Research Article

Perceptions and innovations of academics in an open distance e-learning institution

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	The issue of academic support remains a significant area of concern within open distance e-learning (ODeL) institutions. Therefore, this study aims to explore the perceptions and innovations pertaining to academic support, specifically in the academic language and literacy in English module (ENGX). Grounded in the social presence theory, the study investigates the pivotal role of social presence in promoting students' engagement and academic success in ENGX module. The findings reveal that while lecturers generally hold a positive view of academic support in online higher education institutions, there is room for further enhancement, considering students' expressed dissatisfaction. The findings also shed light on students' apprehensions regarding limited engagement, accessibility challenges, and the pressures associated with misusing chat generative pre-trained transformer (ChatGPT). In contrast, lecturers emphasized the significance of fortifying presence and engagement to mitigate issues such as plagiarism. The pedagogical purpose of the paper is to enhance the understanding of academic support within the context of ODeL and explore innovative approaches to improving the educational experience in such a context. **Keywords:** ChatGPT, innovation, academic support, ODeL, social presence theory

INTRODUCTION

Online learning has become increasingly popular, offering more flexibility and accessibility to higher education through ODeL institutions. However, first-year students often face unique challenges that are believed to be caused by a lack of academic support in ODeL institutions (Jordaan, 2022; Maboe, 2019). The challenges include restricted interaction between students and lecturers, insufficient engagement with the study material, and inadequate language support, particularly for students studying English as a first additional language, English as a second language (ESL), or even English as a foreign language (EFL) (Maboe, 2019; Mohammed Nasser Hassan Ja'ashan, 2020; Muhammad et al., 2018). Many distance learning students in South Africa find it difficult to comprehend learning in a language other than their mother tongue and finding effective strategies for enhancing the English vocabulary of university students amidst the spatial, temporal, and pedagogic distance associated with ODeL practices remains a challenge (Makoe & Shandu, 2018). According to Lentell (2012), the problem rests in an institutional lack of understanding about distance learning pedagogy and/or a lack of capability to make the necessary institutional changes required to ensure that distance learning works. In addition, some students perceived that distance learning was excellent and essential. Thus, Gabaudan (2016), Zhang (2005), and Zuhairi (2013) believe that some of the academic support challenges faced can be addressed by employing workable academic support services, such as those that can address language-related issues that continue to persist in ESL contexts (Meirovitz et al., 2022; Bachiri & Sahli, 2020; Strydom et al., 2010). English is the primary language of instruction in most higher education institutions (HEIs) in South Africa, creating challenges for students who are not proficient in the language, especially for academic writing modules, where writing in English is mandatory (Langum & Sullivan, 2017). For Ditlhale and Johnsons (2022, p. 1),

> "any institution of teaching and learning needs support staff in place. Human services include academics, administration, support, and others. These staff members are there to help, administer, direct, and solve any issues relating to the business of teaching and learning."

This assertion reinforces the idea that academic support services students receive from the support staff are a critical component of ODeL and are instrumental in helping first-year students adapt to and excel in an ODeL learning mode.

This study adopts the academic support definition by Sánchez-Elvira Paniagua and Simpson (2018), who divided the definition into two parts. Firstly, academic (tutorial) support is "supporting students with cognitive, intellectual, and knowledge issues of a specific module." Secondly, there is non-academic support, which includes supporting students in the "affective and organizational aspects of their studies" (Chokwe, 2011; Dehghani et al., 2020; Rotar, 2022; Sánchez-Elvira Paniagua & Simpson, 2018). To further understand these two types of support structures, this study responds to the following research questions: What is the current state of academic support in academic language and literacy in English module (ENGX) module? How can academic support mechanisms be designed to enhance lecturer presence and facilitate students' engagement in ODeL? What are the best practices for promoting social presence in ODeL contexts, and how can they be applied to enhance academic support practices?

Emphasis on Specific Context

This study is conducted at an ODeL institution located in South Africa, denoted pseudonymously as UXY. UXY caters to a diverse population of students with different ages, ethnic backgrounds, and languages. It has registered over 370,000 students between 2018 and 2023 (Letseka et al., 2018; Sherrif-Shuping, 2023). The article focuses on ENGX module offered by the department of English studies in the college of human sciences at UXY. ENGX module is available on the learning management system (LMS) Moodle. Although the module is offered online, students receive hard copies, which makes it a blended module. The researcher contends that conducting a research study on academic support in ODeL is highly appropriate due to the modular structure of ODeL, which enables tailored interventions to cater to the unique requirements and difficulties encountered by each student.

A SYNOPTIC EXPLORATION OF SCHOLARLY WORKS

Exploring Dynamics of Academic Support in ODeL Contexts: A Multifaceted Perspective

Perceptions of academic support in ODeL contexts are influenced by various factors. The literature demonstrates that students generally hold a favorable view of academic support, expressing satisfaction with various electronic resources provided through LMS. These resources include digital study materials, podcasts, vodcasts, feedback-oriented tutorial letters, and recorded virtual class sessions (Herman et al., 2015; Mohammed, 2020; Sevnarayan & Mohale, 2022; Sevnarayan et al., 2023). This attitude suggests that students in ODeL contexts recognize the online study material and technology as crucial components needed to conduct studies and enhance their learning experiences, thus perceiving academic support through the provision of these resources as effective and beneficial. In contrast, findings by Gultom and Suhartini (2020) and Ong and Quek (2023) indicate that lecturer-student interaction in distance learning can provide high language and reasoning skills, something digital resources cannot accomplish. This claim is corroborated by Garrison and Cleveland-Innes (2005), who suggest that academic support, when delivered through interaction within the context of distance learning, should be structured and systematic to attain specific educational objectives. Furthermore, the significance of student-lecturer interaction, as emphasized by Cleveland-Innes et al. (2007), Garrison et al. (2001), Rotar (2022), and Whiteside (2015) in the community of inquiry (CoI) framework, has revealed numerous benefits in the context of ODeL, including enhancing academic performance through timely feedback and mitigating feelings of isolation by nurturing a sense of belonging and motivation. According to Garrison et al. (2004) and Holliman et al. (2021), students who share positive relationships and interact regularly with their lecturers tend to develop stronger social-emotional competencies and are more likely to absorb an increased amount of academic knowledge. However, Cleveland-Innes and Wilton (2018), Garrison and Cleveland-Innes (2005), and Whiteside (2015) argue that,

while interaction is undoubtedly a crucial component of effective online education, it alone falls short of creating a robust cognitive and social presence, which are essential for meaningful learning experiences in distance learning. Consistent with the findings of Garrison and Cleveland-Innes (2005), Holliman et al. (2021), and Whiteside (2015), the findings from Garrison et al. (2004) highlight the significance of five key areas in the context of academic support: technology, lecturer roles, modes of interaction, self-identity, and module design. These essential aspects, identified as technology, lecturer roles, modes of interaction, self-identity, and module design, are integral to the development of social, cognitive, and teaching presence within the context of distance education (DE) (Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005; Garrison et al., 2004; Holliman et al., 2021; Whiteside, 2015). It is further argued that to comprehend students' adaptation within these five areas, it is essential to consider fundamental attributes of the student's role, including adaptability and collaboration, within the online CoI (Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005; Garrison et al., 2001, 2004; Holliman et al., 2021; Whiteside, 2015).

Challenges Impacting Student Support

The challenges facing student support in DE are multifaceted, spanning career counselling, resource provision, technology integration, and adapting to evolving student needs (Raj & Raman, 2017). To address these challenges effectively, HEIs must proactively monitor and invest in digital solutions such as dashboards and online portals (Gillett-Swan, 2017; Raj & Raman, 2017). In addition, to address challenges related to student support, commonwealth of learning (COL) advocates for expanding access to quality education through DE methods and leveraging technology to bridge the student-resource gap (Lentell, 2012; Macdonald, 2000; Nsamba, 2019). In this ever-evolving educational landscape, recognizing the impact of factors like gender, ethnicity, and nationality on help-seeking behavior and academic self-efficacy is crucial (Disabato et al., 2018; Gee et al., 2020; Wong et al., 2014). For Bolic Baric et al. (2016), Garrison et al. (2004), Gutiérrez-Santiuste et al. (2015), Lentell (2012), Maboe (2019), Macdonal (2000), and Parahakaran (2018), tackling these multifaceted challenges and aligning strategies with COL's principles may allow DE institutions to better serve their diverse student populations and enhance the effectiveness of their student support services in distance learning. Furthermore, lecturers' immediacy behaviors, as noted by Arinto (2016), Wang and Baker (2015), significantly shape students' perceptions of overall satisfaction associated with academic support. For Cleveland-Innes and Wilton (2018), Makgahlela et al. (2021), Maphoto (2021), Rotar (2022), Shabani and Maboe (2021), recognizing students' intrinsic qualities, engaging, and supporting lecturers who facilitate learning, providing timely feedback, fighting against plagiarism, and implementing an effective blended learning environment may substantially contribute to positive academic support experiences.

Innovations in Academic Support Services

Several innovations have been proposed to enhance academic support services in ODeL. Paniagua (2018) and Shabani and Maboe (2021) assert that by providing individualized support services, including personalized guidance and resources addressing students' unique challenges to enhance their academic success, the effectiveness of academic support services can be enhanced. Additionally, the use of technology, such as chatbots, has been proposed to provide 24/7 support to students (Zuhairi, 2019). For Naidu and Sevnarayan (2023, p. 8), "the use of ChatGPT in online assessment in DE presents both challenges and opportunities; therefore, its development and use must be approached cautiously." Potts et al. (2021) argue that chatbots should consider users' wants and needs when delivering support services. Expanding on this idea, Paniagua (2018) and Rotar (2022) emphasize that chatbots provide academic support through personalized assistance, the streamlining of administrative tasks, and an overall enhancement of the educational experience. This approach aligns with the idea that academic support should be responsive to individual requirements, acknowledging that students may have diverse needs and preferences. Rotar (2022) extends this perspective, asserting that technologies like adaptive learning platforms and intelligent tutoring systems, when integrated effectively with social presence theory, can assist students in overcoming academic challenges and ultimately contribute to their academic success. Drawing from the perceptions of Cleveland-Innes and Garrison (2005), Sevnarayan and Mohale (2022), and Weidlich et al. (2021), the social presence theory underlines the significance of creating a vibrant online community through innovative tools like social media platforms and online learning resources such as podcasts and vodcasts. These resources can enhance

communication between students and lecturers, provide easy access to study materials, and create online communities that encourage student engagement and support. However, Alraimi et al. (2015), Pratiwi et al. (2021), and Zarzycka et al. (2020) argue that while social media platforms and other online teaching tools may be used to provide academic support to students, concerns have been raised about the reliability and accuracy of information shared on these platforms. Additionally, innovative approaches to academic support may not be suitable for all students, as some may prefer face-to-face interaction with tutors and peers over relying solely on technology-based solutions as part of innovation (Jonson et al., 2016; Kahu, 2014; Nsamba, 2019; Nyerere, 2016; Rotar. 2022). Nonetheless, the use of technology-based solutions for academic support may exacerbate existing inequalities in access to technology and digital literacy skills (Sandybayev, 2020; Starks & Reich, 2023). For McCabe (2018), Ouma (2019), and Seo et al. (2021), student support in DE needs to be justified not only pedagogically but also financially, and to be able to do so, research on any kind of support directed to students should contribute to the following areas:

(1) developing or refining the methods of cost-benefit analysis,

(2) developing a general model of student support in web-based, dual-mode institutions, and

(3) providing ways to systematically incorporate the needs of distance lecturers.

While numerous studies have explored innovative approaches and the perspectives of lecturers regarding academic support in ODeL success, only a limited number have concentrated on obtaining the views of students to examine their needs and suggestions concerning academic support. This study aimed to fill that gap.

POWER OF PRESENCE: SOCIAL PRESENCE THEORY IN OPEN DISTANCE & E-LEARNING SUPPORT

This study adopts the social presence theory, a construct within the broader CoI framework, as the central focal point for its investigation. The choice to prioritize social presence theory is driven by its profound relevance in contemporary online and DE contexts. It allows for an in-depth examination of how students establish connections and interact within virtual learning contexts. In an era marked by the widespread adoption of online learning, understanding and optimizing social presence is critical. This study asserts the paramount importance of social presence for comprehending the perceptions of individuals related to academic support. It explores the elements of social presence theory as outlined by Garrison (2000) and Whiteside (2007), which incorporate affective association, knowledge and experience, interaction intensification, community cohesion, and lecturer involvement. Menneke (2010) and Osei-Frimpong (2017) argue that social presence significantly impacts student engagement and academic success in ODeL settings, reinforcing its pivotal role in educational outcomes (Ice et al., 2017). Sevnarayan (2022), Xerri (2018), and Zhan (2013) explain social presence as the extent to which students feel connected and supported by their peers, lecturers, and the learning community.

In addition, Whiteside (2015) describes social presence as a "master conductor" that harmonizes the lecturer, students, academic content, LMS, media, tools, instructional strategies, and learning outcomes within a learning experience. In this study, the social presence model proposed by Whiteside (2007) is utilized to analyze the data. Social presence theory can be better understood through a social presence model. This model outlines several elements that contribute to social presence, including affective association, community cohesion, lecturer involvement, interaction intensity, and knowledge and experience, as shown in **Figure 1**.

Affective Association

The affective association plays a pivotal role in shaping students' attitudes towards education and their learning experiences. It encompasses the emotional and psychological connections students form with various stimuli, such as people, places, objects, or experiences (Anderson et al., 1999). Positive affective relationships with lecturers and peers have been found to enhance students' motivation, engagement, and academic achievement (Swan & Shih, 2005). Conversely, negative emotional connections to the university, lecturers, or academic activities can lead to academic disengagement, low self-esteem, and mental health
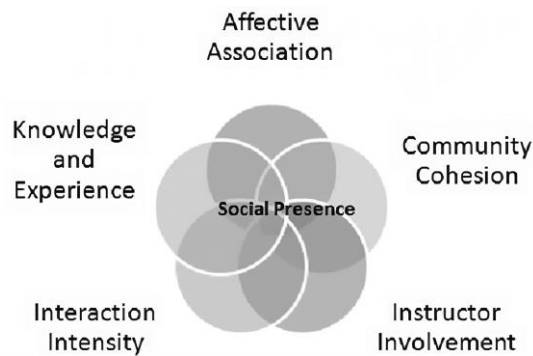
Figure 1. Social presence model (Whiteside, 2007, p. 12)

issues. Therefore, it is crucial for lecturers and student support staff to create a conducive learning environment that promotes pleasant emotional associations. According to Whiteside (2017), this process entails building strong connections with students by delivering lessons that are both meaningful and captivating, utilizing various resources like instructor videos, welcome letters accompanied by surveys, introductory profiles, announcements, and reminders, and incorporating audio and video elements. Additionally, it involves offering emotional support, providing feedback, and actively promoting an inclusive and respectful environment for learning (Whiteside, 2017). For Swan and Shih (2005) and Whiteside (2017), prioritizing and nurturing affective associations may enable lecturers to innovate teaching and support, enhancing students' well-being and academic success.

Community Cohesion

Affective association refers to the emotional and psychological connections individuals form with various stimuli. It significantly influences students' attitudes towards education and learning experiences. Positive associations with lecturers, peers, and studies enhance motivation, engagement, and academic performance (Whiteside, 2017). Conversely, negative associations with lecturers or academic tasks can lead to disengagement, low self-esteem, and mental health issues. To promote positive affective associations, lecturers and student support professionals should create a conducive learning environment by always referring to "we" instead of "you" and "they," modelling language, building positive relationships, providing engaging experiences, offering support and feedback, and promoting inclusivity and respect (Whiteside, 2015, 2017). Nurturing positive affective associations promotes a sense of belonging and motivates students to pursue their academic goals. Recognizing its importance, educators should incorporate effective strategies that promote positive affective associations into their educational practices.

Instructor Involvement

The instructor's or lecturer's involvement based on the principles of social presence theory involves purposeful efforts made by the lecturer, including getting acquainted with students, customizing the learning experience, offering timely feedback, sharing the spotlight, and consistently reflecting on students' progress. These actions contribute to the development of a strong sense of community, effective communication, and interactive learning among students in both online and blended learning settings (Whiteside, 2007). Social presence theory posits that the level of social presence, indicative of the extent to which individuals feel connected and actively engaged with their peers, exerts a profound impact on learning outcomes, satisfaction, and retention within online and blended learning contexts (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004; Mykota, 2018).

To optimize social presence, lecturers can employ a diverse array of pedagogical strategies, such as establishing explicit expectations and guidelines, promoting a supportive and nurturing learning climate, harnessing interactive technologies, and engaging in proactive and dynamic communication with lecturers (Molinillo et al., 2018). Through the skillful implementation of these strategies, lecturers may cultivate a tangible sense of social presence, encourage collaborative interactions, and enhance the overall caliber of the student learning journey. Skillful utilization of connecting devices, including transitional phrases, conjunctions, and sentence structures, further aids in conveying these ideas coherently and ensuring logical flow within the discourse.

Interaction Intensity

Interaction intensity is vital in social presence theory, involving the frequency, depth, and quality of online and blended learning interactions (Richardson et al., 2017). According to the theory, more intense interactions lead to a stronger sense of social presence, positively affecting learning outcomes, satisfaction, and retention (Whiteside et al., 2014).These approaches include facilitating synchronous and asynchronous communication, incorporating collaborative learning activities, facilitating meaningful interactions, establishing a Q&A section, engaging with students, creating informal social spaces, sharing resources, delivering timely and substantial feedback, and actively encouraging student-to-student interactions (Triberti et al., 2018; Whiteside, 2017). The judicious utilization of connecting devices, such as transitional phrases, conjunctions, and sentence structures, serves to effectively convey the significance of interaction intensity within the framework of social presence theory, along with its implications for the design and facilitation of online and blended learning environments. Interaction intensity represents a crucial constituent of social presence theory, encompassing the frequency, depth, and quality of interpersonal exchanges within online and blended learning contexts (Richardson et al., 2017). As posited by social presence theory, heightened levels of interaction intensity contribute to a more pronounced sense of social presence, thereby exerting a positive impact on learning outcomes, satisfaction, and retention within these educational settings (Whiteside et al., 2014). Lecturers can amplify the level of interaction by adopting diverse strategic approaches. These approaches include facilitating synchronous and asynchronous communication, incorporating collaborative learning activities, facilitating meaningful interactions, establishing a Q&A section, engaging with students, creating informal social spaces, sharing resources, delivering timely and substantial feedback, and actively encouraging student-to-student interactions (Triberti et al., 2018; Whiteside, 2017).

Knowledge & Experience

Within the framework of social presence theory, students' knowledge and experience assume a pivotal role in shaping their ability to engage in online interactions and cultivate a sense of social presence (Ice et al., 2022). The depth and breadth of students' subject matter expertise and familiarity with online learning contexts significantly influence their proficiency in navigating course materials, communicating with peers and lecturers, and actively participating in collaborative learning activities (Whiteside, 2015). Individuals with higher levels of knowledge and experience are more likely to engage in deeper and more frequent interactions, leading to a heightened sense of social presence. However, according to Karaoglan Yilmaz (2017), a few students, especially those who are unfamiliar with the subject matter or online learning environments, may benefit from additional support to enhance interaction intensity and cultivate a sense of social presence. Lecturers play a crucial role in facilitating this process by encouraging students to leverage their cultural background and prior experiences, ensuring authentic teaching practices, offering clear instructions, valuable feedback, and opportunities for peer-to-peer interactions. Additionally, creating a conducive learning environment that nurtures collaboration and active engagement further supports the development of meaningful interactions among lecturers. The skillful utilization of connecting devices, such as transitional phrases and conjunctions, aids in articulating the intricate relationship between knowledge and experience and their profound impact on social presence in online learning environments. In addition, CoI framework plays a crucial role in supporting the social presence theory. Cleveland-Innes and Wilton (2018) highlight CoI framework's utility in understanding the interplay of social interactions, cognitive engagement, and teaching methods in ODeL.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Approach

The qualitative approach involves collecting and analyzing non-numerical data, such as words and documents, to gain an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences and perceptions of academic support in ODeL institutions (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). This approach is appropriate as it allows researchers to explore and understand the complexities of human expectations, beliefs, experiences, and behaviors.

Research Design

Adopting the case study approach can be quite useful in examining how academic support is perceived and innovated in ODeL, as it constitutes a "methodological research approach used to generate an in-depth understanding of a contemporary issue or phenomenon in a bounded system" (Coombs, 2022, p. 2). This method enables a thorough analysis of the academic support systems in place at a particular institution and how they affect students' engagement and achievement (Yin, 2018). The researcher can acquire rich and extensive information on how both students and lecturers perceive academic support by combining various tools, such as interviews and evaluation questionnaire forms. The findings obtained may be utilized to examine the institution's academic support systems and pinpoint their strengths and weaknesses to provide recommendations for improvement. The case study method also permits the participation of academic support teams in the execution of adjustments based on the recommendations.

Population

For Flick (2018), Guest et al. (2022), and Silverman (2019), the population in a qualitative study refers to the group of individuals or entities that the study aims to investigate. In this case, the population would consist of all 16 students and nine lecturers in ENGX module who were part of the module in the 2022 academic year, semester 2.

Sample

This study utilized random sampling to sample participants from the student population. According to Creswell and Poth (2017), random sampling involves selecting participants from the population in a way that gives each member of the population an equal chance of being selected. In this study, random sampling was used to select a representative sample of 16 students from a population of 16,000 students in an ODeL institution. There are no fixed rules for the sample size in qualitative research, as it depends on factors such as the type of data collected (Lichtman, 2010, p. 142; Vasileoiu et al., 2018). Purposive sampling, on the other hand, which involves selecting participants based on specific criteria that are relevant to the research question, was used to select nine lecturers from the population of lecturers in ODeL institution (Palinkas et al., 2015). The criteria for selection include the lecturer's expertise in academic support, their experience with ODeL, and their availability to participate in the study. The appropriate sample size for a research study depends on the research question and the complexity of the topic being investigated. For instance, a sample of 16 students from a population of 16,000 is appropriate for precision and accuracy (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Kumar, 2014), while a sample of nine lecturers may be enough to achieve data saturation and represent different perspectives (Palinkas et al., 2015; Patton, 2015). However, only four lecturers were available for individual interviews on Microsoft Teams. This study uses a hybrid approach by combining random and purposive sampling methods to carefully select a sample of students that is representative and a sample of lecturers who can offer varied and insightful viewpoints. This combination of both sampling methods provides several advantages, including time and cost efficiency, flexibility, and adaptability (Gentles et al., 2015). The use of both random and purposive sampling methods is commonly employed in research focused on investigating perceptions and innovations in academic support within ODeL institutions.

Instruments

The research employed qualitative methods, specifically evaluation question forms and semi-structured interviews, to gather data on the perceptions and innovations surrounding academic support in ODeL institutions. The evaluation question forms were used to collect data from students because evaluation questions provide a structured approach to collecting data from many participants. These forms typically consist of pre-determined closed-ended questions that allow participants to rate or rank different aspects of academic support (Gentles et al., 2015), while semi-structured interviews were conducted to gain insights into lecturers' experiences and perspectives on academic support. These interviews provide an opportunity for participants to express their experiences, perspectives, and opinions in their own words, offering valuable insights that may not be captured through quantitative measures alone (Shaheen & Pradhan, 2019).

Data Collection & Analysis

Data collection for this study spanned two months, between October and November 2022, employing a mixed-methods approach that included structured questionnaires distributed on Moodle (16 randomly selected completions) and semi-structured interviews conducted via Microsoft Teams meetings with five participating lecturers. Various channels were used to coordinate interviews, such as phone calls and email invitations. The collected data was organized thematically for analysis, and this timeframe and approach were chosen to ensure comprehensive data collection and allow ample time for subsequent analysis and interpretation in the research process. Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the data collected from both students and lecturers. This analytical approach involves identifying patterns, trends, and themes within the data and interpreting their meanings. By examining these emergent themes, the researchers aimed to gain a deeper understanding of the perceptions and innovations surrounding academic support in ODeL institutions. The qualitative nature of this study allowed the researcher to obtain a rich and detailed understanding of participants' perspectives and experiences related to academic support. It provided valuable insights into how academic support can be enhanced to better facilitate student learning at ODeL institution.

LIMITATIONS & ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The results in this study are closely applicable to one module (ENGX) in an ODeL context. Further research in other modules in similar contexts is highly encouraged. Permission to collect data was granted by the Research Ethics Committee at UXY, and the ethical clearance number is Ref: 90268091_CREC_CHS_2022. The name of the university, the module, and the students have all been given pseudonyms to protect the identities of all participants and the institution. The researcher adhered to the ethical process in the following manner: The researchers obtained informed consent from all participants, explaining the purpose of the study and the voluntary nature of their participation. Participants' identities were kept confidential; hence, names were anonymized to ensure privacy and protection of identities. The researchers ensured that all the collected data was stored securely and in compliance with data protection regulations. Participants were provided with a debriefing at the end of the study, explaining the purpose of the study and how their data would be used. Both parties were satisfied.

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

The purpose of this section is to share data generated from three main research questions. There are three themes that derived from the data collection:

- The state of current academic support in ENGX
- Designing academic support mechanisms for enhanced lecturer presence and student engagement in ODeL
- Promoting social presence in ODeL contexts and its application to enhancing academic support practice.

State of Current Academic Support in ENGX

The first research question, which focused on investigating the current academic support, sought to understand students' views on the state of the current academic support in ENGX module using an evaluation question form. Students' perceptions of academic support are notably influenced by online learning resources available through LMS (Herman et al., 2015; Mohammed, 2020; Sevnarayan & Mohale, 2022; Sevnarayan et al., 2023). This notion is exemplified by one student, Matome, who expressed satisfaction with the existing academic support, emphasizing the helpfulness of resources like podcasts, vodcasts, and recorded virtual classes. This corroborates the literature's assertion that students in ODeL contexts recognize the importance of online study materials and technology in their studies and view academic support through these resources as both effective and beneficial. However, another student's perspective also sheds light on areas that require improvement. Corry's mention of the "need for more engagement and collaboration with peers" (Corry evaluation questions) aligns with the literature's emphasis on the significance of structured interaction and

engagement within the context of distance learning (Cleveland-Innes et al., 2007; Rotar, 2022; Whiteside, 2015). In support of this idea, several studies emphasize the importance of fostering a sense of belonging and motivation among students, which aligns with the foundational principles of social presence theory, which encompass several key elements. Firstly, it emphasizes the need for online learners to express their emotions and thoughts openly, creating a sense of connectedness with their peers and lecturers (Garrison et al., 2001; Richardson et al., 2017; Triberti et al., 2018; Whiteside, 2015, 2017).

Corry's concern regarding the lack of lecturer availability, both online and in person, aligns with the argument that lecturer-student interaction is crucial for improving language and reasoning skills (Gultom & Suhartini, 2020; Ong & Quek, 2023). It highlights the importance of structured and systematic interactions designed to achieve specific educational objectives, as noted by Garrison and Cleveland-Innes (2005). These concerns collectively highlight the need to address issues related to lecturer accessibility to enhance the overall quality of academic support. Khutso's experience with the frequent unavailability of Moodle and limited access to resources echoes the literature's call for effective technology utilization to bridge the student-resource gap and address student support challenges (Lentell, 2012; Lockwood & Latchem, 2004; Macdonald, 2000; Nsamba, 2019). Moreover, it highlights the digital divide among students, a concern that has been consistently discussed in previous research (Cleveland-Innes & Wilton, 2018; Makgahlela et al., 2021; Rotar, 2022; Shabani & Maboe, 2021). Moreover, there seems to be inadequate disability services in ENGX module, as Nana (evaluation questions) similarly added,

> "I'm an autistic student, and I cannot think of any support that is given specifically to us. I also lack language support too much. Many times, I failed because English is difficult and not my mother tongue."

Nana's encounters with English language barriers and challenges related to disabilities in understanding the module materials align with the literature's emphasis on the significance of inclusive support and the recognition of students' intrinsic qualities (Arinto, 2016; Bozkaya & Aydin, 2008; Farsani et al., 2018; Wang & Baker, 2015). These findings highlight the importance of accommodating diverse student needs to promote a sense of belonging and motivation, as advocated by the social presence theory (Richardson et al., 2017; Whiteside, 2015).

In summary, the challenges students face with academic support make it evident that the misuse of chatbots in online modules, particularly in writing-intensive modules such as ENGX, is an inevitable outcome. These findings collectively highlight the complexity of academic support in ODeL contexts and the need for a holistic approach to enhance the overall academic support services and students' learning experience.

Designing Academic Support Mechanisms for Enhanced Lecturer Presence & Student Engagement in ODeL

The second research question, which focuses on how academic support mechanisms can be designed to enhance lecturer presence and facilitate students' engagement in an ODeL context, was responded to by lecturers through the semi-structured interviews. In their responses, two lecturers, Keith, and Simon, shed light on innovative approaches to encouraging engagement and interaction among students. Keith mentioned that

> "working with distance students does not make these questions easy. To attempt the question, I would encourage students to participate in every virtual class, workshop, or Q&A session. This module requires more practice, participation, presence, and collaboration" (ENGX, semi-structured interviews).

In addition, Simon shared that

> "I started teaching in 2018, and since then, I have been trying to create a safe space in the module, where students can freely meet, greet, and interact. I thought about Telegram–social media is the current generation's safe space to open and feel free" (Simon, ENGX semi-structured interviews).

Simon's pedagogical innovation, rooted in the utilization of technology and social presence theory, reinforces the argument that lecturers must evolve and leverage modern tools to cater to the dynamic needs of contemporary students (Herman et al., 2015; Macdonald, 2000; Mohammed, 2020; Nsamba, 2019; Sevnarayan & Mohale, 2022; Sevnarayan et al., 2023). These lecturer perspectives highlight the importance of innovative strategies to facilitate engagement and interaction among students in ODeL context, aligning with the broader literature on academic support and engagement in distance learning. In a rapidly evolving educational landscape, lecturers' views reinforce the necessity for lecturers to adapt and employ creative strategies to enhance academic support in DE contexts.

Keith's views reveal the formidable challenges posed by teaching DE students an academic writing module, emphasizing the pivotal role of active participation in virtual classes, workshops, and Q&A sessions to overcome these writing challenges and enhance writing skills. This prescription aligns with DE studies that consistently emphasize the paramount importance of structured interaction and engagement for effective online education (Cleveland-Innes et al., 2007; Rotar, 2022; Whiteside, 2015). Keith's insights not only diagnose the ailment but also prescribe a potent remedy, reinforcing the imperative of structured interaction in the context of DE.

Kerry (ENGX, semi-structured interviews) added that

> "innovative strategies and multifaceted approaches such as incorporating real-time interactive webinars, personalized artificial intelligence-driven recommendations, and dynamic peer collaboration platforms can collectively enhance student engagement and academic success in ODeL."

In addition, John explicitly responded that

> "supporting lecturers in DE is equally crucial. HEIs should invest in continuous professional development for lecturers, providing training in effective online teaching strategies, digital tools, and resources to enable them to deliver high-quality instruction and offer students meaningful academic support" (John, ENGX semi-structured interviews).

Both lecturers' responses align with the evolving landscape of educational technology and pedagogy that promotes diverse ways to improve student engagement and intensify online interaction, as noted by the social presence theory (Wang & Baker, 2015; Whiteside et al., 2014). Their perspectives also resonate with previous research highlighting the significance of lecturers' immediacy behaviors in shaping students' overall satisfaction with academic support (Arinto, 2016; Bozkaya & Aydin, 2008; Farsani et al., 2018). Furthermore, these perspectives align with the broader literature emphasizing the implementation of blended learning, as noted by CoL (Cleveland-Innes & Wilton, 2018; Makgahlela et al., 2021; Mykota, 201; Rotar, 2022; Shabani & Maboe, 2021). This comprehensive approach not only benefits students but also recognizes the pivotal role lecturers play in the DE ecosystem, acknowledging their capacity to shape the quality of academic support and overall learning experiences (Ice et al., 2022; Whiteside, 2015).

Promoting Social Presence in an ODeL Context to Enhance Academic Support Practices

When asked what the best practices for promoting social presence in ODeL contexts are and how they can be applied to enhance academic support practices, one lecturer mentioned that

> "I believe we can effectively enhance it [social presence] by nurturing a cohesive community, encouraging collaboration among lecturers and students, harnessing innovative technologies, and actively engaging with all students" (Keith, ENGX interviews).

Simon added that

> "it is essential to prioritize the promotion of social presence. Given that students often experience feelings of isolation and disconnection in the world of ODeL, and as a result, they plagiarize" (Simon, ENGX interviews).

According to Keith's views, improving social presence in online learning requires creating unity among students and lecturers, promoting collaboration, leveraging innovative technologies, and actively engaging with all students. This approach aims to create a supportive and vibrant online learning environment, facilitate meaningful connections and a sense of belonging, and empower students to excel academically. This perspective aligns with the broader literature on academic support and engagement in DE, emphasizing the importance of innovative strategies and technology integration to encourage social presence (Paniagua, 2018; Rotar, 2022; Shabani & Maboe, 2021; Zuhairi, 2019). Additionally, Simon's response indicates that prioritizing the promotion of social presence is crucial in ODeL, as many students often feel isolated and disconnected, so it is essential to assure them of support and maintain regular communication. Simon's response further emphasizes that actively fostering social presence through tools like discussion forums and virtual platforms creates an engaging and supportive learning environment, which is consistent with the views on social presence theory (Cleveland-Innes & Garrison, 2005; Sevnarayan & Mohale, 2022; Weidlich et al., 2022; Whiteside, 2007). However, it is worth noting that innovative approaches to academic support may not suit all students, and concerns about technology-based solutions and the digital divide have been raised in the literature (Alraimi et al., 2015; Kumar, 2020; Manca, 2016; Sandybayev, 2020; Sugimoto, 2015). Addressing these concerns and providing diverse options for academic support is crucial to meeting the varied needs and preferences of students in ODeL contexts (Johnson et al., 2016; Kahu, 2014; Nsamba, 2019; Nyerere, 2016; Shrestha, 2017).

For Sharone (ENGX, semi-structured interview),

> "developing a social presence in DE can play a pivotal role in reducing plagiarism in students' writing. Educational social media platforms and elements of gamification can be leveraged to create a dynamic and interactive learning environment, nurturing healthy academic engagement among both students and lecturers."

To add, John (ENGX, semi-structured interview) stated:

> "At an international conference I attended earlier this year, the integration of innovative technologies for English language learning and academic literacies was a prominent topic of discussion. Presenters showcased various technologies that not only enhance the learning experience but also promote social presence, encourage lecturer presence, and improve student performance. It has been proven many times that virtual classes facilitate online interactions, enabling students to engage in group discussions and peer feedback."

In line with Maphoto (2022), Richardson et al. (2017), Triberti et al. (2018), and Whiteside (2015, 2017), Sharone (ENGX, semi-structured interviews) emphasizes the role of social presence in reducing plagiarism, noting that educational social media platforms and gamification can create an interactive learning environment that nurtures collaboration among students and lecturers. In addition, John's comments highlight the positive impact of innovative technologies on English language learning and academic literacies, supporting existing literature (Naidu & Sevnarayan, 2023; Paniagua, 2018; Shabani & Maboe, 2021; Zuhairi, 2019). Furthermore, virtual classes, as mentioned by John, facilitate online interactions, group discussions, and peer feedback, contributing to the development of social presence and lecturer presence (Rotar, 2022; Whiteside, 2015, 2017). These insights collectively suggest the importance of leveraging technology and pedagogical strategies to enhance academic support services in online and blended learning environments.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, this study's findings shed light on critical aspects of academic support in ODeL institutions. The data highlighted the significance of addressing the digital divide, providing inclusive support services, and fostering structured interaction to enhance academic support. Innovative pedagogy and technology emerged as powerful tools to not only reduce plagiarism but also promote engagement and collaboration. The findings further highlighted the imperative for ODeL institutions to adapt, innovate, and invest in effective strategies to enhance academic support for diverse student populations. It has been noted that ODeL institutions can

create dynamic, engaging, and supportive learning environments that empower students and optimize their academic success by bridging the digital divide, reinforcing inclusivity, and capitalizing on technology.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, it is crucial to invest in the professional development of lecturers, equipping them with the skills and knowledge necessary for effective online teaching and support. To foster a thriving learning environment, a strong emphasis should be placed on promoting social presence, encouraging unity among students and lecturers, leveraging educational social media platforms, and incorporating gamification elements. Additionally, nurturing positive affective associations and community cohesion can play pivotal roles in motivating students and creating a sense of belonging. Lecturers should actively engage with students, customize learning experiences, and intensify interactions, all guided by the principles of social presence theory. Recognizing that students' subject matter expertise and familiarity with online learning contexts vary institutions can bridge knowledge and experience gaps through tailored support. Institutions can gain a solid theoretical foundation for understanding the interplay of social interactions, cognitive engagement, and teaching strategies through CoI framework in teaching and learning. Regular evaluation and adaptation of these strategies based on feedback from students and lecturers are essential for maintaining relevance and effectiveness in the ever-evolving world of ODeL.

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