

Use of the Semester System in Undergraduate Programmes for Open Distance Education

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Abstract

Distance education offers a variety of teaching and learning modes, including various instruction periods, such as a year or six months. This study examined the use of semesters for teaching and learning in undergraduate programmes at a specific university offering open distance education. The authors present the perceived pedagogic challenges for programmes with modules delivered over six months. A qualitative exploratory design was used, following interpretivism. The participants were lecturers from a specific college within the university. The lecturers were involved in modules taught over six months, normally referred to as semester modules. Four group discussions were held with the nominated lecturers from different departments within the college. The discussions were audio recorded, and the data were transcribed verbatim, followed by manual content analysis. The findings indicated that the perceived pedagogic challenges in the semester system were limited time for teaching and learning which included delayed feedback to students, and the academic workload brought about by large student numbers and the types of assessment methods used. The results suggest a basis to respond to new pedagogies and the use of alternative assessment methods to match the semester system in open distance education.

Keywords: challenge; distance education; open learning; pedagogy; semester

Introduction

The current landscape of distance education has changed in recent years where course designs and their delivery modes are characterised by a high degree of variation (Burns 2011). Several factors emerge in defining the options of course delivery in distance education (Keegan 1996). Where a curriculum for programmes that lead to different qualifications consists of various modules, a factor found as being particularly important is the duration or period over which the modules are taught, such as a semester or year. A semester is the period of instruction into which an academic year is often divided, typically a period of six months.

Distance education was explained by Moore (1993) as an educational process and system in which someone carries out the whole or a significant proportion of the teaching removed in space and time from the learner. Keegan (1980) indicated that within a distance education system, information and communication are exchanged through print or electronic communications media. Other distance education experts indicated that innovations of distance education models emerged because of the rapid evolution of delivery modes (Hirtz and Harper 2008; Taylor 1995). There are different models and modes of delivery of distance education programmes, each with a different entry requirement, scope, duration and organisation (Burns 2011).

In South Africa, the programme design and development in distance education varies with individual institutions. However, a guide from the Council on Higher Education (CHE) that is responsible for quality assurance and accreditation of programmes and their curriculum, provides the minimum criteria (CHE 2014). Educational decisions are influenced largely by the philosophy of education that guides curricular decisions. In terms of learning design, a key indicator for distance education is the way in which the materials tell a coherent story and unfold an argument that can be followed in a context of independent study and/or collaborative activity independent of the lecturer. Linkages between modules and between activities, feedback and core content are central, especially where there is a “transactional distance” (CHE 2014; Moore 1993). A semester is commonly a session of six months, and in some universities in a semester either of the two divisions of the academic year ranges from 15 to 18 weeks. The advantage of the semester system is greater flexibility in increasing student access to university education at different times in the year (Harris, Mishra, and Koehler 2009; Mishra and Koehler 2006).

Background and the Problem Statement

In this context, the university offers open distance learning (ODL) which is a form of education that combines two forms of education, namely open and distance. Open learning is described as an approach which combines among others principles of student-centredness; flexibility of learning provision; the removal of barriers to access learning; the provision of student support; and the construction of learning programmes in the expectation that students can succeed and support systems (Department of

Education 1995). Additionally, Bates (1995) explained open learning as an approach that provides learning in a flexible manner, organised around the geographical, social and time constraints of the learner rather than an institution.

According to Prinsloo (2011), ODL pedagogy is referred to as intentional strategies and delivery of these strategies to contribute to and bring out learning in bridging multiple distances between students and faculty. These strategies and delivery of teaching are among others dependent on the discipline context, the availability and appropriate use of a variety of resources, teaching periods and institutional efficiencies. ODL pedagogy allows for different learning styles through a variety of opportunities for formative and summative assessment.

The offering of programmes in the university comprises various courses or modules commonly referred to as modularisation. The modules may be taken over six months or one year depending on the structure of the academic year and the programme. The design of the modules followed a similar process as for the curriculum design, but in a more focused way within a particular disciplinary area. Accordingly, modularisation brings forth coherence in the individual aspects of the courses in order to form the building blocks of a programme to ensure that it is clear to students how the constituent elements contribute, separately and together, as completely to the programme purpose and outcomes.

The structure of the programmes is a bit complex, with courses composed of several modules that build on each other at different levels. A typical module weighs 12 or 24 credits each, which means it permits 120 or 240 notional hours for teaching and learning (CHE 2014). A teaching and learning plan involves the implementation of a semester-based system, commonly referred to as semesterisation. A semester system is where modules are as a rule taught and assessed in a single six-months period.

The pedagogic practices consistent with social constructivist are used in the form of student-lecturer or student-student interaction (Atherton 2013), both online and face-to-face. Student support was developed with due consideration of the unique characteristics of the university's students, the institutional profile and context (Prinsloo 2011). The mode of delivery of distance education blends online and print methods wherein the pedagogical online course material is web-facilitated, and print-based tutorials are sent to students by courier or postal mail. The students have the flexibility to use the online or print-based method. A significant proportion of the content is delivered online with the use of a specific university learning management system.

A range of alternative assessment practices appropriate to the ODL character of the institution was approved, taking into account the unique character of each discipline and the student profiles. However, it seems that while processes and support systems were clearly developed to ensure the effective implementation of the alternative assessment strategies, the teaching period (semester) was overlooked. Formative assessment is done

through assignments and summative assessment largely with high stakes examination. The university introduced the use of an integrated tutor model to assist with learner support and to expand the rendering of online tutorial support to students.

Over the past recent years, noticeably, the number of students continues to grow. Student enrolment shows a 28.4 per cent increase from 2008, meaning an average year-on-year increase of 7.1 per cent. Approximately 90.5 per cent of students are enrolled at the undergraduate level (UNISA 2009; 2012). The enrolment growths led to large student numbers in the undergraduate modules. These are normally referred to as large modules, because of the large class sizes. A large class may be defined in different terms depending on the discipline and/or the pedagogical needs of the learning environment (Scott 1995). According to Varghese (2013), the issue of large classes is connected to the trend of massification, which is a term used to describe the rapid increase in student enrolment that was witnessed recently. Varghese (2013) further notes that gross enrolment ratios of those seeking higher education globally has risen from 13.8 per cent in 1990 to 29 per cent in 2010.

The observation of the authors was that for the efficiency of offering open distance education, the university infrastructure and systems were available to support pedagogy. On the other hand, the student profile was taken into consideration when planning learning and assessment. The modes of tuition, forms and methods of teaching were consistent with distance education guidelines. However, the changing environment that the university operates as explained earlier, calls for a policy to align the teaching period (semester) with the context. The authors argue that there is a need to rethink and develop innovative pedagogies to enhance teaching and learning in line with the semester system.

Study Aim

The aim of this study was to explore the perceived pedagogic challenges characteristic in the use of the semester system in open distance education.

Research Method and Design

The study followed a qualitative and interpretive approach (Creswell 2013). Qualitative interpretivism was deemed appropriate because the researchers sought to understand the meanings the lecturers place on their encounters of semester teaching and learning.

The Research Setting and Population

The study was conducted in one specific college, which comprised three schools and nineteen departments in an ODL university. The population consisted of lecturers from the different departments. Each department nominated two academic lecturers to participate in the round table conversations related to the study. The lecturers from the different departments were mixed to form strata such that each of the two lecturers from the same department participated in the different focus group conversations. A total of

38 lecturers who were involved in undergraduate programme semester modules participated in the group discussions.

Data Collection

Four focus groups were formed with the lecturers, and data were collected through round table discussions with the groups (Green 2006). The topic for discussion was “Critical conversations in student assessment and feedback”. The aim of the discussions was to elicit insights into how carefully focused revisions of assessment methods could form the basis of a strategy to deal with some of the noted pedagogic issues that affect assessment and feedback to students in a semester system module or programme. The lecturers engaged in internal conversations on several issues including reflection on the semester system. The focus groups comprised nine to ten members each and lasted two hours each. The discussions were held over two days with two focus groups per day, and were audio recorded with the permission of the participants. As a follow-up, the lecturers were requested to indicate the possible ways in which they could begin to respond to or deal with the pedagogic challenges related to the semester system. All the researchers were involved in the group discussions, with each responsible for organisation of the room, facilitating the conversations, operating the audio record and writing notes during the group discussions.

Data Analysis

Audio-recorded data were transcribed verbatim, read, and followed by manual content analysis using both open and focused coding (Green 2006). The researchers used the two approaches in order to uncover as much as possible about the implementation of semester system, to identify challenges and to look for associated data fitting under challenges. A consensus meeting was held by the researchers to develop and verify similar topics from the four groups’ transcripts. The notes taken during the discussions were used to support the topics during the consensus meeting. An interpretive analysis of the data was done (Creswell 2013). Similar content from the group conversations were grouped together to form topics under the challenges and interpreted. Significant content of the results related to the semester system are presented in a narrative form in the results section.

Ethical Considerations

The university ethics committee granted ethical approval, and permission to approach the participants was obtained from the dean of the specific college and the different heads of departments who nominated the participants. Verbal consent was obtained from the participants following a thorough explanation of the purpose of the study and the proceedings for the group discussions. This was done before participation in the focus group discussions. Agreement to be audio recorded and to share insights with the rest of the group also constituted permission to participate in the study. Participation in the study was voluntary and the participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study without penalty (Creswell 2013). The researchers signed the

confidentiality binding form and an undertaking to observe the ethical principles in the reporting of data. They further obtained permission from the participants regarding the publication of the results.

Privacy and confidentiality were maintained in that the names of the participants were not revealed and the audio tapes were identified by the dates on which the group conversations were conducted. Furthermore, the results are presented in broad topics without individual narrative extracts, in order to ensure that the information is not identifiable with specific individuals from the groups. Emotional disturbance and harm as risks were not anticipated as the interviews were about the semester system only.

Trustworthiness of the Study

Credibility was ensured by gathering information from those lecturers who had experience of teaching the semester modules, to ensure that the data were believable. On-the-spot member checking was done to ascertain agreement by the participants that their reflections had been adequately captured and that the conclusions reached in the interpretations were credible. The research design and its implementation were adequately explained. The researchers, to ensure dependability, evaluated the transcribed group conversations and the data analysis process. The possibility of transferability of the findings depended on the comprehensive description of the research process, the participants within their context and purposeful sampling (Creswell 2013). The researchers coded the same data independently, discussed and agreed on the main deliberations that were derived from the four focus group discussions.

Results

The results present insights from the conversations with the lecturers on perceived pedagogic challenges related to teaching undergraduate programme modules offered over a semester of six months. The participants had the same status, as they were all lecturers and were involved in teaching semester modules. The participants were both males and females, and had 2 years to 20 years teaching experience at the university. They had been teaching different semester modules for two years and more. The challenges were the limited time for teaching and learning, which included delayed feedback to students, and the academic workload brought about by large student numbers and the types of assessment methods used.

Limited Time for Teaching and Learning

The semester period was highlighted as a challenge in terms of reduced timelines for teaching, learning, formative assessment, feedback provision to students and remedial action. The six months was noted to be further reduced to four months considering the first two weeks being for orientation and time for students to familiarise themselves with the content of the module before the formative assessment; and the last six weeks being for the summative assessment or final examination. A shared observation from

the deliberations was that a semester has an effect on the quality of learning and the quality of interaction with the students. The findings indicate that the lecturers were of an opinion that the chance of students preparing themselves for their learning experience and success in the examination was largely dependent on formative assessment. However, there was limited time for remedial action following the formative assessment. Therefore, the impression was that within the semester the students studied only what would be asked in the examination and in the end studied only to pass.

The challenge with giving feedback to students varied with the online and print-based methods. The findings indicated that there was a delay in the provision of feedback for print-based assignments due to postal processes. While the student who submitted printed assignments would receive the mark as soon as it was captured, feedback would only be received when the assignment was posted back to the student. This was unlike online submissions, where feedback arrived promptly with the marks.

There were some institutional factors such as the postponement of assignment submission dates, inevitable mail problems that lead to a delay in delivery of study material, and the late submission of assignments which added to the limited time and delay in feedback to students. The lecturers acknowledged some difficulties concerning the institutional support systems, such as technical problems, which affected the access to online study material from the university learning management system. The general view was that the systems would sometimes fail them to do their work, while they were already having limited time from the semester period. Interestingly, within the six months, the teaching time was perceived to be compromised by other key performance areas where the lecturers had to do research, community engagement and academic citizenship.

Academic Workload

One of the mentioned pedagogic challenges in the semester system was the academic workload. Concerning the large modules, there was acknowledgement that the increase in student enrolments and open learning intake led to large class sizes. However, because the workload was not taken into consideration when student numbers increased; this affected the assessment and feedback to students. It follows that workload issues were brought about by the increased marking of assignments for the formative assessment in the large modules, which put pressure on the lecturers.

While the university introduced integrated tutor management, the ratio of tutors to learners was said to be at a lower level than expected. The deliberation was that in the large modules there were low levels of student engagement and progression within the system. Furthermore, with large modules, the formative assessments were likely to include those that were or could be easy for lecturers, such as the less appreciated objective item question types of assignments in order to overcome the burden of marking. However, the preparation of such assignments was found to be intense and time consuming. The marking of assignments was indicated to take a lot of academics'

time, where they could be focusing on developing innovative teaching and assessment methods in line with the semester system.

Discussion

This paper presents an account of the perceived pedagogic challenges in the semester system in an ODL context. The internal conversations were an opportunity for the lecturers to reflect on their own practices and to discuss personal reflections with others, which offered an opportunity for critique and alternative explanations that moved from descriptive reflection to dialogic reflection on the semester system. Internal conversation refers to dialogues that academics have with themselves in order to develop self-knowledge (Ashwin et al. 2015). Therefore, dialogue was essential in developing reflective teaching practice, particularly in relation to the semester system.

Student characteristics and their learning modes have changed (Jung 2007), which calls for ODL institutions to provide relevant pedagogy. However, little is said about the periods of teaching and learning, such as the semester period in distance education. Distance learning has thus been criticised for imposing a “one-size-fits-all” approach on learners. While the introduction of a semester system was in line with bringing in credit accumulation as required by the curriculum, there seemed to be a perception that a semester gives limited periods that affect the quality of teaching and learning. In turn, some academics were of the opinion that they were compromised for their teaching role. It was evident that there is a perception among some lecturers that longer teaching periods would lead to effective and deeper student learning. However, there is no evidence to support this notion because learning and semester are not the same. According to Archambault and Crippen (2009), pedagogical content knowledge includes knowledge of what makes a subject difficult or easy to learn, and not necessarily the period of learning.

Literature indicates that educators in the distance education mode are faced with new pedagogical issues surrounding student interactions, defining new types of assignments and performance expectations, and different assessment and evaluation techniques (Boling et al. 2012; Moller, Foshay, and Huett 2008). The importance of testing students through a formative assessment within the semester period was acknowledged. However, researchers indicate that the method of assessment is not determined by the structure of the academic year; and therefore distance education requires a different pedagogy and unique set of skills (Boling et al. 2012; Hardy and Bower 2004). It is therefore essential to revisit the notion of assessment for learning versus assessment of learning.

The general impression was that the feedback to students was compromised by several factors such as delayed study material and the mode of the provision of feedback. Experts indicate that the quality assurance criteria such as the timely dispatch of course materials, training of tutors in providing support to students, quality of regular tutorials, timely feedback on assignments and feedback to students on their performance and

progress are important in distance education (Gibbons 1998; Varghese 2013; World Bank 2002).

The level of the workload was perceived as high based on the large modules, number and forms of assessments and limited period of teaching. Maringe and Sing (2014) indicate that the academic work overload is related to the stagnant staff numbers; because as enrolment grows universities are being expected to accommodate greater numbers of students with less human resources. According to Mohamedbhai (2008), related to the large modules, growing class sizes have been a direct effect of massification as there has been no proportionate increase in human and physical support from public sources in the higher education sector globally.

The issue of open learning and increased enrolments calls for a need to achieve active learners and innovative approaches for promoting student-lecturer interaction in large modules, and effective learning during the semester. Therefore, careful planning and innovation in assessment is required around large modules. While large classes do pose very specific challenges, they also hold promise and opportunities for innovation in support of student learning (Hornsby and Osman 2014). Thus, the need to examine and transform pedagogical practices.

The issue of assessment was viewed as an opportunity for a change to new and alternative methods of assessment. In their paper on reflections on assessment in ODL, and the implications of assessment when it is focused on quality of teaching and learning, Letseka and Pitsoe (2014) advocate for formative assessment to be combined with final examination.

There is a long-standing belief that the number of students in a class affects the quality of the learning environment (Cuseo 2007). Therefore large classes were believed to correlate with low student performance. Research shows that students exhibit poor levels of engagement with material, less commitment to courses and lower levels of motivation when presented with large classes (Exeter et al. 2010; Mulryan-Kyne, 2010). However, class size in and of itself is not a distinguishing feature of student performance; rather, class size matters in relation to education goals and the quality of the educational experience (Hornsby, Osman, and De Matos Ala 2013; Mulryan-Kyne, 2010).

The reflection about large modules in this study is in line with literature, which indicates the current discourse on large class teaching. Accordingly, the suggestion that lecturers must accept ever increasing class sizes in the name of access and development is unrealistic, and in terms of the nature of education, and the conditions for the development and acquisition of knowledge (Maringe and Sing 2014).

Limitations

Only one college was included in this study. This becomes a challenge to transfer to other contexts because people experience events in different ways, which can be difficult to conclude that the results will be transferable to the whole university. This limits the application of the findings to a wider range of other higher education institutions offering distance education and a semester system in the rest of South Africa.

Recommendations for Practice

With regard to the possible ways in which the lecturers could begin to respond to deal with the pedagogic challenges related to a semester system, a recommendation for practice was to align the semester with the increased number of months. Timely delivery of study material was advocated for as key to successful learning and assessment. Additional advocacy was for full online modules in order to overcome the inevitable print and postal problems. Concerning workload, a recommendation was to reconfigure academic support by increasing the number of active lecturers and tutors, and collaborative learning initiatives such as virtual learning and virtual classrooms.

The implication is for the university to revisit its assessment policies and to ensure further introduction of alternative assessment methods such as staggered examinations. Formative assignments should cover a broader scope of the coursework. A suggestion was that with large modules, it would be beneficial to introduce online activities and assessment methods that will promote prompt feedback to students. Furthermore, workload should be considered when change is introduced such as when student numbers increase.

Conclusions

The study revealed the perceived pedagogic challenges in a semester system. It follows that there are both opportunities and drawbacks in relation to semester teaching, depending on the context. The challenges in a semester system were viewed as an opportunity for change to new and alternative methods of assessment that are effective in relation to the time period. While this is said, the duration of teaching and learning, specifically with a semester should be duly considered.

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