

The E-Tutor in the New Normal: Analysing the Changing Roles of Tutoring in an ODeL Environment during and post Covid-19

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Abstract

This article reports on a study that explored how an open distance learning (ODL) institution is integrating its online processes in handling e-tutors' experiences as they transition from face-to-face to blended facilitation. The study examined the following key issues: firstly, conceptions of how the university strategy transitions conventional tutors into its open distance e-learning (ODeL) system; secondly, conceptions of how e-tutors bridge the gap between facilitation and student support; and thirdly, how e-tutors are integrated in the ODeL institution's system in relation to their personal academic development. The study adopted a qualitative exploratory approach, which relied on documentary sources and the experiences of university e-tutors at the Botswana Open University (BOU) captured through telephonic and online interviews. It is argued that the world is changing due to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. The changes have been fast, radical, demanding and uncertain. However, ODeL institutions can do more to confront these challenges. The study findings indicated that BOU has positively responded to these changes by relying on its capabilities and strengths. The article provides insights for improved access, success, tutor identities and development. The article ends with recommendations on what could be done to improve learning, teaching and practice as facilitated by e-tutors within ODeL institutions as they recover from the ravages of the Covid-19 pandemic.

UNISA  UNIVERSITY
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International Journal of Educational Development in Africa

<https://unisapressjournals.co.za/index.php/IJEDA>

Volume 8 | Number 1 | 2023 | #12135 | 18 pages

<https://doi.org/10.25159/2312-3540/12135>

ISSN 2312-3540 (Online)

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Keywords: open distance e-learning; e-tutorship; Covid-19 pandemic; exploratory qualitative research

Introduction

As higher education institutions (HEIs) emerge from the ravages of the Covid-19 pandemic and its attendant protocols of social distancing, e-tutoring has come to stay in universities offering programmes through the open distance learning (ODL) mode (Makwara 2019). The key debates have centred on how the development of new technologies in higher education has advanced dramatically over the past few years. This has caused HEIs to increasingly gear themselves for the integration of information communications technology (ICT) teaching mechanisms into their instructional practices (Vlachopoulos and Makri 2021). These developments have led to technological advancements and increased reliance on technology that have made it imperative for ODL institutions to use technology-enhanced learning as a means of academic support to students (Pedro and Kumar 2020). What these debates give little attention to today, however, are the effects of these changes on the new normal in higher education. In particular, there is the issue of the realignment and professionalisation of e-tutors as HEIs rush to embrace the obligatory e-technologies in the teaching and learning environment. In this article, e-tutors refers to those part-time staff who are engaged to facilitate teaching, learning and assessment as well as provide online student support (BOU 2020b).

Background

E-Tutoring plays an important role in distance education and the use of ICT can be used to market educational products, support communication and increase student support (Makwara 2019). E-Tutoring has the main purpose of bridging the geographic gap and the distance between students and their peers, and students and their lecturers (Matoane and Mashile 2013; Pedro and Kumar 2020). The effective interaction of the distance education student with the institution by means of e-tutoring, creates a sense of satisfaction, belonging and fulfilment with the learning environment (Vlachopoulos 2016; Xu, Jilenga and Deng 2019). The key role of an e-tutor is to manage the online learning space effectively and to ensure that it provides a suitable environment for effective learning to take place (Mashile and Matoane 2012). Furthermore, there are three important aspects that are crucial for e-tutoring for an ODL institution to be successful, namely: participation of both the e-tutor and the students; contextualisation of the learning materials to ensure that they are put into a meaningful and practical context, rather than being treated in isolation; and the presentation of the study material in the online context (Gregory and Salmon 2013; Tremblay and Kis 2008).

Within the changes happening across all HEIs internationally and locally (Albor, Lorduy and Dau 2014; Grant 2010; Phelps and Vlachopoulos 2020), universities are embracing the new normal, which is characterised by the massification of e-tutors. In addition, as can be observed within the various ODeL institutions, the e-tutors are the

key actors in the implementation of their core business of teaching, learning and research. However, the precarious nature of their academic work and life is characterised by being considered as temporary employees, with marginal say in university leadership. Their journey to becoming senior academics is complicated, and the nature of their work is invisible. Furthermore, because they receive marginal recognition, apart from financial remuneration, the reward for their academic work is minimal. They are perceived as affordable and easily disposable, since the processes of becoming an e-tutor is often subjective drawing from the experiences they bring with them from outside the university. In many conventional universities, this type of work is usually open to postgraduate university students (often international students), contract workers, retired academic staff, and career industry staff looking for additional income.

Statement of the Problem

In light of the ever-changing scenario in higher education, the key research question was: How can the rapidly changing ODeL institutions of today and tomorrow improve the role and status of their e-tutors in spite of the competing institutional demands and expectations within the universities?

Firstly, this raised several issues of social knowledge, labour justice within the competing frameworks of university leadership with competing institutional conceptualities and realities. In particular, how are these universities able to cope, chart a way forward, and improve the role and status of their e-tutors? Secondly, how can these universities, despite their competing institutional demands and expectations, re-imagine and re-professionalise e-tutoring without necessarily affecting their core purpose of learning and teaching, service, and research? Finally, what are the sustainability governance practices that can carry this through? This article may not be conclusive in providing justice as affected stakeholders may demand, but it rather highlights a contested conversation.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the current study was to explore how HEIs that have been compelled to embrace technology enhanced teaching and learning are integrating e-tutors into the teaching, research and student support in the virtual classrooms and lecture halls that have replaced the brick-and-mortar ones. The study also explored possible avenues of how the HEI can harness the enormous potential and experiences that e-tutors bring with them when they join and grow with the ODeL institution.

The E-Tutor in the New Normal

Subsequently, the article is divided into the following sections: the conceptualisation of e-tutorship within the new normal ODL environment; the international, African and Southern African Development Community (SADC) regional perspectives on the role

of e-tutors within the new normal higher education narratives; the research methodology used; the key results of the study and e-tutor institutional responses; and the understanding of the re-imagination of e-tutoring within the competing narratives in higher education.

Conceptualisation of E-Tutorship within the New Normal ODL Environment

This article uses the concept of roles, e-tutor professional identities and communities of practice to understand the work of e-tutors in the ODL higher education learning and teaching space. ODL can be defined as a multidimensional concept aimed at bridging the time, geographical, economic, social, educational and communication-related distance between student and institution, student and academics, student and coursework, and student and peers (Naim et al. 2022; Roy et al. 2021). Gregory and Salmon (2013) describe the role of the e-tutor in an ODL context as promoting human interaction and communication through modelling, conveying and building of knowledge and skills in an online environment. Berge's (1995) widely used classification of the conditions necessary for successful on-line instruction which he categorises into four areas, namely: pedagogical, social, managerial, and technical. This categorisation shows that the e-tutor has multiple roles too, each with the need to develop different types of competencies such as pedagogical, technical, communicational, and interpersonal skills. Lentell (2003, 67) notes that: "Each student presents particular challenges and thus the tutor-student dialogue has to focus on different things accordingly – for instance, understanding the course, lack of appropriate skills required to demonstrate understanding, lack of presentational skills, etc." The e-tutor is compelled to employ appropriate types of interaction and to provide timely and informative feedback.

Competencies of an ODeL Tutor

The competencies of an ODeL tutor are related to facilitation, assessment, learner support, belonging to a community of learners, research and service. According to Baumann et al. (2008), the e-tutor's role ranges from a student support perspective by outlining that a tutor does the following: prepares and conducts tutorials, seminars and laboratory sessions; marks essays, assignments and examinations; advises students on academic and related matters; attends departmental and faculty meetings, conferences and seminars; serves on institutional committees and boards; conducts research; stimulates and guides class discussions; and compiles bibliographies of specialised materials for reading assignments.

The article also relies on the work of critical pedagogues, like Freire (1970), who writes of education as liberation and e-tutors as guides to help students develop critical consciousness of their own socio-cultural contexts, and how they might connect knowledge to power and freedom. Being a good e-tutor involves integrating conflicting subjectivities; dealing with emotions positively; understanding that discourses can create ideological learning spaces; and accepting that a sense of teacher-self is not only

discursive but also embodied. Palmer (2007) stresses the importance of teachers knowing themselves, in addition to knowing their students. Teachers see teaching as a spiritual endeavour deeply connected to social justice and change. Teaching is about motivating students to excel in their chosen careers while also becoming aware of cultural and social inequalities and how to reverse them.

Teacher identity can be defined as a sense of teacher self that results from a productive combination of key personal and professional subjectivities, identity positions or beliefs (Alsup 2006). Beijaard, Meijer and Verloop (2004) indicate that it is an ongoing process of interpretation and re-interpretation of experiences. According to Kerby (1991), the notions of professional identity relate to both person and context and consists of sub-identities that are more or less in harmony. Subsequently, keying in from the above, these concepts were the base of theoretical assumptions underpinning the current study. These concepts were used within the social justice critical perspective to critically examine the new roles and status of e-tutors within ODeL institutions. Under this organising framework the following arguments are presented.

Firstly, e-tutors have a great deal of useful skills, abilities, knowledge, networks of learning, influence, relationships, and power that they bring to the university. Secondly, as part of the new normal, how universities utilise this wealth of knowledge is dependent on the nature of university governance within the institution. Thirdly, in the new normal it is expected that there are new ways of how these e-tutors teach, learn and interact. Interconnectivity demands new ways of working, teaching, learning, in relation to the fluid changing institutional contexts in the new e-universities. Lastly, the new e-universities will have to adopt new ways to work with these e-tutors, e-students and e-university infrastructures, both locally and internationally.

The researchers opine that e-tutors have a lot to offer to higher education considering the new changes in the field. But this depends on the kind of university leadership in place, and how it is able to respond to new narratives in the light of its institutional agenda within the different institutional contexts. Thus, universities have to find ways of how best to utilise and harness this huge potential e-tutors bring to the success of higher education in the face of the new changes.

International, African and SADC Perspectives on the Role of E-Tutors within the New Normal Higher Education Narratives

International Perspectives on the Role of E-Tutors in Higher Education

The world today has witnessed changes in world economic systems that are responsible for changes in higher education (Lewis and Spencer 1986; Perraton 2000). In particular, neoliberal practices adopted by universities are affecting how universities are led and governed (Bok 2003). Universities have responded to these narratives differently depending on their individual situation, vision, mandates and purpose (Cloete and Maassen 2002). The different institutional responses have led to the creation of open

distance electronic learning (commonly known as ODeL) institutions and the emergence of non-traditional ODeL institutions (Hodgson, McConnell and Dirckinck-Holmfeld 2012; Kivunja and Kuyini 2017; Kukulska-Hulme 2012). In order to thrive, institutions handle these changes differently. Thus, it is imperative to emphasise the difference between traditional ODeL and non-traditional ODeL institutions: in terms of institutional strategy, mission, vision, which are often a bone of contention with non-traditional ODeL institutions or conventional institutions (Bower 2001). Furthermore, many ODeL institutions are forced to do more with less and adjust their strategies to thrive or perish (Li and Irby 2008). This has made life difficult for university staff in these institutions as their labour is increasingly becoming precarious (Rockwell et al. 1999). Despite these real threats to university labour mechanisms today across ODeL and non-traditional institutions, each has its own unique institutional staffing strategies that balance between university staff that are on site and those off site (Choudhury and Pattnaik 2020; Ulmer, Watson and Derby 2007). But at the base of these critical decisions is that most of these actions are guided by the nature of governance adopted by each university council leading and guiding the institution.

African Perspectives on the Role of E-Tutors in Higher Education

In the African higher education arena, what is known about the activities, roles, work and responsibilities of e-tutors across universities is minimal (Bunting 2006; Ngubane-Mokiwa 2017). There is little research available from which to draw conclusive considerations (Dlamini and Nkambule 2019). With the new developments in ODeL as a result of the new normal as experienced in and across non-traditional ODeL institutions, there has been an increased use of e-tutors as the new migrant workers. These e-workers play key roles in teaching and learning across the institutions where they are deployed. On a rather sad note, within the African higher education landscape, what is happening in ODeL institutions regarding the roles and status of e-tutors is basically a duplication of what is happening across the international ODeL institutions.

ODeL institutions are often in coping mode with how they execute their core business. This has continued to raise protesting and contradictory key issues of ownership, often championed by the affected stakeholders like academic staff and university students at different levels (Govender and Khoza 2017; Hoadley and Jansen 2014; Waghid 2018). Unfortunately, how part-time e-tutors are handled internationally is no different with the African ODeL institutions. The situation is made more challenging as the nature of their academic work is precarious. Within this region part-time e-tutors are often postgraduate university students and career individuals in different industries who are looking at how best to balance their additional income. This raises key institutional governance questions of how to enhance their role and status in terms of pedagogy, professional identities, academic recognition, and mobilisation, within the conflicting unique institutional situations. That could explain, in the researchers' view, why universities prefer to employ more e-tutors than full time academic staff; but e-tutors are often not represented in university senate or other institutional stakeholder fora.

SADC Regional Perspectives on the Role of E-Tutors in Higher Education

There is no SADC higher education protocol to handle this category of university staff; it is left to the jurisdiction of each ODeL institution (Khoza 2019; Khoza and Biyela 2019; Mpungose 2020). The precarious nature of their academic work (Jansen 2004; Keengwe, Onchwari and Wachira 2008) and life is characterised by the following conditions: They are temporary university workers who are at the mercy of heads of department and senior academics who contract them. They have no say in the leadership and management of their institutions. The journey to become senior academics within the universities they serve is not clear. The nature of their work is invisible and they receive less to marginal recognition from universities, with minimal rewards. In essence, the integration of e-tutors is a university governance issue and stance – if only the universities were to tap into this rich arsenal of social capital available at their disposal, and accord them a semblance of recognition, then the working conditions of the e-tutors would be seen in a better light.

Research Methodology

The current study followed an exploratory qualitative approach in the form of a single case study (Denzin and Lincoln 2005; Silverman 2013) of the e-tutors at BOU. There are over 969 e-tutors at BOU in its four schools. A total of 171 e-tutors from the School of Education and School of Social Sciences were purposefully targeted. From these, 20 e-tutors (labelled ET1 to ET20) voluntarily accepted to be interviewed online and telephonically, in response to an interview protocol with seven open-ended questions. The questions related to their lived experiences; the challenges they face as e-tutors; and their recommendations on how to overcome the challenges. Each interview lasted between 15 to 20 minutes. In addition, BOU institutional documents were analysed with regard to e-tutor management, which included: *The E-Tutor Model* (BOU 2020b), *The Tutor Management Strategy* (BOU 2021), and *The Strategy on Technology Enhanced Learning, Teaching, Assessment and Student Support (STELTASS)* (BOU 2019). The researchers employed content data analysis (Creswell 2014), where two themes were inductively drawn. From the analysis of the findings, five emergent sub-themes were deductively drawn.

Ethical Considerations

Prior to collection of data, ethical clearance was sought from the University Research and Ethics Committee that issued an Ethics Clearance Certificate Number 100391934. Furthermore, the respondents signed an informed consent form to participate in the interviews, with the assurance of anonymity, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw as and when they saw fit.

Findings, Analysis and Discussion

From the analysis of the interview responses and the institutional policy documents and guidelines, the following themes emerged.

Emerging Forms of the “New Normal” post Covid-19

According to Bozkurt and Sharma (2020) and the World Bank (2020), the “new normal” post Covid-19 in higher education implies a rapid transition from face-to-face to “emergency remote learning”. In addition, Xie, Siau and Nah (2020) posit that dependence on online education is the new normal being experienced in the education sector. Therefore, the key results of the study shall look at the emerging forms of the new normal. For example, how does the adoption of an institutional digitalisation strategy at BOU and the e-tutor responses speak to the needs of the stakeholder ecosystem? Furthermore, what does this mean for good university governance, within such contesting stakeholder university spaces?

Institutional Digitalisation Strategy and Response to the New Normal

Digitalisation at BOU has always been reflected in its strategic intent which in part states that “by 2023 BOU will be an innovative open university recognised for its technology-enhanced programmes” (BOU 2020a, 23). As BOU is an HEI, and as experienced world-wide and dictated by the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, it could not escape the brunt that dictated “rapid” transition from face-to-face to remote learning. Therefore, BOU was also compelled to re-introspect and to develop and review some of its policies.

For the sake of the current study, the documentary sources available in the public domain indicate that BOU has instituted the following e-learning strategies as part of its new institutional normal, which include: *The E-Tutor Model* (BOU 2020b), *The Tutor Management Strategy* (BOU 2021), and *STELTASS* (BOU 2021). The E-Tutor Model as its foremost consideration, redefined e-tutor roles, and responsibilities, because the advent of the new normal spelt a change or impact on the part-time tutor (e-tutor) management at BOU. One of the recommendations from this model is for tutors to undertake e-tutoring within the learning management system (LMS), currently MOODLE. It also introduced remuneration to the tutors on connectivity data to cover their roles in teaching and assessment and to supplement their limited connectivity (BOU 2020b). The e-tutoring role also dictated that the tutors capture the marks online, on the university’s integrated tertiary system (ITS). The model and strategy inevitably altered the expectations of BOU e-tutors, which impacted on their management, and thus compelled BOU to develop a Tutor Management Strategy as an acknowledgement of the critical role of the Part-time Tutor in enhancing student learning, particularly in an ODeL setting. “Clearly, part-time tutors are at the centre of ODL delivery, and the management of the tutors should be a priority for the University,” (BOU 2021, 3).

Another critical document meant to propel digitalisation and in response to the new normal is the STELTASS. The main aim of this strategy is to provide a compelling catalyst for the “emergency remote learning” ushered into the teaching and learning environment by the Covid-19 pandemic. By encouraging the adoption of the LMS, the schools and the e-tutors are to ensure effective use of the system and that the LMS is

utilised consistently across disciplines. BOU has to conduct regular inductions and provide guidance to both the students and e-tutors on digital technologies.

In response to the new normal, BOU also adopted new e-learning technologies to assist in the teaching, learning and research experience at the university. Documentary evidence indicates that e-tutorship has been implemented at various levels of the university. This has entailed the delivery of teaching and learning, assessment and student support through MOODLE, which has provided a platform for running online courses as well as facilitating online communication with students. For instance, massive open online courses (MOOCS) have allowed unlimited participation and open access to learning via the internet. In this way, online educational services, including virtual tutoring and webinars using video conferencing tools have become a common feature of ODeL institutions. In addition, documentary evidence shows that there are advantages of these new developments, which include: flexibility, information accessibility, global outreach, equity, and innovation. It should, however, be noted that there is still a downside to these advantages. For example, digital inequality and limited access to ICT is still a reality and continues to be so especially in the context of a developing country like Botswana as articulated by ET1 during their interview.

Recruitment of E-Tutors

Another key result from the study has been the different processes of how individuals were recruited to become e-tutors. Documentary sources indicate that several e-tutors were recruited from different sectors of the economy and professions. All e-tutors are employed by the university on a part-time basis. A part-time e-tutor at BOU is one who conducts tutorials in one or more subjects within a prescribed course of study (BOU 2021). The challenge, however, is that many of those recruited have received little or no training in online tutoring. The lack of online tutoring experience has led to challenges of how to function well in an ODeL institution environment. In addition, the study results indicated that many e-tutors came into the online tutoring experience as a third option or as complementary employment. Most of the e-tutors have another job which is their key source of income, which therefore, is given priority. For some, online tutoring is not their ideal work or profession because it is a side job or position, which could subsequently affect their commitment to and therefore the performance of their students.

Integration and Struggles of Integration

In addition, another study result was the observation that there have been challenges of integration and adaptability with the (forced) migration to online teaching platforms compounded by the effects of Covid-19 protocols. Furthermore, when ET4 was asked to respond to this issue she said that:

Lack of practical training to use all the digital tools on the Learning Management System (MOODLE).

The e-tutors interviewed indicated that changes in ICTs and online learning have been fast and required constant training to learn how to operate these often-changing new teaching and learning technologies. In addition, this affected student responses to the use of the university's available online resources, as they are also struggling with how to access them. Furthermore, when ET1 was asked to respond to this issue he said that:

Lack of students' participation during the virtual lessons. Most of them do not participate because they lack necessary skills to operate in an online learning environment.

However, the documentary evidence indicated that BOU has put in place a number of tutor training modules, packages and platforms to empower or retrain e-tutors on the requisite skills at affordable university fees or in the form of inductions. Despite these developments, however, the researchers found that some e-tutors still struggle to sufficiently access university online resources.

Interactions between Mature and Young E-Tutors

Furthermore, one important observation from the study was the mixed diversity of e-tutors who have come into the field from different walks of life with varying experiences and ages. The study results indicated that BOU has many e-tutors who are mature in age with only a few young ones. The reliance, choice and existence of mature e-tutors is possibly due to the nature of the university students that they have to deal with. Most of the university students are mature students, who need an andragogic approach to their facilitation. The postgraduate level students are mature in-service students and only attend the online sessions after work. This kind of approach to learning has necessitated BOU to adjust its teaching strategy to respond to these and other situations on the ground; hence, BOU's reliance on more mature academicians, who are experienced, patient and mature.

E-Tutor Expectations

A key aspect that emerged from the study was in relation to the e-tutors' expectations. The e-tutors interviewed had low expectations from this kind of teaching and e-tutoring position. They did not know how long they would be e-tutors in the same field. Their heartfelt desires and dreams were to become full-time academic staff with a view to becoming professors in their individual fields of specialisation in the future. Whether this would be possible in their lifetime is something yet to be experienced as the results indicated. Their low expectations were partly due to low remunerations that were sometimes paid late which affected their perspectives on e-tutoring at this level. Some view it as "the kind of temporary work you do but have other side work to supplement it" as indicated by ET1, ET7 and ET15. They were of the view that the work is temporary and not permanent, and it can, therefore, end at short notice. Another view was that there is little or no job security. Subsequently, the precarious nature of this work impacts on the delivery, because probably the university cannot get the best out

of them. Another key result was the issue of e-tutor access to what other full-time and contract university staff enjoy. By virtue of their work contracts, they have limited benefits if any beyond the allowances they receive. In addition, ET1 lamented thus:

E-Learning is delivered using computers and internet. Some tutors do not have computers or laptops to use for tutoring. Internet connectivity and accessibility is also a problem for both tutors and students and this makes it difficult for effective teaching and learning to take place.

In some cases, these sentiments have generated envy and jealousy over the difference in remunerations between e-tutors and full-time academic staff. It is the view of the authors, that these are tough conversations that university leadership need to engage with since this group of university staff play important roles in the teaching, learning, assessment, student support and research projects of the university.

It is important to note that as HEIs rush to work with-online tutors as a way of curbing the costs of maintaining a large academic labour force, amidst tight rising budgets, the important question concerns e-tutor quality. The results of this study indicated that BOU has several e-tutors with varied qualifications from different international and local universities. However, the right qualifications do not merit efficiency or guarantee the right delivery on curriculum content due to the changing nature of the ICTs that require constant updates and retraining of academic staff, who use these platforms for teaching, learning, assessment and research.

E-Tutor Governance

The need to govern e-tutors has become pertinent in ODeL institutions both locally and internationally. The researchers noticed that BOU has put in place processes and systems on how best to manage and govern e-tutorship. Documentary evidence shows that e-tutors are playing key roles in the teaching, learning and research strategy of the university. There are e-learning management platforms, as mentioned above, being instituted to regulate their performance, recruitment and professionalisation. This need arose due to the challenges occasioned by Covid-19, which compelled most universities to shift to digitalisation despite being under resourced. In addition, ET9 pointed out that:

Inviting students for the virtual lesson must be done several days before the tutoring date as some students are staying in remote areas. I have noticed that the attendance is better when using WhatsApp than when using email.

This calls for further integration of the BOU LMS and ITS with other social media platforms.

However, and despite these developmental efforts and initiatives, the study results painted a rather challenging picture of the precarious nature of the work and life of these “invisible” e-tutors. It is commendable that they are doing so much with little; however,

there is a need to find ways to reimagine their academic life in order to accomplish better ODeL institutions of today and tomorrow. Although this is a tall order, the study advocates for the university leadership to kick-start the process of change and transformation despite the current uncertainty in higher education.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The following recommendations stemmed from the study.

Redefine E-Tutor Identity

There is a need to redefine e-tutor identity which is currently ill-defined in relation to a sense of belonging to the university. In addition to e-tutor unionisation, they could participate in collaborative online international learning settings (Langesee 2022). This collaboration could be in the form of joint research and publications with peers and students. The e-tutors could also lobby for representation on university statutory committees.

Professionalise E-Tutorship

Currently, higher education is witnessing the increased drive towards professionalising e-tutorship – as students, quality assurance agencies and other stakeholders advocate for quality and qualified academic staff (Helton 2005; Thorpe 2016). It was noted in this study that e-tutors come from different sectors, which means that they bring with them a rich variety of social capital, which the universities can creatively utilise. However, this calls for their professionalisation so that they are able to deliver the kinds of knowledge with which they are equipped.

Increase Global Recruitment

Today, the increase in global recruitment of different categories of academics as e-tutors who are industry-based professionals that do not need to go to the university premises is increasingly becoming inevitable (Bens 2005; Grant 2010; Portugal 2015). This emerging trend in higher education requires relevant institutional policies. E-Tutors offer universities a rich resource of skilled, knowledgeable and experienced personnel (Cunningham 2017) that bring with them various kinds of knowledge that the university can tap on and use to meet its needs.

Realign Promotion

The realignment of promotion of e-tutors into the university professoriate is increasingly becoming inevitable. It is something that universities are grappling with since it involves institutional planning and budgeting. Universities have to find ways of empowering this group of university staff as they come into the main arenas of teaching, learning and research. It can be argued that nothing is impossible so long as the university recognises that it needs this group of workers, who are readily available to offer their services.

Therefore, those who deserve some kind of empowerment could be offered opportunities to do so within the universities.

Suggestions for Future Research

The researchers are convinced that a lot can be done to further integrate e-tutors within the structures and processes of universities in general, and particularly, ODeL institutions. Further research is inevitable in order to develop and test university leadership and governance models that would allow improved recognition of services offered by e-tutors. There is a need for further inquiry into ways of ensuring that e-tutors gain a sense of belonging to the university.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the current study sought to examine how the rapidly changing ODeL institutions could improve the role and status of their e-tutors, despite the competing institutional demands and expectations. The article has argued that e-tutoring in higher education is here to stay despite the gripes from affected stakeholders in the academic industry. It is known that higher education has been grappling with numerous innovations to survive and thrive amidst and post Covid-19. This has brought out possibilities and opportunities for re-imagining of e-tutorship across ODeL institutions. Undoubtedly, HEIs are increasingly going online and the critical utilisation of this emerging human online resource, should be the basis for vouching for reimagining the university of today and tomorrow. Arguably, innovations adopted by the HEIs are dependent on the models and brand of university leadership and governance.

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