UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA STAFF'S LEARNING EXPERIENCES IN ONLINE COURSEWORK MASTER'S OF EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the experiences of University of South Africa (UNISA) staff who did an Open and Distance Learning (ODL) based Master's of Education (MEd) programme between the years 2012 and 2015. This is an online programme that was initiated jointly by UNISA and University of Maryland University College (UMUC). Only academics who UNISA employs were targeted in this study due to UNISA's rationale for engaging in this dual university initiative. A cohort of these academics had already qualified with doctoral and professional master's degrees in various focus areas. We were interested in these academics' varied experiences with respect to their views, understandings and needs in this online programme. What are the staff's experiences of learning online in the UNISA-UMUC MEd programme? This question triggered research into the experiences of the academics concerned. This qualitative phenomenographic study was framed in the variation theory. Seven purposively selected staff members were interviewed using semi-structured interview guide. Three main themes emerged from the data namely, experiences of staff pertaining to learning online, subject matter and student learning, and the learning tools related to social media. The study's findings revealed that participants varied in their experiences of online learning in the dual university initiative. The findings were important for this dual university initiative in so far as improvements that may be necessitated by the findings are concerned.

Key terms: online, learning, Master's of Education, staff, understanding, students.

BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH PROBLEM

In this study we explored the variation theory of UNISA staff's online learning experiences who were students in the ODL based MEd programme between the years 2012 and 2015. In the context of this study, experience refers to the likes or dislikes of UNISA staff of studying in the

above programme via the online mode and thus their thoughts about the worthiness of the programme. The above programme aims to empower UNISA staff members to ensure their effective operation in an ODL teaching and learning environment, which is supported by O'Donoghue, Singh and Green (2004), who assert that the aim of online learning is to empower the workforce. UNISA and UMUC started to offer the MEd in ODL programme as a partnership in 2012. UMUC offers the coursework component which focuses on distance education and online learning. UNISA builds onto the coursework by offering the ODL Curriculum Development and Leadership and Management of ODL modules as well as a dissertation of a limited scope.

The advancement of technology enables the effective facilitation of learning online through different learning management platforms such as Blackboard, blog, webinar, etc. Online learning commonly includes kinds of teaching practices that may vary according to their "outcomes, cost and student access" (Carey and Trick 2013, 5). Online learning is generally a course of teaching that is performed over the internet (Higher Education Authority [HEA] 2009; Carey and Trick 2013) and almost total asynchronous teaching (Council on Higher Education [CHE] 2014). Bates (2016, 111) observes that online learning has brought into teaching and learning fraternity new models or designs. Students interact online among themselves and with their teacher, material content and obtain support (Ally 2008).

The MEd programme in question is meant to capacitate UNISA's academic and professional staff for effective teaching in ODL. The programme is also meant to meet the societal, public and private sector needs. The need for the programme is also motivated by the South African and African masses' demands of ODL based education. UNISA offers a range of undergraduate programmes that articulate with this dual master's degree between UMUC and UNISA. Most academics in higher education environment have yet to acquire an educational qualification to augment their professional qualifications. The initiative about the online MEd will bridge the gap between the ODL based teaching skills and online learning skills that are so much needed in the current digital era.

If students outside academia apply and they comply with the admission criteria and the criteria for online access, they will obviously also be admitted to the MEd in ODL. The MEd in ODL can contribute towards a sound ODL and online learning practices in academia. Graduates who are competent from their first degree and/or professional experience may need to build onto their qualifications by enrolling in this programme. To give an example, graduates with the first degree in the technical field may find this programme valuable to advance their qualifications.

This MEd in ODL was developed in response to the need expressed by UNISA to educate,

among others, all new staff members in ODL theory and practice. Workshops were held to establish the need for more structured knowledge development in ODL, and the need to provide training to the academic and other staff members in ODL became clear. The design, learning outcomes, expected completion time and delivery method of the programme are suitable for the educational needs of its target market. Thus, the programme outcomes are fit for purpose for regional, national and international markets especially in Africa.

Academics' experiences in respect of the MEd in ODL have not yet been researched. The international ODL literature has widely described the experiences of students who study online literature. However, scholars have not yet looked to a dual university initiative such as one being reported in this study, plus literature does not describe the master's degree students' online experiences in ODL clearly. It is in this light that the views of online students can share valuable knowledge needed by UNISA for possible improvement that may be needed in the programme. Thus, the issue of the experiences and views of UNISA staff in respect of the MEd in ODL informed the research question. A lot of staff in ODL institutions is yet to be trained in the use of the learning management platforms, which is also the case with UNISA, hence the above initiative. The study sorts an answer to the following: What are the experiences of UNISA staff regarding learning online in the UNISA-UMUC MEd programme? The study reported in this article sought answers to this research question.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The challenges that students in different contexts may face in respect of online learning suggest the importance of orientation into ODL programme in the first place. This is, in turn, a challenge to ODL institutions, since they do not have the luxury of meeting students face-to-face. Research has not as yet put emphasis on the students' orientation to online programmes despite the need for it (Kelly 2013; Melick 2014). Online learning is constantly increasing except that it suffers from student retention unlike in the contact mode of learning (Jones 2013). This state of affairs is attributed to insufficient orientation of students to online programmes (Simpson 2012).

Similarly, Jones (2013) illustrates this problem through a study that identified the USA-based Richland Community College's situation. The students were orientated to the programme face-to-face in the first ten years. However, the students still struggled to study online from home even when they had been orientated into the programme. Incorrect software and computer set-up were blamed for this problem (Jones 2013, 44). This situation suggests that proper technical systems should be put in place for orientation to bear fruits. In a study by Jones (2013), another rural community college evaluated its procedures about the orientation of students to

its online programmes. The evaluation revealed was not spot-on regarding students' needs. The college resolved to develop an ADDIE model according to Moore and Kearsley (2005) to address this problem. In ADDIE, the evaluator analyses, designs, develops, implements and evaluates the programme. The students responded well to the ADDIE-based orientation programme with resultant improved retention.

Orientation smoothens students' learning going forward. Learning activities happen online where students participate in discussions, complete assignments, post their individual contributions and provide feedback to their colleagues' contributed ideas (Government Accountability Office 2011). UNISA staff on the MEd programme read and discussed the weekly posted themes, completed individual and/or group assignments, and so on. This online management of learning necessitates juggling one's commitments in order to deal effectively with time conflicts and access of the programme materials (Zhang and Kelly 2010).

Participation is an aspect of active learning from a constructivist perspective (Zhu 2012; Koohang et al. 2013). Active learning is any teaching method to engage students actively in the learning activities. It requires students to think about what they do through continuous reflection, synthesis and analysis and engagement in higher order cognition. Furthermore, in an online learning, constructivism is more evident through connectivism (Siemens, Downs and Tittenberger 2009), which is a web of connections that students could form as they reach each other through online technological means. Learning by connecting in an online platform can promote knowledge construction (Zhu 2012). Students' knowledge construction strongly influences online education as it converts teacher dominance to student-directed learning (Peters 2002). Student autonomy is thus promoted in learning online and students can accommodate each other's contributions as they are informed by their cultural and social context, beliefs and attitudes.

Programme assessment is the most under researched area pertaining to online teaching and learning despite its importance towards learning (Arend 2007). The current study helps to evaluate the MEd in ODL as offered by the two institutions jointly, i.e. UNISA and UMUC. Arend (2007) cites a US-based study which reports the types of online assessment according to which students are graded, such as assignments, quizzes, games, reflections, etc. Arend (2007) notes that from this list of types of assessment, grading students for their participation in online is the most preferred method.

Literature uncovers the disjuncture between lecturers' and students' expectations in relation to assessment, which may discourage student performance (Zimmerman, Schmidt, Becker, Peterson, Nyland and Surdick 2014). Islam and Ferdowsi (2014) conducted a study about the perceptions of 22 students who participated in the MEd in Distance Learning

Programme at Bangladesh Open University in order. These scholars' aim was to ascertain the programme met the students' needs and to understand the core aspects of distance education (2014). According to their findings, there were certain aspects of the programme that satisfied the students, e.g. materials, module choice, feedback on assignments, etc. on the contrary, the students were dissatisfied with poor student support relating to the quality of tutorship and access to resources/materials.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Variation theory was used to describe the variations of UNISA staff's experiences who participated in this study. Variation theory originated from the phenomenographic research (Marton 2000; Marton, Runesson and Tsui 2003, 16; Cheng 2016). According to this theory, people's discernment has variations through which researchers can understand or experience a phenomenon (Ling Lo 2012; Cheng 2016). In a learning situation, then, students perceive the subject matter and their capabilities variedly as a result of their own epistemologies. The emphasis of variation theory is thus on learning in as experiencing the learning object, i.e. what is to be learned. Furthermore, variation theory focuses on one's discerning ability for the critical features of a phenomenon that might have not been focused on previously (Marton et al. 2003, 16). It was due to its relevance to phenomenography and its ability to vary people's experiences that variation theory was deemed suitable for this study.

METHODOLOGY

The current qualitative study used phenomenography, which is a predecessor of and thus guides variation theory. A phenomenographic research exposes varied ways to experience to understand a phenomenon and map out such variations (Suhonen et al. 2008; Marton 2000). Thus, the lens of variation theory was used in this study for the exploration of the participants' (UNISA staff's) experiences of the studied phenomenon, i.e. their online learning in the ODL based MEd. The participants' experiences were studied through the very experiences that were revealed, their understanding of the subject matter and capabilities and social media tools.

As with qualitative studies, the rigour of phenomenography is a contentious issue. Validity in this study was embedded in credibility. Detailed explanation of the methods of the study is available in this article and on UNISA's institutional repository since this study draws from the MEd study that the first author conducted at UNISA. Reliability was ensured by the thoroughly describing the procedures of data collection. We worked on methodology and checked data analysis to reach an agreement that all the variations were a true picture of what the participants said. We used bracketing as in phenomenology to set our own preconceptions apart in this

phenomenography. The bracketing file was used to check that our views on the UMUC dual university initiative were not captured in the data throughout the process of data analysis. This bracketing process was a kind of structure of awareness to check and control our own subjectivity.

The participants were purposively selected for the study to ensure a variety of their experiences regarding the newly accredited MEd in ODL programme. To that effect were selected seven staff members from the list that was generated by the section that manages the MEd in ODL programme. These were interviewed until we reached data saturation. The interview guide was piloted on one extra staff member to in order to improve it (Welman, Kruger and Mitchell 2005). No change was made in the interview guide as this participant did not experience any issues with it. The participants were interviewed individually between September and November 2015. Pseudonyms, i.e. MEdSt1 up to MEdSt7 (MEdSt stands for MEd student) were assigned to the participants to ensure their confidentiality. Due processes were followed at UNISA to obtain ethical clearance and permission to use UNISA staff in the study, but they participated voluntarily. Each interview lasted about 35 minutes and was recorded. We checked with participants to confirm the data on the transcripts as representing their views, as well as triangulated the data (Stokrocki 1997). Main data collection ensued thereafter. Students' postings on myUNISA (the learning management platform at UNISA) in the Discussion Forum from 2014 to early 2015 were also treated as data.

We used Rossman's and Rallis' (2003) thematic framework to analyse the data which entails reading the interview transcripts severally and marking the words or phrases emerging from the data. Data analysis was guided by the frequency of the occurrence of phrases, issues or words concerned, the position of the participants' statements and the selection of those statements that seemed important to the participants. To give an idea, the main themes that emerged during data analysis are given in Table 1.

Table 1: Brief explanation of variations in the study

Variation 1	Variation 2	Variation 2
1. Participants' experience	**2. Subject matter and student capabilities**	**3. Social media tools**
1.1 Learning in ODL	2.1 Taking part actively and criticality	3.1 Social media tools, e.g. Twitter, Facebook, Weebly, etc.
1.2 Orientation of students	2.2 Variety of methods	3.2 Student interactions and community of learning
1.3 Learning online	2.3 Thirst for the current trends in education	
1.4 Equipped for online learning	2.4 Learning was two-way traffic	
1.5 Time needed	2.5 Contribute to other students' discussions	

Variation 1	Variation 2	Variation 2
1.6 Change of mind		
1.7 Different learning experiences		
1.8 Too much pressure		
1.9 We did collaborative tasks		
1.10 Assessment and grading		

FINDINGS

An integrated strategy was adopted in presenting the findings while considering the varied experiences of the participants. It can be noticed that the sub-themes seem to build into each other even across the master themes. The participants' biographical information, which partly accounts for the variation in their experiences, is presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Participants' biographical information

Student	Participant's progress in the MEd programme	Participant's gender	Participant's age in years	Participant's race	Participant's exposure to studying online	Participant's designation
MEdSt1	Dissertation stage	Female	40–49	Black	Not exposed	College of Education
MEdSt2	Coursework stage	Female	50–59+	Black	Not exposed	DSPQA
MEdSt3	Dissertation stage	Male	50–59+	Black	Not exposed	College of Education
MEdSt4	Dissertation stage	Male	40–49	Black	Not exposed	College of Science, Engineering and Technology
MEdSt5	Dissertation stage	Female	40–49	Black	Exposed	College of Graduate Studies
MEdSt6	Coursework stage	Female	30–39	Black	Exposed	College of Graduate Studies
MEdSt7	Coursework stage	Female	50–59+	Black	Exposed	Directorate: Curriculum and Learning Development

The findings, according to Table 2, show that the participants had progressed differently in the MEd in ODL programme. Five participants were female, but all the participants are black. However, the participants' biographical information showed variations in terms of their age distribution and designation with exception of two who belonged to College of Education and two to College of Graduate Studies. Their experience about studying online ranged from "no experience" to "more experienced". As indicated in the methodology section above, the findings are now presented under the participants' experiences, subject matter and student capabilities and social media tools.

VARIATION 1: PARTICIPANTS' EXPERIENCES

This theme yielded several sub-themes that illustrated the variation of experiences of online learning during the dual learning initiative between UNISA and UMUC. ***Learning about ODL***

covered the students' reasons for enrolling in the programme, which included the acquisition of a basic understanding of ODL, self-development, skills and knowledge and information about ODL. MEdSt2 and MEdSt3 enrolled in the programme in order to enhance their understanding, but in different aspects such as education and technology for ODL, and UNISA's ODL policy and the provision of support to UNISA students using new technologies. MEdSt4 remarked: "I was new at UNISA and I saw the programme as an opportunity to learn about ODL so that I can use acquired skills in my tuition".

Orientation to the programme revealed mixed student reactions such as "good and welcoming (MEdSt7) and necessary, relevant and prepared me for the deep end" (MEdSt5). MEdSt1 thought that the orientation benefited him as he was never exposed to studying online before. MEdSt6 also appreciated the orientation session that UNISA organised for the staff. MEdSt3 raised the concern that the orientation was much theoretical when participants expected hands-on as they would have to learn online throughout the programme. MEdSt4 thought orientation to the programme was challenging as a result of starting late on the programme.

Online learning taught the participants new online avenues especially in the coursework offered by UMUC, that were needed in their practice as academics. MEdSt4 and MEdSt5 had similar views about the demands that the programme placed on them vis-à-vis the time needed outside of their duties at work. MEdSt1 was faced with adjusting from operating face-to-face online. Students needed access to internet 24-hour and their technological devices "in order to be able to contribute to the online discussions" (MEdSt6). MEdSt6 stated that negotiating one's weekends with the family was necessary in the face of the demands that the programme placed on the students. Students felt the pressure of submitting tasks weekly and thus MEdSt7 felt that the programme was very challenging since students had to find time "to complete the assignments". The schedule to complete the learning activities was very tight. To someone who is working the programme was very intensive, for example, "the foundation module had more than four actions per week all requiring research and hands-on experience of technology that was not too familiar for a beginner. The DETC 630 was too demanding on time activities to a point where I did not expect to pass" (MEdSt2). But MEdSt3 found learning online easy due to being digitally literate in this space already. The programme caused transformation in the participants' practice. MEdSt4 felt being better capacitated as now he understands "what students go through in order to learn online". The programme made teaching online easier for MEdSt5, while MEdSt1's understanding of learning online was enhanced.

Regarding ***change-of-mind*** sub-theme, the participants was realised discovered the joys of embarking on online groupwork, a strategy that they could adopt in their practice. Thus, MEdSt4 and MEdSt5 noticed a lot of other things that could transform practice through learning

online. For example, MEdSt5 discovered the value of gamification for online learning by recognising its educational value. Hence, participants thought that online learning enrich their pedagogical knowledge and skills. This experience made MEdSt6 to reflect on UNISA's 2016–2030 strategy, that needed the proper operationalisation of student support, functional and teaching and learning ICT services and dedicated academic staff.

The ***different learning experiences*** sub-theme focused on the students' varied backgrounds, for example, MEdSt3 remarked: "... [S]ome students in our group were not coming from [an] education background". This placed huge demands on other students who were not even able to complete the programme. According to MEdSt4 and MEdSt5, students' experiences were not dissimilar, but MEdSt4 pointed to different learning experiences of students, "I suppose those who were not new to an education qualification, online learning, and had plenty of time would have a different learning experience".

With regard to ***Too much pressure*** sub-theme, the findings revealed the varied student experiences vis-à-vis troublesome areas in the programme such the difficulty to navigate different online applications on myUMUC, interpret the instructor's instructions, subjective groupwork and grading of discussion forums. However, online Discussion Forum and group work made the students learn collaboratively. They contributed completed tasks together and peer-assessed at times. But MEdSt2 opined that students collaborated through group assignments only, stating that "learning was collaborative when it came to group assignments and class discussions, but everything else was individually oriented". The students were concerned that the UNISA component did not have any group assignments, thus it compromised on the students' opportunity to learn together.

Assessment and grading findings revealed the students' positive experiences about assessment. Assessment was explained in advance in terms of the outcomes, criteria and rubrics. There were reservations, though, about assessment. MEdSt2 and MEdSt7 suspected that assessment in the programme was subjective especially during online groupwork activities and discussions. The students were uncomfortable with a very high pass percentage which was 75 per cent minimum compared to UNISA's 50 per cent minimum. Some students complained about the non- to very low participation of their fellow students in groupwork activities, yet they were rewarded with marks undeservedly.

VARIATION 2: SUBJECT MATTER AND STUDENT CAPABILITIES

This theme was specifically about how the students experienced learning. The sub-theme ***active participation and criticality*** was experienced as an element of constructivism. Studying online unlocked the theories of distance learning for the students as they studied classical theorists

such as Moore and Anderson. MEdSt7 now understood constructivism in practical terms as students collaborated and exchanged ideas online; online social and communication atmosphere was created. The students participated actively in their learning and completion of their tasks and assignments. MEdSt4 "participated in all discussion topics within the allocated time every week or according to schedule". MEdSt1 found groupwork fulfilling in completing groupwork assignments because each member in the group had a task to complete and share it with the group. To that effect ***varied methods*** were considered by the lecturers to explain difficult concepts. For MEdSt1, learning online using videos, conferences, group work, etc varied the methods so that students could understand the concepts. Furthermore, MEdSt2 stated that class interactions were the most viable methods for learning. The students therefore felt that they benefited from a range of teaching methods that would feed into their practice as lecturers. On the contrary, the students felt that learning the UNISA modules for the programme confronted them with undifferentiated methods as learning was not flexible enough to accommodate varied learning styles. They did not favour the idea that they were confined to the myUNISA Discussion Forum instead of exploring other methodological avenues. The findings reveal that the lecturers' instructions to the students were not always and thus students did not follow what the lecturers really wanted them to do. Other frustrations that the students faced were that the lecturers' presentation styles were not easy to follow, they were not always available online especially during online discussion.

A thirst for the current trends in education captured very varied students' experiences packaged in *concepts, pedagogies and technologies*, current trends in education and understandings of ODL and their relevance to UNISA as an ODL university. To that effect MEdSt6 envisaged herself as being "among the few colleagues at UNISA who will be ready to contribute towards successful roll-out of ODL". She thought she was acquiring the required technological skills to teach and research online. The variation expressed in this theme was augmented by ***two-way traffic***, which dealt with the tight time frames and co-learning. One participant, MEdSt2 opined that there was not much time to co-create knowledge due to the tight deadlines for the submission of assignments. Also, MEdSt3, in reference to the time problem, viewed learning as a two-way traffic in which even lecturers learnt from the students. Concerning co-learning, MEdSt1, felt that she participated in the co-creation of knowledge from the theories learned in the programme. To that effect MEdt7 alluded to the application of constructivism, that in practical terms promoted social and communication skills as emphasis was placed on collaboration and exchange of ideas in online discussions. But MEdSt2 thought the brevity of time denied the students to learn the theories in-depth.

Furthermore, ***contribute to other students' discussions*** was close to the two-way traffic

as it was also described in varied ways by the students. Some felt that they wanted to work on their own on the learning activities. This could be as because generally students have journeyed individually in their education previously. Others, however, felt that they owned their learning experiences, "I learnt ... I was willing to study the suggested material and contribute to other students' discussions (MEdSt4), I could share my experiences (MEdSt5), I did a lot of research ... to come up with a solution in this course" (MEdSt7).

VARIATION 3: SOCIAL MEDIA TOOLS

The students learnt about the ***social media tools*** that the they could use in their learning. These media tools transformed their approach their teaching at UNISA. They could navigate tools such as Twitter, Blogger, wikis, etc. MEdSt3 used the tools for student-to-student and student-to-lecturer interaction. This participant now lectured the students through *a community of learning online*. MEdSt5 initiated a blog on distance education to engage in discussions with his colleagues at UNISA. MEdSt1 tried out varied tools such as Wiki Spaces, Weebly and Dropbox. Furthermore, this student created a website via Weebly and used YouTube for her research project. She filed information for her studies in Dropbox so that she could access it anywhere anytime. MEdSt4 discovered the educational value of the social media tools. But MEdSt2 "found it hard to keep following various networks" that he created due to the time constraints that the demands of the programme placed on him. MEdSt6 seemed to be knowledgeable and skilled in the use of media tools and as a result felt that she learnt nothing new.

DISCUSSION

The UNISA-UMUC online MEd in ODL programme targets the UNISA academics and professionals for purposes of capacitating them to operate in the ODL. The programme has attracted keenness in the UNISA staff. The students had positive experiences about their orientation into the programme. They however had reservations such as that it was more theoretical. They felt that a late starter in the programme would be disadvantaged without being orientated hands-on. The nature of the programme forced the students to make a quick transition from their traditional learning into online learning especially in their coursework with UMUC. The programme placed demands on them to learn fast such as manoeuvring through the online technological tools. This was felt in completing their learning activities, online discussions, assignments, etc. The fact that only one student stated that she already possessed skills and knowledge of operating the online tools points to the need for orientation into the programme. Otherwise lack of orientation into the programme can be a recipe for deregistering or dropping

out of the same. This may contribute to the lack of student retention raised by Jones (2013). The discussed studies about orientation by Government Accountability Office (2011) and Jones (2013) above cast light on the importance and handling of orientation for students who enrol in online programmes. The lack of or insufficient orientation of students into a programme provides the obvious answer to the problem of drop-out. Also, the right approach towards orientation (Kelly 2013) could help motivate student retention in the programme.

Learning about the theories of distance education has proven, from the findings, to benefit the students in the sense it boosted their understanding of distance education and ODL. However, the programme seemed heavy for the students who are working; they could not cope well with the weekly readings and tight deadlines to submit assignments. The late starters dropped out from the programme as they realised that they were falling behind. However, class interaction motivated those who stayed in the programme. Their co-creation of knowledge, taking ownership of learning and collaboration rewarded them with the experience that would turn around their practice in the academia (Peters 2002). Thus, constructivism guided the students' learning as it enriched collaborative and student's active engagements in learning.

In light of students appearing to be older (middle aged plus) as evidenced from their profile in table 2, it appeared that they transitioned from being digital immigrants to becoming digital natives. They tried out a variety of social media tools such as Twitter, Blogger, Wiki and Facebook. Their ability to manipulate technology and these media tools would help transform their lecturing styles to benefit students (Kelly 2013).

The students' experiences were spiced with some variation of views. Variation played itself out, casting light on how UNISA staff experience the online learning in the MEd in ODL programme. This might be different to other students in other contexts, as Cheng (2016) attests that the variation theory suggests that the ability to discern a certain aspect calls for one to experience variation in it, a thing that is regarded as a subject matter and student capabilities (Marton et al. 2003, 16). Hence, traces of the variation theory were evident in the findings of this study.

The findings cast light on how the students experienced assessment in the programme. Their experiences yielded both positive and negative aspects. The positive aspect is that their lecturers prepared them by explaining assessment in advance and provided the assessment criteria. Contrarily, an element of subjectivity was raised assessment in online groupwork activities and discussion forum which created a thinking that certain students deserved high marks compared to their colleagues who seemed to ride on others' backs. It would appear that groupwork activities lacked effective online monitoring systems. This finding perfectly supports the idea that assessment causes issues of dissatisfaction among students. The UNISA

versus UMUC pass percentage could be the reason for students' disgruntlement.

IMPLICATIONS FOR ODL AND ONLINE LEARNING AND FOR THE DUAL DEGREE INITIATIVE BETWEEN UNISA AND UMUC

The MEd in ODL programme has created the learning and career pathways in the academia for opportunities with regards to educational access and programme viability and articulation at other institutions that also offer the ODL modules or courses. Students with a four-year degree or a three-year bachelor's qualification and an honours qualification, a postgraduate diploma or an equivalent qualification in any academic or professional field (96 credits at National Qualifications Framework level 8) were (and will be) considered for admission to the MEd in ODL at UNISA. In preparing the students to achieve the outcomes of the programme, the MEd in ODL takes into account the South African Qualifications Authority thus:

- The programme enrolled both inexperienced and experienced students in terms of online learning. Resultantly, students' transformational experiences varied in a number of ways. They (as lecturers) felt that their new experiences helped them to understand and service their students much more effectively in an online teaching environment.
- The students developed a new understanding, as lecturers, about student support, which is emphasised UNISA puts an emphasis on. This change of mindset could contribute towards improved cognitive student support and success in ODL institutions.

Failure to properly orientate students towards online learning in ODL suggests a specific orientation programme into the current MEd in ODL programme. It appears that the staff who were enrolled in the programme did not undergo orientation of the kind that exposes them to the technicalities of online learning that are crucial for success in the programme. Such needed orientation should offer initial hands-on training. Students should be orientated on how the programme is presented. They should also be orientated about the learning management systems through which the programme is presented. UNISA prides itself in facilities such as advanced computer laboratories where training can be presented.

A needs analysis should be done alongside the orientation programme to affirm the online competencies students. This assessment should be conducted to inform the kind of intervention strategies that will ensure timeous support. UNISA staff who have completed the programme should contribute strategies towards effective online learning, e.g. tailor online learning that is suitable for their students by carefully selecting the online technological and social media for use on myUNISA. In addition, UNISA should prioritise the student support strategies that are

based on technology- or online-driven teaching.

More research should be considered about students who are reluctant to participate in the co-construction of knowledge, thus discrediting constructivism. This study creates an understanding that certain academics may not be as advanced about operating online either for teaching of for their own learning, thus, re-training academics to master online teaching and learning should be considered.

The main implication of these findings for the success of the UNISA-UMUC master's degree is that UNISA should provide an initial orientation programme to staff members who are successful in applying for the dual degree. A four-credit short learning programme offered through a massive open online course offered at NQF level 8, which includes the following aspects, could ensure a seamless and more enjoyable learning journey for the candidates:

- outline of the MEd in ODL and requirements for the MEd in ODL;
- educational technology in the digital age;
- orientation into the different educational media available in the different modules;
- time management skills and planning of the learning process over two years (submitted online on the ePortfolio site);
- orientation into the basic educational theories and specific knowledge on constructivism, technological pedagogical content knowledge development and other relevant theories;
- online learning skills and internet ethics;
- assessment in the MEd in ODL; and
- support strategies for online learning.

CONCLUSION

The study successfully inquired into UNISA staff' learning experiences as regards MEd in ODL programme. The study produced findings that contribute an understanding of the varied experiences of students when it comes to learning online. We think that the findings can influence decisions towards the improvement of the programmes. The crux of this study is its contribution of about the need for student orientation and support to guard against their early discouragement and resultant drop-out from the programme. It is revealed from the study that students (UNISA staff) experience frustration due their non-mastery of the online learning technology. Hence, if UNISA is "serious" about its ideals regarding student support, that should include the aspect of orientating the staff into the technical aspects of learning online in the MEd in ODL.

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