Implementing Open Distance and E-Learning in Teacher Training Institutions in Eswatini

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Abstract

Technological advancement and the advent of the internet led higher education institutions to transform from open and distance learning (ODL) to open distance and e-learning (ODeL). Distance education (DE) is not a new phenomenon. Its history dates back to the 1700s and 1800s when course content was delivered by traditional mail, and later by visual and auditory gadgets such as televisions and radios (Casey 2008, 46).

The twenty-first century marked the massive evolution of digital knowledge and network society which altered the scope of DE. Instead of reaching masses of learners through traditional mail, radio and television, a personal approach to reaching individual learners became possible. The prominence of teacher-centred education diminished and was replaced with learner-centred education. Availability of technologies such as laptops and tablets allowed for the migration of DE to ODL which gave learners the flexibility to choose the medium, time and place of learning. New learning models such as e-learning, mobile and universal learning led to transformation by some institutions from ODL to ODeL.

The University of South Africa (Unisa) was the first university in Africa to offer DE since 1946 (Nyerere, Gravenir, and Mse 2012, 185). Unisa’s success inspired other African countries because towards the new millennium Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries such as Zimbabwe and Botswana established fully fledged ODL universities. In Eswatini, the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET 2018) enacted an education policy in 2018 that calls for the introduction of ODL in all existing and new institutions of higher learning. The policy did not give guidelines on the ways in which institutions were to implement ODL. In the interim Eswatini does not have a fully fledged ODL university.

In mid-June 2020 during the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown and movement restrictions, the MOET instructed institutions of higher learning to introduce ODeL to mitigate the challenge of lack of access to education facilities by students. This instruction came without any policy guidelines. In light of this background, we conducted the study to explore the ways in which teacher training institutions in Eswatini implemented ODeL under the prevailing circumstances.
The study was situated within the social constructivism, connectivism and online collaborative learning theories. Vygotsky (as quoted in Picciano 2017) described the learning process in social constructivism as setting up a zone of proximal development in which the teacher, the learner and a problem to be solved exist. The teacher provides an environment in which the learner and others can construct knowledge necessary to solve the problem (Picciano 2017, 166). The connectivism theory and the online collaborative learning theory align with the social constructivism theory. Both theories believe in the connection of networks through the internet to enhance knowledge construction and sharing by learners through collaborations (Picciano 2017, 170). It can then be argued that the internet and network connections that foster learning collaborations, knowledge creation and problem solutions are vital elements of the ODeL environment.

The interpretivist research philosophy guided the study to gather data in the natural setting and context of the phenomenon. A qualitative approach allowed us to go to teacher training institutions and gather in-depth information directly from the participants (Tichapondwa 2013, 106). A multiple-case study design was used to focus on three purposively selected teacher training institutions that had started implementing ODeL. Data were collected using in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with purposively selected participants who had taken part in the implementation of ODeL. These participants included four members of management and three Information Technology officers who were interviewed, and six lecturers and six students who participated in focus group discussions. We used a thematic approach to analyse and present data in a verbatim and narrative manner. Permission to conduct the study was granted by the management of the institutions. The participants signed consent forms that contained ethical guidelines. Code names were used during the data analysis to protect the identities of the participants (McMillan and Schumacher 2014, 370).

The findings revealed that the introduction and implementation of ODeL in teacher training institutions in Eswatini were reactive measures to mitigate the Covid-19 lockdown and restricted movements. Out of the three institutions that participated in the study only one institution maintained learner engagement during the Covid-19 lockdown using the Moodle Learning Management System. The other two institutions tried to use Google Classroom, but they encountered challenges and discontinued it. The major challenges experienced by institutions were the lack of internet accessibility, poor connectivity, the lack of digital gadgets by students who came from disadvantaged communities, expensive data bundles, technophobia and illiteracy of some lecturers and students, and the absence of guiding ODeL policies from MOET and institutions.

In this study, we concluded that ODeL was hastily implemented in institutions in Eswatini as a reactive move to the Covid-19 lockdown without a strategy and policy framework from MOET and institutions. We also concluded that institutions had not yet prepared and developed adequate capacity to successfully implement an ODeL initiative.
In this study, we recommended the following:

- institutions should use blended learning while building capacity to gradually introduce ODeL;
- the MOET should enact a policy with guidelines and a framework for implementing ODeL;
- the government should build an ODL university to align with other SADC countries; and
- institutions should train students and staff and capacitate them with e-learning knowledge and skills.

**Keywords:** open distance e-learning institutions; Eswatini

**References**


