

## **University of Namibia Academics' Perceptions of Face-to-Face Learning and Open and Distance Learning (ODL)**

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**Abstract:** *This article examines the attitudes held by faculty academics towards face-to-face learning and distance education at the University of Namibia (UNAM). In Namibia, Open and Distance Learning (ODL) has become a means of meeting the demand for mass education across its vast geography and widely distributed population. Face-to-face academics have less positive attitudes towards ODL and view ODL students' learning experiences as less rigorous compared to those in conventional higher learning institutions. This article drew from the views of academics who are currently working with ODL students, and those who have never been involved in ODL. 46 academics responded to a 40-item ODL-related knowledge, attitude and behaviour questionnaire. Results indicated that participants view ODL as a valid educational tool but a cumbersome task.*

**Keywords:** *Open and Distance Learning, Dual Mode, Perceptions, Face-to-face academics*

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### **1. INTRODUCTION**

This study investigates the perceptions held by face-to-face academic staff at a dual mode university towards Open and Distance Learning (ODL). There has been a continuous challenge in making face-to-face academics deliver the same commitment and quality of didactic support they have towards their full time students to that of their distance-learning student counterparts. Centre for External Studies (CES) students were treated as 'those'/'outside' students and are always compared to 'their'/'inside' students. This approach has resulted in strenuous relationships between ODL staff and face-to-face academics. Subsequently it has raised the concern of how face-to-face academics perceive ODL and students registered through this mode. The paper drew on the perceptions of face-to-face academics at the University of Namibia who are rendering services to the Centre for External Studies (CES), the distance wing of this institution. The theory of attitude and behaviour purports that the determining of perceptions explains the nature of behaviour towards a situation (Azjen, 2002). The rationale is that perceptions generated from this study would assist CES to adequately support face-to-face academics and foster healthy academic relationships towards the enhancement of Open and Distance Learning in Higher Education in Namibia.

Distance education is practised in all parts of the world to provide study opportunities for those who cannot always take part in the conventional classroom teaching (King, 2012; Pardasani, Goldkind, Heyman and Cross-Denny, 2012; Gemmell, Sandars, Taylor and Reed, 2010; Xiao and Reed, 2011; Zhao, 2011; Maritim, 2009). In Namibia, Open and Distance Learning (ODL) has increasingly become a means of meeting the demand for mass education across its vast geography and widely distributed population (SAIDE, 2012). Students who study through ODL are geographically separated from their lecturers, a situation which subsequently requires that learning resources and administrative support need to be organised in advance (King, 2012). In their attempts of seeking higher education, for many of these students, distance education creates a distinctly flexible and alternative opportunity for current and previously disadvantaged groups

and the marginalised to upgrade their knowledge and skills in various disciplines. It is therefore imperative that the provision of such an alternative education should be of high quality. The premise is that ODL would not only improve their own life chances, but would positively impacts on the broader agenda for social and economic development, especially in Namibia (van Zyl, Els and Blignaut, 2012; Maritim, 2009; Tau, 2008). For the University of Namibia to expand its responsibility to a broader citizenry through distance education, it has to consider the different dimensions and the roles of disparate faculties. The successful marriage of conventional educational modes with ODL practices could only result in a variegated professional status, and a perceptible maintenance of common academic standards.

Despite the expanding adoption of distance education by Namibians, there has been some controversy around the quality of delivery and instructional design (King, 2012; Badu-Nyarko, 2006). Many conventional students have questioned the educational equivalence of distance education courses when compared to the perceived quality of traditional classroom packages (Hockridge, 2013; Pardasani, Goldkind, Heyman and Cross-Denny, 2012; Jones, Lindner, Murphy and Dooley, 2002). Not only students, but academics too, have less positive attitudes towards distance education. They held the views that distance education students' learning experiences are less compared to those in conventional higher learning institutions (King, 2012; Badu – Nyarko, 2006). King (2012) and Badu-Nyarko (2006) separately found that academics in faculties fear that distance education students adversely affect the accreditation of the degree and that such courses are poorly prepared by under-qualified people. Already in 1982 Gibbs pointed out that academic staff from full faculties often feels that they are overworked, to the extent that additional loads from distance education are perceived as exacerbating the workload. In addition, King (2012) and Rockwell, Schauer, Fritz and Max (1999) found that the perceived lack of institutional support and training, inadequate compensation and incentive structures, loss of autonomy and control of the curriculum, lack of technical training and support, and lack of release time are some of the obstacles that impinge upon effective and quality provision of distance education. These studies highlight the negative attitudes and subsequent non-committal behaviours of faculty academics towards distance education. Unfortunately, little is quantitatively and qualitatively established about the attitudes of faculty academic staff at the University of Namibia, hence the urgent need for a study such as the current one.

## **2. BACKGROUND**

The Centre for External Studies (CES) was created in 1992 by the University of Namibia (UNAM) to ensure greater access to higher education and equity for students from various backgrounds. The mission of CES is to provide accessible quality higher education and to create opportunities for professional development to adult members of the community by the provision of open learning through distance and continuing education programmes. CES caters for the educational needs of people who, for a variety reasons, cannot come full-time to any of the University campuses for further studies. The CES operates through two departments: the Department of Material Development and Instructional Design, and the Department of Student Support Education. In fulfilling their duties, these two departments are supported by the CES Student Administration unit. The two departments collaborate with internal faculties of the UNAM and outside partners in offering formal courses to external students by means of ODL methods (CES, 2013). The academic staff who are responsible for faculty contact courses on a full time basis also tutor the distance students enrolled for the similar courses.

The University of Namibia, as a dual mode institution, operates on a Full Time Equivalence (FTE) system which determines the load of faculty academic staff. Those academic staff members who meet the required number of teaching hours on a full-time basis are remunerated for their services and those who do not have a full teaching load are obliged to render services to CES as part of their teaching load. Academic staff who write materials for distance students are also remunerated. As insider researchers, we experienced various challenges including delays in the marking of distance students' assignments, tutors not turning up at vacation schools, including academics expressing unwillingness to assist open and distance learners. Unfortunately, nothing has been documented thus far on these issues at UNAM. As a result little is known about the attitudes of faculty academic staff at the University of Namibia towards Distance Education, therefore this study was conducted.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

The study employed a quantitative and descriptive survey design. A quantitative approach was used with the aim of generating quantitative questionnaires that consisted of closed - ended and Likert scale questions (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000). The Likert scale was used to measure attitudes, opinions, views and beliefs of UNAM faculty academics towards distance education (Robson, 2002). The survey method was used to focus upon 'collecting and analysing quantitative data in a single study in order to understand the problem better' (Cresswell, 2008). The purpose of this research was to establish the attitudes of a clustered sample of academics from all faculties at the different UNAM campuses, towards distance education.

There are approximately 200 academic staff members employed by UNAM at various faculties and centres responsible for fulltime and distance students since UNAM is a dual mode institution. The study sample consisted of academics who are currently working with CES, those who have worked with CES before and those who have never worked with open distance students. This approach intended to establish the diverse attitudes from these three groups in order to give an understanding of why some staff are motivated and others are discouraged by the modalities of distance education.

The study sample was selected using stratified sampling. UNAM academics were grouped into homogenous subsets such as gender (males and females), by academic levels (lecturers, senior lecturers and professors) and by faculty specifications (education, law, humanities, health, economic and management sciences, sciences, agriculture and engineering). The questionnaires were distributed to all faculties in order to capture the spectrum of views across UNAM (Cresswell, 2008).

The study involved the development and administration of a questionnaire to collect quantitative data. The questionnaire was designed to assess variables associated with ODL practices and participants' beliefs and opinions about distance education. This in turn assisted with the identification of current attitudes held towards open and distance learning. The questionnaire also sought to establish any intentions on the part of the lecturing staff to be involved in Open and Distance Learning. Statistical analysis was used to analyse data. Data is presented in table format as outlined in the questionnaire.

### 4. RESULTS

Surveys were returned by 46 (23% of the University population) academics from various faculties in the University. The respondents represented a cross-section of the five host faculties, namely education, humanities, nursing, economics and management sciences and sciences. The host faculty of the research participants appears under the biographical data of the study. Although effort was made to involve all faculties, the return rate was low as appears in table 1. It is worth mentioning that those faculties with high returns are the faculties with programmes housed within the Centre for External Studies which could have influenced their participation.

**Table1.** Faculty Academics Distribution (n=46)

Faculties	Percentage %
Education	52%
Humanities	9%
Economics & Managements Science	15%
Science	11%
Nursing	13%
Agriculture	0
Engineering	0
Law	0

This paper managed to attract fairly balanced gender participation: 54% were female respondents and 46% were male participants. Many of them were within the age category of 31 to 40 (54%). The second largest age category was 41 – 50 (35%) followed by 51 and over (7%) and finally the youngest group with age range 20 – 30 (4%). This indicates quite a diverse group of academics. The second question focused on the academics' years of experiences in distance education.

**Table2.** Descriptive Statistics of Participants' Perceptions on ODL (n=46)

Views towards distance education dimensions	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Not sure
1. Distance education instruction and learning is as good as face-to-face	17%	48%	24%	9%	2%
2. Distance education increases the flexibility of teaching and learning process	28%	67%	3%	0	2%
3. Distance education enhances the pedagogic value of a course	9%	52%	26%	9%	4%
4. Compared to conventional classroom courses distance education creates better learning experiences	7%	35%	46%	8%	4%
5. Distance education increases the quality of teaching and learning because it integrates all forms of media print, audio, video	7%	43%	36%	7%	7%
6. Distance Education improves performance of educators	9%	50%	25%	9%	7%
7. Higher Education students perform better through distance learning as compared to fulltime classes.	7%	17%	59%	9%	8%
8. When compared to traditional education, distance education provides students with a higher quality of course materials	4%	45%	33%	9%	9%
9. I am motivated to teach distance education courses	26%	54%	9%	4%	7%
10. I have adequate distance education instructional skills	28%	41%	20%	0	11%
11. The advantages of distance education outweigh the disadvantages	13%	50%	24%	2%	11%
12. I would rather teach in a face-to-face environment rather than teaching through distance education	28%	19%	39%	7%	7%
13. Delivering distance education instruction is stressful	6%	34%	30%	17%	13%
14. Distance education takes a lot of time from my full-time faculty responsibility	13%	26%	46%	11%	4%
15. Remuneration for work done through CES is worth the effort.	9%	7%	50%	13%	21%
16. I would stay away from distance education as much as possible	2%	5%	56%	33%	4%
17. Distance education causes the quality of education to decline	4%	11%	52%	26%	7%
18. UNAM values distance education	9%	52%	21%	7%	11%
19. I would like to know more about distance education	30%	52%	12%	4%	2%

The average years they have in working with open and distance is learning (ODL) is 10 years, with the lowest years of experience being 2 years and the highest number of years being 20. Although 76% indicated that they have experience in ODL, only 31% indicated that they received training in working in ODL environment. When asked how comfortable they would be in tutoring in an ODL environment, an overwhelming 46% indicated that they were very

comfortable, followed by 36% indicating that they would be comfortable. This adds up to 79% level of comfortability. Only 2% indicated that they would be uncomfortable and 5% were not sure.

Data shows an impression that any person could teach in ODL environment without receiving training and be confident in it. This point is discussed later in relation to other findings. Participants claimed that they were prepared to tutor in an ODL environment because they were familiar with:

- Lesson presentation
- Tutoring in-service BETD Training
- Assessment of assignments and micro teaching
- Materials development
- The role of the tutor
- Tutoring students on e-learning and
- Content delivery for Bachelor of Education (Hons) students

With a few exceptions to ODL specific training or exposure, there were indications of random courses that are believed to have equipped participants for their roles as tutors. A relationship can be drawn between the types of training that are believed to equip participants and their level of comfortability to tutor in ODL.

Participants were also requested to complete the questionnaire on ODL related beliefs and attitudes linked to a five point Likert scale (i.e. 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree' with 'not sure' as a last option). For collating the interpretation of the results, the responses for "strongly agree" and "agree" are considered as "agreed" and "strongly disagree" and "disagree" are considered as "disagree" and "not sure" is considered as "do not know." Results emerging from the questionnaire are shown in table 2.

## **5. DISCUSSION**

The University of Namibia is a dual instructional mode institution, and it established the CES as an academic centre aimed at ensuring access to higher education and equity for adult learners from various educational backgrounds. This paper investigated the attitudes of faculty academics towards ODL at UNAM. Respondents' biographical data shows the proportions of academics in relation to gender, age range, teaching experience and training in ODL. According to the results, it seems to be a perception that tutoring in ODL needs no specific or specialized training. A workshop on lesson presentation, materials development or even initial teacher training such as a Bachelor of Education is perceived as sufficient prerequisites for a lecturer to become a tutor in ODL. According to Chikoko and Chiome (2013) ODL tutors need to be well trained for them to motivate and engage pedagogically with adult students. This means that quality tutorials are a very important component in ODL tutoring.

Nespor (1987) has argued that beliefs are far more influential than knowledge in determining how individuals organize and define tasks and problems. Exploring this notion in higher education in general can provide useful insights into the factors that lead to successful change. Pajares (1992) argues that academic staff beliefs can and should become an important focus of educational inquiry. Exploring the academics' beliefs in relation to ODL practices could provide an enriched understanding of those academics' thought processes, teaching practices, change and orientations towards ODL teaching. Below are themes developed from the beliefs established in the questionnaire regarding open and distance learning.

## **6. WILLINGNESS TOWARDS TUTORING IN ODL**

Data in this study portrays a very positive attitude towards ODL. This is evident from items 1 to 3 in table 1. Participants have a strong belief (65%) that distance education is as good as face-to-face; it is flexible in teaching and learning (95%) and enhances the pedagogic value of a course (61%). There is even a further belief that distance education can increase the performance of

educators. This aligns with Abedalaziz and Muaidi (2012) who are of the view that a person's willingness to support a course is determined by their beliefs, which informs attitudes. The data from this study provides findings that are on the contrary. In item 9, 80% of participants indicated that they are motivated to tutor in distance education. 89% in item 16 indicated that they oppose the view that they would disassociate themselves with distance education. In item 18, 61% of the respondents indicated that the University values distance education which could also be associated with them as individuals. In addition, in item 19, 82% of the participants indicated their willingness to know more about distance education. From this group of participants, it seems that there is a strong sense of willingness among academics to be part of an ODL system. Being willing is one side of the coin; engaging actively with a quality approach is the other side of the coin that needs further investigation.

## **7. ABILITY IN THE ROLE OF A TUTOR**

According to Bandura (1977) self-efficacy is concerned with a person's perceived ability to execute a particular behaviour that will produce certain outcomes. The confidence that an individual has in their skills to perform a particular behaviour will motivate them to perform such behaviour (Romi and Leyser, 2006). It is critical to point out that although participants in the biographical detail indicate a strong sense of confidence in tutoring in ODL, a mere 36% indicated that they practically received training in their role as tutor. Does this create an impression that anyone can tutor in an ODL programme without specific training? King (2012) highlights that much understanding is needed on the role and functionality of interaction and interactivity in ODL as such traits affect ODL completion success rates among the students. Chikoko and Chiome (2013) also elaborate that it is very important to train tutors on adult and distance education methodologies, including modern technologies constitutive of protocols in ODL teaching. Researchers as CES staff have also observed that UNAM faculty academics need be trained in ODL activities. They further observed that during the annual tutor training, the same academics attend, who constitute only 20% of the tutor population. With the assignment monitoring system, CES identified that those who do not attend tutor training are the same candidates who do not comply with the standards laid. This point is further illustrated in item 10, where 69% of the participants believe that they have ODL related instructional skills while only 36% indicated they practically got ODL training.

It appears that tutoring through ODL is an inherent skill possessed by anyone with a tertiary qualification. Such beliefs could impact negatively on the quality of delivery strategies and what is expected of a tutor in ODL.

## **8. VIEWS ON CHALLENGES IN DISTANCE EDUCATION**

Challenges in this article are hitches experienced by students and academics in the ODL environment. Bezuidenhout (2013) narrates that students and academics in ODL institutions are experiencing feelings of self-doubt, alienation, dehumanisation and loss of esteem in their day to day operations. Regardless of the strong sense of willingness portrayed, a relative proportion (47%) of the participants indicated in item 12 that they would rather teach in the conventional face-to-face mode than tutor through ODL. This could be influenced by the perception in item 13 that tutoring through ODL is stressful (40%). 35% indicated in item 14 that tutoring through ODL takes a lot of their time.

Nearly half (49%) of the participants believe that materials provided to distance education is not of a high quality. Even in item 4, 54% of the participants indicated that distance education does not offer a rich learning experience. It is inevitable that participants would view ODL in a negative sense if the pedagogical experience is not rich and if the material is not of a high quality, considering that students heavily depend on such materials. This factor could further exacerbate the challenges in distance education and subsequent feeling to rather teach through the conventional face-to-face mode.

## **9. WHAT DO THESE VIEWS MEAN TO UNAM?**

This study established that academics have a general positive view on the contribution of ODL to distance education. There is, however, a need to address specific issues related to ODL. Amongst others are the views that distance education needs no specific skill and therefore no training to be

effective as tutors. In turn, this could be the very reason why specific negative views are held. It is through training that, for example, issues on quality material are addressed, creative approaches to ODL experiences are introduced and pedagogics is merged.

Training also provides a broader understanding into the nature of students in ODL that would motivate educators to have a better understanding and introduce creative supporting tools (Bezuidenhout, 2013; Chikoko and Chiome, 2013). Most of the training offered in ODL is of an elementary nature and it is time for UNAM to develop a fully-fledged accredited course in Open and Distance Learning. The beliefs uncovered in this study constitute an initial research agenda from which more nuanced conversations are likely to be stimulated, hence this study serves as a springboard for further research to unpack each of these perceptions in an attempt to change them.

This study was born from the frustration that some approaches and actions by fulltime academic staff at UNAM were not acceptable. CES experienced delays in the marking of distance assignments, tutors did not turn up at vacation schools, academics expressed blatant unwillingness to execute tasks assigned to them by their faculties, amongst others. It is ironic that there is a strong sense of willingness but the reality indicates the inverse. This cul-de-sac therefore needs a creative negotiation out of maze.

## **10. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

This study offers research opportunities regarding attitudes and perceptions of University academics towards ODL. UNAM academics in general hold considerable positive beliefs about ODL. There are, nevertheless, other beliefs within their experience in ODL that influences their approaches in their role as tutors. CES and UNAM at large have to explore these items on an individual basis to bring about the desired change and enhance a positive image for ODL within Higher Education. There is a need to further this study in examining what other realities there are in terms of workload and subsequent pressures associated with it. UNAM, as one of the ODL providers in the country, needs to choose and create a proper ODL teaching and learning environment. It is further emphasised that ODL providers and partners should facilitate dialogical learning support and engage in further research in the provision of ODL programmes and courses.

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