

“MIND THE GAP” – EXPERIENCES OF PREVIOUSLY DISADVANTAGED INDIVIDUALS STUDYING BY DISTANCE LEARNING: A CASE OF SELECTED UNISA STUDENTS IN THE EASTERN CAPE

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ABSTRACT

Distance learning is a popular mode of study in South Africa, especially among previously disadvantaged individuals. In a post-democratic South Africa, such individuals have become a priority in efforts of redress and social justice initiatives. An investigation into the experiences of enrolment can be a useful precursor to current and ongoing career counselling support, especially among population cohorts such as previously disadvantaged individuals. The study drew on a narrative inquiry that investigated a sample of 40 previously disadvantaged individuals' experiences of studying via distance learning. Based on the narrative analysis, three main themes emerged as informing the aims of the study mainly to investigate students' experiences of studying via distance learning. First, distance learning, as a mode of study, was not the first choice, with preference being given to non-distance learning institutions. Second, distance learning was chosen due to pragmatic reasons. Finally, being a distance learner was framed as a difficult yet opportunity-yielding experience. Based on these findings, strategies for improving the distance learning experience from a career counselling, teaching, administrative and policy point of view were suggested.

Keywords: distance learning; experiences; narrative analysis; previously disadvantaged; study mode

INTRODUCTION

So when my cousin found out that I will be studying via distance learning, he jokingly said to me “mind the gap” – three years later, there were things in that statement that were so right yet also so wrong. (Female participant in the study)

South Africa attained its independence in 1994, emerging out of the apartheid policy that entailed the ideology of “separateness” (Cottrell 2005, 14-15). Previously disadvantaged individuals include Black Africans, Indians, Chinese South Africans, mixed-race people, women, youths, the disabled, and those living in rural communities (Cottrell 2005). At the core of the apartheid policy was disenfranchising these individuals not only educationally but also concerning career opportunities (Stead and Watson 2006). Some suggestions have been put forward to resolve the challenges faced in post-apartheid South Africa.

First, calls have been made for more legislation such as Affirmative Action (AA) in magnifying the voice of those individuals affected by apartheid (Czakan 2006). At the core of such efforts is the fast-tracking of these individuals into key clusters of the economy to achieve not just parity but also to allow for their participation (Booyesen 2000). Second, the role of education and the acquisition of skills is argued to be important in this expression of economic empowerment (Toni and Olivier 2004). Further, attainment of an education is also deemed to be important especially within the South African Higher Education (HE) context given improving the country’s competitiveness (Chinyamurindi, 2012; 2016a, 2016b). The priority here, through an education and skills acquisition the country can create opportunities for all South Africa’s citizens (South African Department of Higher Education and Training 2014).

Given the focus on education in post-democratic South Africa as a vehicle for economic transformation and social mobility, the South African government has invested a lot of money in building distance learning higher education institutions (South African Department of Education 2010). Most notable is the University of South Africa (UNISA), an institution popular amongst previously disadvantaged individuals (Chinyamurindi 2016a, 2016b; South African Department of Education 2010; South African Department of Higher Education and Training 2013). Recent figures reveal the following:

- a. Consistently between 2009 to 2015, UNISA has had the largest enrolment of students amongst public higher education institutions;
- b. UNISA as a distance learning institution has the largest enrolment of previously disadvantaged individuals by race and gender;
- c. Finally, of the students studying via distance learning, 90% are enrolled at UNISA (South African Department of Higher Education and Training 2017).

Researchers in South Africa and internationally encourage more research in distance education themes given observed research gaps. For instance, Zawacki-Richter (2009) argues the need for more research on aspects of access and equity and how these relate to distance education as a mode of study. Linked to this can be a more renewed empirical focus on student support issues that characterise distance learning enrolment as a focus that needs attention (Zawacki-Richter and Naidu 2016). Within distance education research, calls also exist for developing a continued research agenda in the field (Zawacki-Richter and Anderson 2014). In South Africa, arguments have been made for this to be done between distance learning as a mode of study and the quest for individual career development especially among previously disadvantaged groups (Chinyamurindi 2012; 2016a, 2016b). Given these contextual and empirical arguments, the purpose of this study is to investigate the experiences that influence previously disadvantaged individuals in their studying via distance learning.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Emergence of Distance Learning

The South African government has proposed policy interventions through laws and frameworks to address the challenges around social and economic justice and redressing historical imbalance (South African Department of Education 2010). Notably, post-1994, the South African government prioritised the building and access to education especially to those affected by the segregatory policies of apartheid (South African Department of Higher Education and Training 2013). Msila (2006) attributes the popularity of distance learning not only to historical issues, but also to the nature and challenges of the present South African higher education landscape. These challenges include:

- a. The exorbitant cost of attending national universities (in particular full time) (South African Department of Education 2010);
- b. The teaching methods in national universities, and universities' ability to deliver to graduates the specific skills needed in the employment sector (Pityana 2009); and
- c. The inflexibility of teaching methods used in national universities (mostly full time) when it comes to answering the needs of a diversifying student population (Msila 2006).

Pityana (2009, 7) argues for distance learning as a "promising and practical" intervention not only to solve the problems faced by South Africa, but also those experienced by some African countries. This links to the popularity of UNISA as a mega-university in South Africa as well as the African continent (South African Department of Higher Education and Training, 2011). UNISA's history began in 1873 with the establishment of the University of the Cape of Good Hope (Lawlor 2007), an examining agency for

Oxford and Cambridge universities (myChoice 2011). By 1916, and through an act of law, UNISA was established (Boucher 1973).

FACTORS INFLUENCING CHOICE TO STUDY VIA DISTANCE LEARNING

Theoretical Lens to Understand the Experiences of Distance Learning Enrolment

Regarding factors affecting distance learning enrolment, a number of theoretical lenses can be used in understanding what informs choice. One view attributes the influence of motivational aspects driven by individual desire (Meszaros 2011, 5) as informing the behaviour (including choice) chosen by individuals (Bergh 2011). For instance, individual motivation and desire to self-improve by acquiring higher skills of thinking cannot only lead to a course of study, but also to an institution of study (Trooboff, Cressey and Monty 2015).

Others (Wiers-Jenssen 2015) take a different approach by grouping motivations into push and pull factors amongst the student cohort which subsequently drives behaviour. In a South African HE context, this has been found to refer to factors such as low fees, recognition given to the institution and support facilities provided by the institution (Chinyamurindi 2012). A study conducted in South Africa (Wiese, van Heerden and Jordaan 2010) found the choice factors to be myriad and may include: a) perceived quality of the institution of study; b) ideals by the student of being in a multicultural environment to be important; c) employment prospects after enrolment; d) quality of teaching and e) campus safety and security. The next section specifically details empirical findings on experiences of studying via distance learning as this is the context of analysis for this study.

Empirical Findings on Experiences of Studying via Distance Learning

Previous theorising exists as to the popularity of distance learning. Steyn, Alexander and Rohmn (1996) consider distance learning a suitable mode of study since it meets geographical and cost issues that may affect students. This could be the reason why UNISA is popular in South Africa as the institution uses a regional learning centre approach across the country and beyond (Finlayson 2005).

Others (e.g. Harley 1992) view distance learning institutions like UNISA as serving a mandate of providing equal opportunity and access to education to people at varying career stages. With specific reference to UNISA, Lephala and Pienaar (2007) conducted a study on the reasons why previously disadvantaged groups favour UNISA as a place to study. Two dominant themes emerged: 1) low tuition fees compared with

full-time universities, and 2) distance learning provides flexibility to work and study, which seemed preferable to individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds. These themes highlighted the possibility of a causal link between the popularity of distance education amongst previously disadvantaged groups and their socio-economic standing.

A follow-up study conducted by Lintvelt (2008) identified the following reasons for previously disadvantaged groups' enrolment in distance learning: a) convenience with regard to geographical distance; b) cost consideration in relation to full-time study; c) convenience that allows students to study and work at the same time; d) flexibility with regard to time and e) perception of good quality of education. These findings confirmed previous work (Lephalala and Pienaar 2007).

The choice to study via distance learning could be influenced by the teaching methods adopted by such institutions. The distance learning mode of instruction in South Africa is one that relies on the use of technology and the postal system (where possible) (Schulze 2009). This can work in two ways. First, the use of information communication technology (ICT) to teach and reach a greater number of students. These technologies allow UNISA students to receive learning material from remote locations. Students are encouraged to return at least one assignment for each module they are enrolled for in their course. Second, the number of assignments to be completed is usually dependent on the structure of the course and the preference of the tutor. When the student had submitted the completed assignment, it is then marked and returned by post to the student with the solutions for each exercise. Some major centres in regional towns host satellite broadcasts which are usually live or pre-recorded lectures and tutorials transmitted via television (Wessels 2010).

Though distance learning institutions such as UNISA can serve as a useful hub for the career development of previously disadvantaged individuals, some concerns exist (Chinyamurindi 2016a, 2016b). These concerns serve as constraints to previously disadvantaged individuals. A low completion rate at UNISA has been attributed to factors such as feelings of isolation, the need for more guidance in distance learning over full-time enrolment, and financial difficulties (Lintvelt 2008; Venter and van Heerden 2001).

Venter (2000) also found that UNISA students struggle with basic reading, writing and examination-taking skills in their relevant modules. This problem may be attributable to those students lacking basic proficiency in technology (Lawlor 2007) or South Africa's education system (Ellis 2008). Another recurring problem with UNISA appears to be the lack of non-academic support (Makoe 2007). This is consistent with findings in previous research (e.g. Elsner 2005), which highlighted that UNISA students had little or no interaction with their university offices and seldom participated in student activities. This often leads to a perception that UNISA (as a distance-learning provider) offers "second-rate" education when compared to traditional enrolment (Pityana 2009, 15) given that the completion requirements (regarding timelines) are different for distance learning institutions and full-time universities (South African Department of Education 2010). Thus, the aim of this research is to investigate the experiences of

previously disadvantaged individuals in their distance learning enrolment using the case of the largest distance learning provider, UNISA. Such an inquiry is useful for three reasons.

First, there is an acknowledgement that the optimisation of outcomes is facilitated by understanding processes (Clarke and Hollingsworth 2002). In essence, understanding the outcome and experiences of an individual choosing distance learning as a mode of study can be a useful precursor to the provision of services such as designing reliable, powerful and effective learning programmes (Gravani et al. 2010). Second, understanding experiences, especially those of the distance learning student, has the potential of helping not just the development of distance learning as a mode of study in higher education in general (Bailey et al. 2015). Given the South African context, this has been noted as having constraints that affect factors influencing the choice of an institution of study such as cost (Chinyamurindi 2016a) and perceived quality (Wiese et al. 2010). An understanding of the experiences from the lens of the student can potentially inform interventions that can be provided to enhance the quality of education given to the student (Chinyamurindi 2016b). Finally, calls exist for more research on understanding these experiences and how they affect adult learners in higher education (Gravani et al. 2012). Such research efforts may be critical in improving services offered to students as customers of HE institutions (Ansary, et al. 2014). Therefore, the overall research question that guided this study was: what are the experiences (given the South African context) that influence previously disadvantaged individuals in their distance learning studies?

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative case study methodology adopting an interpretive philosophy was used for this research following the exploratory technique (Creswell 2009). This allowed for a way of seeking an “understanding” of the world through the “perceptions, attitudes and experiences of individuals” (Sheard 2011, 623). This involves within-case design analyses exploring how participants make sense of phenomena around them, either through text or the spoken word (Silverman 2013). Each participant interview was viewed as a separate case study and analysed independently of the others (Merriam 1998), and this provided the researcher with the opportunity to investigate participant experiences as part of their distance learning enrolment.

Research Context

The research project was conducted at a UNISA regional campus. Contact was made with authorities at UNISA to ask for permission to carry out the study, this also led to the granting of ethical clearance from the same institution. Given that UNISA has a number of satellite campuses across South Africa, the Port Elizabeth campus in the Eastern

Cape province of South Africa was chosen due to the researcher being familiar with the city of Port Elizabeth.

Participant Sampling and Data Collection

A total of 40 participants took part in the study. The breakdown of these participants was: 18 were males (45%); 22 were females (55%); age range was 19-52; average age was 28; 35 Black Africans (87%), and five Coloureds (13%). A convenience sampling approach was used relying on those participants that were “accessible and available” (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2007, 114). Participants had to be registered students at UNISA. Contact and recruitment of the 40 participants were made on the Port Elizabeth UNISA campus. Participants had to fit the criteria recognised by the law of being previously disadvantaged, whether by race or by gender (Cottrell 2005); participants were excluded if they did not meet these criteria. Participants were approached and given an explanation and purpose of the study. Upon agreeing to be part of the study, participants first had to show a valid student card before interviews commenced in a dedicated interview room provided by the institution.

An unstructured interview approach was adopted as such an approach tends to prevent the researcher from imposing any predetermined assumptions (Stead and Watson 2006). Unstructured interviews helped to allow participants to share their situations freely from their points of view (Fraenkel and Wallen 2006). The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. In addition to this, notes were made to accompany the recording. The study (including interviews) was conducted from October 2011 to March 2012, and each interview lasted between 55 minutes and 2 hours.

Strategies to Ensure Data Quality

To ensure the quality of the data, four steps were taken. First, initial interview questions were pretested with a sample of 10 students (non-participants) who fit the same profile as those interviewed in the main part of the research. Second, to ensure credible data, all interview data were recorded and transcribed verbatim within 24 hours. Third, after data transcription, participants were emailed a copy of the transcript to verify its accuracy. Finally, before and during the study, reflexivity was conducted to safeguard objectivity and avoid researcher bias (Taylor, Gibbs and Lewins 2005); this was also done to ensure sensitivity concerning how data was collected, analysed and represented (Mays and Pope 2000). In doing so, comprehensive notes were taken at all critical stages of the research for additional depth and quality.

Data Analysis

The interviews were exported into QSR International’s NVivo 9, a useful data analysis and management software package for dealing with masses of text, graphic,

audio and video data (Reuben and Bobat 2014). A data analysis procedure based on three levels of meaning-making, as adopted in previous research, was used (e.g. Chinyamurindi 2012, 2016a, 2016b; McCormack 2000).

Level 1 was helpful in developing a good understanding of the career development experience of each story. This was done by rereading each interview and listening to audio recordings. Such a process allowed for the identification of “markers” of the stories (McCormack 2000, 221) and answering the question about each interview: “What kind of story is this?” (Thornhill, Clare and May 2004, 188). This consisted of an evaluation of each transcript as being grouped as a story of a) hope; b) tragedy; c) failure, or d) success. This was based on the experiences expressed by each participant. Level 2 was achieved through classifying responses from participants into meaningful categories (Nachmias and Nachmias 1996). Finally, on level 3, the researcher analysed the content of the gathered narrative accounts and themes (McCormack 2000) by identifying themes and using quotes based on consistencies across participant stories (Rhodes 2000).

RESULTS

After the analysis of the data had been collected, three main themes emerged. First, distance learning was illustrated in the participant stories and narratives as not being the preferred mode of study for tertiary education. Distance learning was chosen due to pragmatic reasons, and this formed the second theme of this study. Ironically, the final theme was of participants framing distance learning as being challenging, yet offering an opportunity for individual social advancement. These three themes receive attention next with illustrating quotes. In order to arrive at these identified themes, focus prompts were used (Kane and Trochim 2007). These prompts consisted of phrases (in view of the research question) that assisted in the generation of codes and subsequently the identified themes. One prompt was used:

Previously disadvantaged distance learners like me have experienced distance learning as...

Using this approach of focus prompts there allowed not just the generation of codes into themes, but also for the purpose of presenting the discussion of these themes in the following section. The first theme to emerge revealed that participants did not prefer distance learning as a mode of study, but would rather have chosen a full-time university ahead of one that offers distance learning. Participant 12 shared:

I only started hearing about distance learning after I had received my high school results; for me, the big universities I knew were the University of Pretoria, University of Johannesburg and Stellenbosch. So naturally, the preference was to get into these universities and not a distance learning university.

Another participant revealed prejudice to distance learning as a mode of study and explained why:

For me, distance learning was not part of the plan. My friend told me of her cousin who was studying via distance learning and how she was always doing well, but at the end of her qualification, she struggled to get a job. I think the struggle may have been due to her studying by distance, I think she was not taken seriously, and so my first priority was to avoid distance learning. (Participant 9)

Another interesting quote around the perception of distance learning was from one participant who narrated the ensuing conflict between him and his parents around the notion of distance learning:

You see, my parents were from the old school and studied by correspondence through private colleges. I did not want that. When it came to choosing an institution of higher learning, I knew that I wanted anything but correspondence learning or even so-called distance learning. I did not want to be a distance learner period. (Participant 22)

These three quotes (Participants 12, 9, 22) illustrate the general narrative generated around not only distance learning, but also individual choice. The second theme (related to the first) reveals their decision to consider distance learning to be a compromise. Given their disadvantaged status, participants narrated the intersection between individual factors and pragmatic concerns as motivating their choice of distance learning as a mode of study. These factors included a) poor high school grades resulting in a failure to make it into full-time universities; b) lack of funds for studying at full-time universities resulting in distance learning enrolment which was cheaper, and finally, c) the perception that full-time university enrolment would not allow for flexibility to work and study, which distance learning studies would allow. The following quotes reveal factors that explain how distance learning served as a compromise to the preferred full-time enrolment:

When I got my matric [high school], I realised that I had not done well to make it into a full-time university. I guess plan B, though not the preferred one, was the most practical, UNISA. I think UNISA is a much better distance learning provider than other distance learning institutions. (Participant 2)

I did not have funds to study in a full-time university such as the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU). Think of it this way: I have to pay fees, budget for accommodation in the residence and my upkeep. This is not going to be possible even if I got student funding. The next best choice was UNISA, which I think competes well with NMMU. (Participant 35)

I would have loved to be in a university with full contact. However, I am single parent and also a career woman. There was no way studying full-time would work for me. Our company [Name supplied] has an agreement with UNISA. So studying with UNISA worked best for me as I could study at my own convenience while purs[u]ing my career goals and also being a mom. (Participant 16)

Finally, participants were asked to narrate their experiences of being a distance learner in relation to the experience and issues of the choice of institution to study at that they had described earlier. In general, though the second theme refers to some positive aspects of enrolling for distance learning, especially with UNISA, the third theme reveals an irony. Participants generally heralded distance learning as a mode of study giving them an opportunity to further their development albeit an opportunity marred with difficulty. Table 1 reveals the nexus between opportunity and struggle and some illustrating quotes around these.

Table 1: The nexus between opportunity and struggle

Participant	Illustrating Quotes
2	"Studying at UNISA has helped me get my first degree and a promotion at work. However, it's not easy; I have to juggle many balls at work, school and home. Most times, I struggle to balance all these but eventually make it."
27	"...distance learning works well on paper and my financial situation. Most times, I realise I need to be strict with myself. At times, I just wish I could sit in a classroom with a lecturer in front of me not a tutor in Bloemfontein or somewhere whom I do not see."
21	"In the end, it boils down to discipline, with full-time learning the lecturer and other stands force you to be disciplined. With distance learning, I am on my own. It's an opportunity to study further – at times a difficult one and my age does not help."
10	"We had a postal strike, and that was a worrying period for me. I could not get my materials on time. I guess that was the difficulty of studying via distance. Though UNISA did their best, I struggled. Something that won't happen at a full-contact campus."

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this work show support of previous work in the same field (e.g. Msila 2006; Chinyamurindi 2016a, b) detailing cost consideration as a barrier towards access to education. However, uniquely in this work, participants revealed that their first choice with regard to the choice of institution to study was not the distance learning mode. In essence, this experience appears to illustrate the struggles that characterise student enrolment issues in universities (Byrne and Flood 2005), and the complexity of these issues noted in other studies (Wiese et al. 2010). Distance learning thus emerges as a negotiated choice after considering individual circumstances. The context of challenge limits enactment of choice, especially in higher education (Bailey et al. 2015; Msila 2006).

Conversely, the attainment of tertiary education through distance learning occupied a place of importance in the stories of the previously disadvantaged distance learners. Distance learning based on these participant stories serves a pragmatic function that

cannot be divorced from individual needs or the circumstances surrounding their disadvantage. Further, the experiences that accompany the distance learning enrolment is framed within a space not just for acquiring an education but also aiming for mobility away from a life of disadvantage to a better one, considering the individual situation and background in South Africa.

This current research study shows support for previous factors found to influence not only choice in the mode of study, but also the experience of learning. This study especially frames cost considerations (Steyn et al. 1996) and the individual situation of poverty (Chinyamurindi 2012) as affecting these two. Further, distance learning appears to be chosen as it allows for individual situations, such as the need for general flexibility (Lephalala and Pienaar 2007), time flexibility (Lintveldt 2008), and accommodation of individual career pursuits (Harley 1992). In essence, a range of intrinsic and extrinsic factors (Bergh 2011) appear to shape the experiences of distance learning enrolment.

The research study findings also magnify the challenges that exist as part of the experience of being a distance learner. Notably, the lack of support and isolation can be flagged as key concerns with the distance learning enrolment (Makoe 2007). The participant experiences around these two issues subsequently create not only a barrier towards teaching and learning (Chinyamurindi 2016a, 2016b) but also individual career development and social advancement. However, though these challenges may serve as obstacles, participants highlighted that the opportunity to study was key.

The findings from the research study are likely to be of value to career counsellors who work with clients presenting challenges, such as those shown by distance learners used in this study. Understanding how distance learners construct their careers using a narrative and storytelling approach provided a magnifying lens on experiences around this construction, and the implication is in helping these individuals not just through their distance learning enrolment, but also supports their career development. This is also important and prudent in informing policy efforts on a grand scale concerning the implication of distance learning intervention, not just for inclusion and access to education but also as a vehicle for career development, especially for those previously disadvantaged in South Africa.

This research study has some limitations that deserve to be noted. First, the sample cannot be generalised to fit the entire population of either distance learners or those who were previously disadvantaged in South Africa. The point here was to work with a sample available, making a theoretical argument for the use of narrative as a research method in understanding individual experiences. Future research could extend this study by comparing students outside universities such as UNISA, but also by adopting a distance learning approach. Future research can specifically focus on the career development of previously disadvantaged individuals studying by distance learning, for example, first years only, to understand the issues they face, especially at such a formative stage and suggest interventions.

Notwithstanding such limitations, this study places importance on understanding the role of context and disadvantage in the experiences of previously disadvantaged individuals choosing distance learning as a form of enrolment. This study also offers an interesting exploration of how these experiences influence enactment of choice in South Africa, thus appealing to the academic audience.

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