

Chapter 28

Professional Development Needs of Distance Education Staff: A Mixed-Methods Explanatory Sequential Study

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ABSTRACT

This chapter disseminates the findings of a mixed-method sequential research study that was undertaken in a distance learning context in South Africa. This research investigates the future roles of distance education academic staff and their perceptions of their own competencies in these roles. In addition, the research seeks to identify the required professional development for preparation for these future roles. A mixed-method explanatory sequential design was used so that multiple perspectives could be investigated. Mixed-methods research involves collecting quantitative and qualitative data and then integrating the different sets of results to best address the research questions. This approach is grounded in the paradigm of pragmatism, which is a philosophy for integrating different perspectives and approaches. The integration of the results indicated synergy between the quantitative and qualitative data and provided further metacognitive insights into the future roles of the distance education respondents.

INTRODUCTION

Distance education (DE) was first described by Holmberg (1974), with the fundamental element being the geographical and physical separation of the teacher and the learner. This separation occurs whether the mode of instruction is print-based, media-based or online. Traditionally, the correspondence mode of instruction has been the predominant one, particularly in developing countries such as South Africa.

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However, many higher education institutions (HEIs) have moved away from the correspondence mode and have sought to incorporate digital technologies in the delivery of their teaching. The University of South Africa (Unisa) is the largest DE university in South Africa and the university is in the process of transforming from a print to a paperless environment. The term ODeL is the acronym for Unisa's system for teaching and learning and stands for Open Distance and e-learning.

The COVID-19 pandemic that emerged early in 2020, acted as a catalyst for HEIs to move predominantly into online teaching, as face-to-face learning was no longer viable. Initially, most people were caught unprepared for total online learning and teaching and simply used what is termed emergency remote learning (Bozkurt et al., 2020). COVID-19 has changed the teaching and learning landscape and it has been suggested that we might never go back to the "old way" of teaching and learning again. Many lecturers now work from home, in-person examinations are no longer allowed – the future is online.

Although the concept of Open Distance e-Learning (ODeL) has been mooted for several years, it was always perceived to be future-oriented, particularly among HEIs whose primary form of teaching was either via correspondence or a face- to-face mode. This study was conducted in 2018 and 2019, shortly before the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted all education. At that stage, the researchers were interested in investigating the professional development needs for Distance educators (DEs) for a 5-year future timeframe. This timeframe was brought forward, and it has become clear that DE academic staff had had to adjust almost overnight to the new online way of teaching, and many of them were unprepared for this sudden change.

Bezuidenhout (2018) cautioned that training gaps for DEs need to be continuously assessed so that they may be contextually relevant. In addition, the lack of detailed planning, monitoring and evaluation models for ongoing capacity development of DEs is seen as one of the contributing factors to the slow development of institutional policies and plans for building the capacity of DEs . This research therefore has the overall aim of identifying and ranking the importance of current and future roles of DEs, as well as their perceptions of their own competencies in each of these roles. The usefulness of this research is to provide empirical evidence for the development of continuous professional development (CPD) programs for DEs.

The six objectives of this mixed-methods study are as follows:

1. To identify the roles of DEs at the HEI level.
2. To rate the importance of each of the roles currently and to assess respondents' perceptions of these roles in the future.
3. To investigate the perceived competencies of DEs in these identified roles.
4. To identify areas of personal development that faculty will need to fulfil their future identified roles.
5. To analyse the results of each of the above objectives through demographic cohorts.
6. To present the results of this research study to the CPD department at Unisa to assist the development of a Competency and Capacity Development Framework for ODeL staff.

BACKGROUND

Distance education refers to the teaching and learning that takes place where there is a physical separation between the teacher and the learner as described by Keegan (1996). Holmberg (1974) emphasised

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