the centralisation of UNISA-DCS HUBS in selected DCS facilities. It transpired during the interview that students were never consulted regarding the implementation of UNISA-DCS HUBS. Consequently, study participants felt disregarded, sidelined and excluded as a subgroup of UNISA students relative to other UNISA students where there are UNISA DCS-HUBS. Participant 5 articulated it thusly:

“It could as well be a subjective view because what is not happening here [Baviaanspoort Prison], at Central, being a UNISA HUB, some of the things we are not getting here, they [incarcerated students] are getting there as a UNISA centre. We are also not privy to a number of things that UNISA students should be privy to ... bearing in mind again that we are here by choice ... they [correctional administrators] could easily say you want a UNISA laptop? UNISA sponsored laptop? Then go to Central ... which is something some of us do not want.”

Sharing a similar view on these power dynamics was participant 2 who eloquently put it as follows:

“You know what basically happens in an environment like this ... in a correctional centre, I believe their main objective is secure incarceration ... all the other rights you have are subservient to security ... you understand? ... so what comes first is their security and your right to education becomes secondary.”

From these narratives, it is apparent that the evolving landscape of Higher Education (e.g., compulsory computer literacy and access to sophisticated computers) has the propensity to narrow down the academic choices of incarcerated students. In essence, this theme highlights that as UNISA's curricula leans more towards e-pedagogies, module choice and degree pathways for incarcerated students is also shrinking and this constraint acts as a disincentive for students to continue their studies (Watts 2010, 5). Consequently, by restricting as well as widening educational opportunity, e-learning technologies are simultaneously creating an ethical dilemma for incarcerated students.

Tools to navigate the ODL space

The metaphoric expression behind this theme underscores our respect, trust and gratitude towards study participants for supplying information which ultimately informed this theme. In the context of our investigation, “tools to navigate the ODL space” imply mobile phones complete with learning portals compatible to most PCs and can connect to the internet to execute a specific function such as accessing myUnisa, downloading study material and even submitting assignments. This theme was constructed from the question, “How open is Open Distance Learning, and to whom is it open?” Participant 5 commented as follows:

“The Open in Open Distance Learning is not there ... it's just distance that's there.”

This view reiterates Kamper and Du Plessis' (2014, 77) argument that “there is very little ‘openness’ in this type of learning”. According to research, one of the major challenges facing distance education is the equitable provision of support for students whose attributes are diverse with respect to their isolation and separation from peers and lecturers (Kamper and Du Plessis 2014, 84; Makoe 2009, 10; Seeletso and Evans 2016, 60). In her study, Makoe (2009)

investigated the pedagogical suitability of applying cellphones to enhance interaction in distance education, her results showed that most students already use cellphones for study and social purposes. These findings correspond with our results. To exemplify the extent to which students use mobile phones for study purposes, participant 1 stated that:

“At any given time I access myUnisa ... any given time.”

Coinciding with this view was participant 4 who said:

“I use myUnisa 90% of the time.”

Makoe (2009, 10) reaffirms the relevance of mobile phones in distance education when she states that more than 90 percent of Unisa students own a cellphone and most of these cellphones have software features such as pictures, videos, music, games, instant messaging as well as access to the internet. All these features can be used for educational purposes. Nevertheless, as suggested by the first theme, technological advancements in Higher Education are constantly evolving to the detriment of incarcerated students. In this particular instance, participant 5 felt that the newly implemented version of myUnisa is not user friendly compared to the previous one. He stated:

“The previous version of myUnisa was perfect ... ja ... it was on point! The updated version is the most hideous because you have to click here, click there and go to where your car [Mobile phone] cannot even navigate because of the terrain.”

Echoing the writings of Wake et al. (2013, np) was the following remark by participant 6 which falsified the assumption that students readily have access to the internet: He reflected thusly:

“I foresee a possibility of us not affording access to the internet because look, even if we would be using our own cars [mobile phones] ... we can't afford the fuel [data] ... that's where I foresee the problem.”

Based on these narratives, interacting with the university (and by extension tutors and lecturers) highlights the daunting experience encountered by students as a result of technological requirements and confinement. Characterised as off-line students by Hopkins and Farley (2015, 44); respondents in Watts' (2010, 7) study also echoed similar struggles regarding restricted internet and phone use. Comprehensively considered, these studies underscore the notion that “resources are extremely tight for prison education” (FETL 2020, 23) and this serves to maintain and widen the “digital divide”. Against this backdrop, one can posit that sustaining connections with the university necessitated students to “construct” a bridge by acquiring tools

to navigate the ODeL space. Participant 2 made the following analogy:

“I think the challenge is basically on access ... I mean, an unconnected computer is as good as a typewriter.”

Despite DCS categorising mobile phones as “contraband”, our results indicate that technologies such as mobile phones are indispensable tools necessary to navigate the ODL space (i.e., applying, registering, completing some forms and types of assignments and examination questions) because they are readily accessible and affordable. Consolidating this view was participant 3 who revealed that:

“Just like my car [term the inmates use for their mobile phones] ... it was confiscated on Monday but I got a new one now.”

As suggested by this extract, access to Higher Education is not possible without access to technologies which make such learning possible. Participant 5 concluded that:

“But through the understanding of the education office, the other guys are open to use the modem, but that is a gentlemen’s agreement, I must stress ... because it’s people who understand the need for that gadget to be there.”

Sailing against the current

In line with extant literature, the results generated by this study seem to suggest that Higher Education in prisons is compounded by many institutional challenges (Jay 2013, v; FETL 2020, 8–9). Yet against this background, improving student retention and success are by far the most important ideals enshrined by many institutions of higher learning. The challenges encountered by incarcerated students, and in particular, postgraduate students could easily threaten these ideals. For instance, in the present study, participants raised concerns about the National Student Financial Aid Scheme and challenges regarding the dwindling financial assistance (especially at postgraduate level). Participant 6 commented thusly:

“you never know where to go ... within UNISA bursary, there’s stringent criteria ... an existing qualification disqualifies one from furthering their education.”

Nevertheless, amidst this financial challenge, study participants’ tenacity, as well as the courage to remain resolute were noteworthy. It was upon exploring the value of Higher Education that study participants divulged that their ultimate goal is the acquisition of education even at the expense of possessing e-learning technologies such as mobile phones. Participants exemplified the anxieties of studying in a volatile and unpredictable prison milieu.

“Obviously, we live in constant fear ... you can experience a search at any time.” (Participant 4).

The unpredictable nature of the prison was corroborated by participant 3. He said:

“You know, prison life is not the same everyday ... you understand ... people have flexible reading times, some people prefer studying at night [because] just like today, we are going to be locked up at 11 o'clock [am].”

Unpredictable disruptions such as unanticipated search and seizures, lockdowns and headcounts are all too familiar in prison discourse (Hopkins and Farley 2015, 43; Seelig and Rate 2014, np; Watts 2010, 1). The emotional turmoil accompanying tertiary education is clearly articulated in these extracts. For example, the narratives portray correctional environments as rigid institutions governed by strict security rules which in turn make online learning difficult. Pretorius (2009, 15) is in support of this notion and contends that in Open Distance Learning where neither lecturer nor students are in face-to-face contact, numerous challenges are foreseeable. As at 2009, literature indicated that 20 per cent of Master's degree and only 13 per cent of Doctoral students in South Africa completed their research degrees (Minnaar 2009, 12). Enquiries into why students fail to complete their studies indicate the absence of the supervisor as a reason for “giving up”. These findings could very well have untoward implications for incarcerated students registered for higher degrees. At UNISA, for instance, face-to-face supervision of Master's and Doctoral students is minimal and rarely occurs physically. Instead, supervision likely occurs through the use of e-mail, mobile phones and other social media (Minnaar 2009, 12). Thus, there is no possibility of studying “anytime anywhere” for incarcerated students since they cannot virtually or physically meet with their supervisors. Consequently, and due to the bureaucratic red tapes in prisons, incarcerated students often feel lost and overwhelmed with the demands of having to study independently as well as the difficulty of discussing issues with their supervisors. On this particular subject, participant 1 commented as follows:

“As a Master student, the topic I am researching requires that I should be on the internet most of the time gathering as much information as I possibly can ... [plus] ... I have to type a dissertation entailing 350 pages. I cannot do this with the 3 hours I am allocated on a daily basis ... so in short, give me a laptop.”

Given that the official period for accessing the school's computer labs is between 9 am –12 pm weekdays, the reactions gathered from study participants was such that 3 hours were incommensurate with the academic load. Therefore, on the basis of this information, we inferred that (1) on-line learning is impractical when students are only allowed 3 hours in an “authorised connected space” and (2) lack of access to the internet makes students' learning styles and

preferences practically unattainable. According to Moore (2013), there needs to be synergy between dialogue, structure and learner autonomy for transactional balance to remain at an equilibrium. “Such a transactional gap”, warns Kamper and Du Plessis (2014, 83) “can exist between students and the institution, between students and lecturers/tutors, between students and courseware and between student and student”. In support of this claim, participant 6 pleaded as follows:

“Without asking too much ... I think if there can be some kind of a provision, specifically for inmates where they meet us halfway ... if DCS can be influenced by UNISA to allow us the opportunity to have access to computers that are connected ... so we can have access to the internet ... we must be allowed to have laptops inside.”

E-learning equals student-centered learning

Student Centred Learning (SCL) – a constructivist approach to teaching and learning – has received considerable research attention from different researchers but not so much from the point of view of prison education (Kamper and Du Plessis 2014; Sabah and Xu 2018; UNISA 2008, 2). As impressive and attractive student-centeredness is championed to be, determining its applicability in the context of imprisonment can be tricky. For instance, in terms of TDT, achieving academic success relies on a transactional balance of “proper communications media, the design of courses, the selection and training of lecturers, and the learning styles of students” (Kamper and Du Plessis 2014, 80). From this perspective, the implementation of a constructivist approach to education is constrained by several socio-cultural contexts (Sabah and Xu 2018, 515) and profoundly so in carceral communities. One of these constraints is marrying security and control measures together with the pedagogical developments of the 21st century. In support of this claim, participant 2 and 5 commented as follows:

“There is always an administrator who is responsible for all the computers in the lab ... so for example, I cannot add any software to the computers because I do not have the log-in details to manipulate the computer ... all I have access to is my account and the administrator has my password and can check what is in my computer at any time and take out whatever is not compatible or allowed.”

“They [computers] are randomly checked ... the policy behind the use of these three computers is that students can use them but only in the presence of an official.”

These accounts not only permit for an aerial perspective of the extent to which prison overemphasises security, but they also lend support to previous research suggesting that prison administrators perceive e-learning as a threat to security (Hopkins and Farley 2015; Watts 2010). Further exploration of the extent to which myUnisa addresses students' needs in relation to access, duration, problems with connectivity, including issues of data provision revealed that

despite its inherent challenges, e-learning technologies such as myUnisa remain by far the most indispensable service for linking incarcerated students with the university. In order to draw from the learning experiences of students, study participants were configured at the centre of their own learning process (as prescribed by SCL) and encouraged to think of innovative ideas by sharing their opinions, experiences and suggestions regarding how to improve the implementation of e-learning tools in a secure setting such as prison. Illuminating these experiences elicited the idea that in a study environment characterised by lack of student–student interaction, institutional support becomes imperative in managing the competence of studying via ODeL mode. Despite the lack of concrete solutions from study participants, nevertheless, their accounts suggested that both institutions (UNISA and DCS) have the responsibility to ensure that students' needs are met through safe and optimal use of ICT including the provision of alternative means to access e-learning materials, communication and coursework. As advised by Kamau (2009, 7), it remains the responsibility of UNISA to identify and apply the most appropriate pedagogical approaches that facilitate regular interaction between incarcerated students and their lecturers.

CONCLUSION

In the broader scheme of things, access to Higher Education plays a therapeutic role in carceral spaces insofar as it facilitates rehabilitation. Despite wave after wave of pedagogical innovations, the present study reconfirmed that Open Distance Learning is paramount to crime prevention since time spent during incarceration is re-routed to enhance the educational levels of offenders which is not only critical, but indispensable to social reintegration. Further to this, the narratives highlighted in this study indicated the need for Higher Education institutions to acknowledge that as research continues to reflect transformations being made in the field (Le Roux and Mitchell 2009, 9) so should the policies as well as the technological advancements that promote inclusivity as opposed to those who exclude the already socially excluded. While Unisa complies with the pedagogical advancements of the 21st century, yet given the realities of incarceration, a proportion of incarcerated students is without access to computers, including reliable internet. Lastly, given the global trend towards enhancing the learning experience of students – particularly through student-centered learning, our findings seem consistent with contemporary research suggesting that the use of technology-mediated pedagogies, as well as other innovative instructional strategies have significantly transformed teaching and learning in prison education and this has had ripple effects for the learning experiences of incarcerated students. Over and above, as UNISA is continuously challenged to redefine the way it provides prison education, so too, our results indicate that UNISA needs to leverage more on online

technologies which allow for easy access and interaction between incarcerated students and lecturers.

LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This study was conducted with male participants only and leaves a gap for incarcerated female students. With this in mind, it becomes imperative to investigate how Unisa's online system impact incarcerated female students. We propose research that explores the learning experiences of female incarcerated students studying through the medium of Open Distance Education, as well as strategies that can attract and retain them in Higher Education.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors wish to thank UNISA and DCS especially Mr Dibekoane (DCS internal guide) for facilitating access to the restricted correctional facility.

REFERENCES

- Akhtar, I. 2016. "Research design." In *Research in Social Science: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, 68–84. SSRN Electronic Journal. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2862445.
- Barrow, L., T. Ambler, M. Bailey, and A. McKinnon. 2019. "Incarcerated Students, the Technological Divide and the Challenges in Tertiary Education Delivery." *International Journal of Bias, Identity and Diversities in Education (IJBIDE)* 4(1): 17–34.
- Baird, N. 2009. "The changing faces of Distance Education and Open Learning." *NADEOSA Conference Abstracts Booklet*. <https://www.nadeosa.org.za/documents/NADC09AbstractsBooklete.pdf>.
- Baloyi, G. P. 2009. "The changing faces of Distance Education and Open Learning." *NADEOSA Conference Abstracts Booklet*. <https://www.nadeosa.org.za/documents/NADC09AbstractsBooklete.pdf>.
- Chaleunvong, K. 2009. *Data collection techniques. In training course in reproductive health*. Vientiane.
- Chokwe, J. M. 2009. "The changing faces of Distance Education and Open Learning." *NADEOSA Conference Abstracts Booklet*. <https://www.nadeosa.org.za/documents/NADC09AbstractsBooklete.pdf>.
- Creswell, J. W. 2003. *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. 2nd Edition. Sage Publications. Thousand Oaks, CA.
- Constitution of the Republic of South Africa*. 1996. Act No. 108 of 1996.
- Department of Correctional Services. 2005. *White paper on Corrections in South Africa*. Pretoria: Government Printer.
- FETL see Further Education Trust for Leadership.
- Further Education Trust for Leadership. 2020. *Leadership in prison education: Meeting the challenges of the new system*. FETL.
- Harrison, L. 2014. "Incarcerated students and their access to the internet in the pursuit of education." *Alternative Law Journal* 39(3): 159–162.
- Haughey, M. 2006. "Commentary on e-Learning in Canada." *Canadian Journal of Learning and Technology* 32(3).
- Heydenrych, J. 2015. "Education (im)possible: Reconsidering the contribution of distance education in

- South Africa." *Asian Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences (AJHSS)* 3(2).
- Hopkins, S. and H. Farley. 2015. "E-Learning Incarcerated: Prison education and digital inclusion." *The International Journal of Humanities Education* 13(2): 37–45.
- Hsieh, H. and S. E. Shannon. 2005. "Three approaches to qualitative content analysis." *Qualitative Health Research* 15(9): 1277–1288.
- Jay, J. 2013. "Higher education and re-entry: The gifts they bring. Prisoner re-entry institute." <http://johnjayresearch.org/pri/files/2013/11/Higher-Education-inReentry.pdf> on 08/08/2017.
- Kamau, J. W. 2009. "The changing faces of Distance Education and Open Learning." *NADEOSA Conference Abstracts Booklet*. <https://www.nadeosa.org.za/documents/NADC09AbstractsBooklete.pdf>.
- Kamper, G. D. and E. C. du Plessis. 2014. "Some Critical Reflections on Open Distance Learning, With Particular Reference to Work-Integrated Learning." *Africa Education Review* 11(1): 77–90. DOI: 10.1080/18146627.2013.853568.
- Le Roux, A. and J. Mitchell. 2009. "The changing faces of Distance Education and Open Learning." *NADEOSA Conference Abstracts Booklet*. <https://www.nadeosa.org.za/documents/NADC09AbstractsBooklete.pdf>.
- Makoe, M. 2009. "The changing faces of Distance Education and Open Learning." *NADEOSA Conference Abstracts Booklet*. <https://www.nadeosa.org.za/documents/NADC09AbstractsBooklete.pdf>.
- Memorandum of Understanding. 2017. www.insideoutoutsidein.co.za/unisa-anddcs-changing-lives. (Accessed 29 August 2019.)
- Minnaar, A. 2009. "The changing faces of Distance Education and Open Learning." *NADEOSA Conference Abstracts Booklet*. <https://www.nadeosa.org.za/documents/NADC09AbstractsBooklete.pdf>.
- Moore, M. 2013. "Chapter: The Theory of Transactional Distance." In *The Handbook of Distance Education*, ed. M. G. Moore. 3rd Edition. Routledge.
- Motswagosele, D. and M. Marakakgoro. 2009. "The changing faces of Distance Education and Open Learning." *NADEOSA Conference Abstracts Booklet*. <https://www.nadeosa.org.za/documents/NADC09AbstractsBooklete.pdf>.
- MoU see Memorandum of Understanding.
- Ngubane-Mokiwa, S. and M. Letseka. 2015. "Shift from Open Distance Learning to Open Distance e-Learning." <file:///C:/Users/User/Downloads/MokiwaLetsekashiftffromODLtoODel.pdf>.
- Onwuegbuzie, A. J., W. B. Dickson, N. L. Leech, and A. G. Zoran. 2009. "A qualitative framework for collecting and analyzing data in focus group research." *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 8(3): 1–21.
- Parker, A. and J. Tritter. 2006. "Focus Group method and methodology: Current practice and recent debate." *International Journal of Research and Method in Education* 29(1): 23–37.
- Payne, G. 2009. "The changing faces of Distance Education and Open Learning." *NADEOSA Conference Abstracts Booklet*. <https://www.nadeosa.org.za/documents/NADC09AbstractsBooklete.pdf>.
- Pretorius, R. W. 2009. "The changing faces of Distance Education and Open Learning." *NADEOSA Conference Abstracts Booklet*. <https://www.nadeosa.org.za/documents/NADC09AbstractsBooklete.pdf>.
- Sabah, S. and X. Du. 2018. "University faculty's perceptions and practices of student centered learning in Qatar: Alignment or gap?" *Journal of Applied Research in Higher Education* 10(4): 514–533.
- Seeletso, K. S. and R. Evans. 2016. "How much 'distance' does language create in ODL materials?" *Progressio* 38(1): 58–73.
- Seelig, C. and L. Rate. 2014. "The role distance learning has to play in offender education." *Journal of Learning for Development* 1(1).

- Sife, A., E. Lwoga, and C. Sanga. 2007. "New technologies for teaching and learning: Challenges for higher learning institutions in developing countries." *International Journal of Education and Development using ICT* 3(2): 57–67.
- Singh, G., J. Donoghue, and H. Warton. 2005. "A study into the effects of eLearning on higher education." *Journal of University Teaching & Learning Practice* 2(1): 14–24.
- Steyn, L. and F. M. Myburgh. 2009. "The changing faces of Distance Education and Open Learning." *NADEOSA Conference Abstracts Booklet*. <https://www.nadeosa.org.za/documents/NADC09AbstractsBooklete.pdf>.
- Subotzky, G. and P. Prinsloo. 2009. "The changing faces of Distance Education and Open Learning." *NADEOSA Conference Abstracts Booklet*. <https://www.nadeosa.org.za/documents/NADC09AbstractsBooklete.pdf>.
- Teare, R. 2000. Modelling the Virtual University. *The Journal of Workplace Learning* 12(3): 111–123.
- UNISA see University of South Africa.
- University of South Africa. 2008. *ODL Policy*. https://www.unisa.ac.za/static/corporate_web/Content/Colleges/CGS/schools%20institutes%20&%20research%20chairs/institutes/documents/odl-policy_version5_16Sept08.pdf. (Accessed 27 August 2018).
- Wake, M., H. Farley, T. Bedford, A. Murphy, and K. Denham. 2013. "From access to success: Improving the higher education learning experiences for incarcerated students." 11th Biennial Australasian Corrections Education Association (ACEA) Conference, 29 September to 1 October 2013, Sydney, Australia. (Unpublished).
- Watts, H. 2010. "Teaching a distance higher education curriculum behind bars: Challenges and opportunities." *Open Learning: The Journal of Open, Distance and e-Learning* 25(1): 1–8.
- Witthaus, G. 2009. "The changing faces of Distance Education and Open Learning." *NADEOSA Conference Abstracts Booklet*. <https://www.nadeosa.org.za/documents/NADC09AbstractsBooklete.pdf>.