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TUTORS' VIEWS ON THE INTEGRATED TUTOR MODEL IN OPEN DISTANCE LEARNING

Abstract

The facilitation of learning by tutors is a worldwide phenomenon that is supported by most open and distance learning (ODL) institutions. It is a strategy employed to achieve academic success. This qualitative intrinsic case study explored the views of tutors at the University of South Africa (Unisa) about the implementation of the Integrated Tutor Model (ITM) which supports student learning. The successes, challenges and impact of the ITM on the tutors' delivery of tutorials are not fully known. Therefore, the findings of this study will highlight the successes, challenges and impact of the ITM which Unisa can use to improve the model. Data were gathered through face-to-face interviews with six tutors who were purposively selected from Unisa's Gauteng region. The findings revealed successes and challenges of the ITM that affect the support that is due to the students via tutorage. These findings explain the application of the ITM that can assist Unisa in strengthening or reviewing both the tutor system and the model.

Keywords: *face-to-face, integrated tutor model, interaction, online, tutor*

1. Introduction

An effective student support system is at the heart of an ODL institution (Tait, 2003). To provide the necessary assistance, universities around the world have developed tutor support as part of their student support programmes. Tutor support aims to guide students in their studies. Since ODL universities offer their academic services online, they vie to deliver exceptional online support to differentiate their offerings from those of other universities. This is in line with rapid developments in information and communication technologies (ICTs) and greater internet access, which drive teaching and learning in these environments. Depending on their student profile, universities may either choose face-to-face (f2f) or online tutor support, or even a blend of these to supplement their students' self-instructional materials. Unisa prefers to provide online tutor support. In 2012, Unisa introduced the Integrated Tutor Model (ITM) to support its students. Prior to that, Unisa supported its students through the traditional face-to-face tutorial programme. Students attended classes on Saturdays and sometimes during the week. With the introduction of technology, Unisa changed to integrating technology and tutorial support. ITM provides



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students with online tutorial support parallel to f2f support. As a result, students have a choice to use the online, f2f support or both.

In the light of the ITM, Unisa is determined to transition from ODL to an open distance and e-learning (ODeL) model. ODL is described as a multi-dimensional concept aimed at bridging the time, geographical, economic, social, educational and communication distance between the students and the institution, the academics, the courseware and their peers (Unisa, 2008). ODeL, however is about removing barriers to access learning, providing flexible learning, student-centredness, supporting students and constructing learning programmes to assist students to succeed in their academic studies (Unisa, 2008).

The student profile and their circumstances, which arise from the context of a developing South Africa, dictate that the ITM be used to offer both f2f and online tutor support. The inception of this model was guided, not only by the Unisa student profile, but also by the principles of equal opportunities and high academic quality (Peters, 2001). The aim of the study on which this article is based was to explore the viability of the ITM by gathering tutors' views on the subject. Since tutors implement the model when servicing the students, their views can contribute towards improving the student support system to enable students to benefit optimally, as intended by Unisa. All tutors apply online through i-recruitment. They go through the process of selection by module lecturers and the human resource unit based in the college. Tutors are required to have Honours' degrees (or higher) in a particular discipline and at least three years' experience in the facilitation of learning or teaching. For the purpose of training and development, all tutors are required to go through an annual training and development workshop where they are trained in facilitation skills in an ODeL environment. They are also introduced to the latest developments at Unisa and current trends within tutoring. In order to follow up and monitor the implementation of what was learnt in the training and development workshop, formative evaluations are conducted by the Regional Academic Coordinators who manage the f2f programme. Tutors are monitored online to check the quality of their facilitation.

With the introduction of technology, students enrolled at Unisa are assigned an online tutor. They have the option to receive f2f tutorial support by enrolling for this at any Unisa regional service centre within South Africa and in Ethiopia (Unisa also services Ethiopian students as a special arrangement entered into via a memorandum of agreement with the Ethiopia Ministry of Education). Students are divided into tutorial groups, each serviced by a tutor who is contracted to Unisa on a part-time basis. The f2f tutorial sessions are mainly conducted on Saturdays, although some are scheduled for weekday afternoons and evenings, once a week, for 12 weeks, during a semester. Fifteen tutorial sessions are provided for this purpose. The schedule has been designed in such a way that it also meets the needs of employed students. Participation in these sessions is optional, but students are encouraged to benefit from the tutor support and to use these opportunities to access the tutors' knowledge in the subject they are studying. Online tutorials do not have a fixed tutorial schedule but are conducted as and when students need support in an area of their studies that is proving challenging. The next section reviews the extant literature on the ITM.

2. Tutor models used in Open Distance Learning

Models of tutoring were introduced to support students who entered distance learning through correspondence. These models assisted students who, at the time, studied alone with no support except their own study material. The introduction of individualised tutor support gave

the student the full attention of the tutor. According to Nonyongo (1998), tutors met with students to support them in their academic journey and helped them to succeed. This model had a gap as tutors expressed the need for students to meet, share their knowledge and assist one another. This need resulted in the f2f tutor model which was established to drive a learner-centred approach to teaching and learning under the guidance of a qualified tutor. According to Cervero and Wilson (1999), the learner-centred approach calls for the full involvement of students and allows them to identify their needs. This tutorial model had certain weaknesses that included barriers to distance, time and space as students had to travel from their locations to meet at a venue at specified times. This suggested a need for alternative models, such as ITM, which used technology to offer flexible learning. F2f and online tutors were employed by Unisa to respond to the needs of students in terms of bridging the gap and facilitating learning for students. Unisa could not avoid this dual mode, i.e. online and f2f tutoring, due to its student profile – a considerable number of students still live in rural areas which do not have internet or Wi-Fi access.

3. Facilitation of learning through the ITM

The Commonwealth of Learning (2003, 62) defines “facilitation of learning” as the way in which students develop their own learning path or resolve obstacles to their learning with tutors or facilitators to assist students in developing their learning skills. According to Ntuli (2016, 24), when tutors facilitate learning, they provide students with skills on how to link their existing knowledge to new knowledge in order to explain what they are learning and to solve problems in the most effective way. Furthermore, tutors or facilitators should be equipped to facilitate learning in different ODL environments. Therefore, Baran, Correia and Thompson (2013) note that online tutors need to acquire a different set of skills to enable them to facilitate online while Jaques and Salmon (2007) explain that diverse human skills are crucial for online and blended learning environments to provide effective tutorial support.

Facilitation needs a well-resourced environment to stimulate the participants to be motivated and proactive. Such facilitation should include collaborative efforts and continuous communication under the support and guidance of tutors who help students to develop the skills needed to learn independently and collaboratively within this environment. Online tutorage is however not problem- or challenge-free (Lisewski & Joyce, 2003) which strengthens the need to research the tutors' views about the use of the ITM.

ODL-based tutoring can bring an interpersonal complexity in the learning process and also heighten learning that is based on physical materials. It can do this through varied practical and iterative activities while promoting collaborative learning among the students and the lecturer or tutor. Moore and Kearsley (2012) believe that students who learn successfully enjoy learning, and that this is a sign of motivation. We assert that the enjoyment of learning happens through the tutor support that students receive that motivates them to learn.

4. Tutors' evaluation of models of tutoring

Tutors enhance student learning (Hassan, 2017) and their roles and responsibilities are complex and varied (Abbot & Graf, 2018). Despite this, a gap exists in the literature about researching the tutors' views about the role that they play. Abbot and Graf (2018, 245) confirm this gap by stating that “[n]umerous studies have shown the benefits of peer tutoring for students through a range of tutoring practices and roles. Far fewer have asked tutors directly

about their experiences". We confirm this because our literature search did not yield many studies on this aspect. Tutors are placed between faculty and students, thus doing what can be termed "supplemental teaching" and, as a result, they have to navigate, as part of their tutoring roles, the relationships which are tied to power and authority. Molotsi and Goosen (2019) conducted a qualitative case study in which they explored the collaborative learning approach in computer integration in the classroom in an ODL institution. They interviewed seven tutors and found that there was limited interaction between students and e-tutors. In another study, Hassan (2017) investigated tutors' movement downward and upwards along the semantic scale during tutorials. The study found that the pedagogical strategies that tutors adopted enabled them to strengthen and weaken semantic gravity and semantic density for semantic construction and cumulative knowledge building. In yet another study, Mills (2015) explored the experiences of two tutors. The findings of the study were that tutors experience challenges pertaining to students' indiscipline, short attention spans, lesson preparation and classroom management. As a way of responding to the challenges, the tutors used a variety of professional, personal and institutional coping mechanisms to deal with their classes and gained support from the teaching and administrative staff. As much as there are benefits of tutoring, such as improved academic performance, greater satisfaction with the faculty experience, deepening of the tutors' own academic learning and development of the tutors' own identities as leaders and teachers (Abbot & Graf, 2018), there are also challenges that they face. Abbot and Graf (2018) enumerate challenges related to tutors finding time to prepare and refresh their knowledge of the course material, role clarity, maintaining boundaries between formal tutoring and personal advice (students may be confused by tutors' roles and engage them on non-course-related matters) and developing student-tutor relationships. Hence, it is important to clarify the interactions that are packaged in the ITM.

5. Interaction in the implementation of the ITM

Interaction is one of the pillars of the facilitation of learning within the ODL environment (Hillman, Willis & Gunawardena, 1994; Sher, 2009; Moore & Kearsley, 2012; Zhou & Xu, 2015). Interactions can be synchronous (in real time) or asynchronous (not in real time), paralleling f2f or online tutor support. Moore's (1993) transactional distance theory is instrumental in closing the transactional gap in distance education. According to Moore (1993, 22), transactional distance is a "psychological and communication space" which can give rise to misunderstandings between students and tutors in a distance education context. Should this space be left unattended, the learning outcomes will not be attained. For interaction to be successful and meet the learning outcomes, it should take place at three levels, i.e., student-content interaction, student-tutor interaction and student-student interaction (Moore & Kearsley, 2012). Anderson and Dron (2011) add a fourth dimension, namely, student-interface interaction. This study focuses on student-tutor interaction as we opine that the tutor plays a role in facilitating the other interactions as well.

Tutor-student interaction, according to Zimmerman (2012), involves communication between the tutor and the student. Zimmerman, Schmidt, Becker, Peterson, Nyland and Surdick (2014) explain that improved communication between the tutor and the student clarifies their roles and responsibilities and leads to a better working relationship. In this way, the tutor and student engage in discussions about the content guided by each other's role expectation to improve the student's learning and communication. According to Vaughan (2010), online

contact between students and tutors heightens interaction and gives students a better understanding of tutors.

Student-content interaction occurs when students study the subject matter by themselves and that involves their unique knowledge, skills and attitudes (Swan, 2010). According to Moore (1989, 2), student-content interaction is “a defining characteristic of education where students are expected to interact with the study material or content”. Moore (1989) further argues that, without such interaction, it would be impossible for learning to occur, while Zimmerman (2012) notes that this type of interaction is characterised by the amount of time the student spends with the content. Xiao (2017, 129) indicates that student-content interaction plays a crucial role in distance learning, as it is the foundation upon which all other interactions are built. Hence, student-tutor interaction should not be underestimated in a distance learning environment.

In student-student interactions, students communicate with each other about the content (Moore, 1989) as they work on group projects, assignments or have discussions (Sher, 2009). Murray, Perez, Geist and Hedrick (2012) refer to such student interaction as “a collaborative exchange of information and ideas”. Tutors need to create spaces which facilitate student-student interactions as gap-filling agents between primary lectures and students. Researching their experiences can inform distance learning institutions so that improved student support can be realised.

Student-interface interaction engages students in online tasks, such as discussions, downloading study materials, completing online assignments and reading the online material about the subject content. According to Gosling (2008), institutions of higher learning advocate for a student-centred approach to teaching and learning which tutors should adopt. Ntuli and Gumbo (2018, 387) argue that “all types of interactions call for Unisa tutors and students to interact at various levels with students through the ITM in order for learning to take place”. The role of tutors is therefore crucial for ITM-based tutorage especially in ODL contexts. Their roles can enhance the understanding of their views and experiences about the ITM.

6. Tutors' role in the implementation of ITM

In an ODL environment, the tutor performs various roles in the facilitation of learning which include pedagogical, organisational, social and technical roles. The pedagogical role requires the tutor to guide and support students in the process of learning. It includes the facilitation of online and/or f2f discussions, learning according to the schedule provided by the faculty and empowering students to develop their own learning skills (Commonwealth of Learning, 2003). All pedagogical activities that the tutor performs require him/her to plan thoroughly. These include organising, setting the objectives and following procedures regarding the online or f2f tutorial classes. This is supported by the fact that teaching requires the teacher to choose and construct educational interventions and provide direct instruction when required (Anderson & Dron, 2011). Segoe (2017, 161) suggests that consistent and well-planned tutoring activities help distance education students to feel as if they are in a safe learning environment where they can ask questions, reveal their uncertainties and explore new dimensions in their studies.

The tutor performs a social function by communicating with students and making them feel welcomed in the course. This role requires the tutor to create a friendly and comfortable social environment in which students feel that learning is possible (McPherson & Nunes, 2004). Hence, one of the important activities a tutor can undertake is to provide students with positive comments to encourage and motivate them throughout their learning journey. Holmberg (2005) refers to

this as an empathetic approach to teaching and learning, also known as the tutor's affective or counselling role (Tait, 2003; Unisa, 2012). Bernath and Vidal (2007) indicate that such an environment is created by offering suggestions to encourage and motivate learners throughout the learning process. As the tutor performs a social role in the facilitation of learning, active participation is promoted through group work and reflective activities. According to Aksal (2009), these activities prevent or break down social barriers in the construction of knowledge.

Mtsweni and Abdullah (2014) state that tutors also perform a technical role in the facilitation of learning, since students need technical skills. This role is mostly performed when tutors facilitate online. During the facilitation of learning, a tutor can help students to access the course material and help students to navigate in an online environment before they begin with the actual course. As a result, tutors should be conversant with ICT systems if they are to assist and guide online students in this respect. Baghdadi (2011) indicates that tutors should allow a certain level of flexibility in their online tutorials to accommodate any unforeseen circumstances (e.g. technical problems and/or emergencies). Such flexibility will also address the needs of technologically challenged students who might require digital literacy training before engaging in a formal online class. Unisa tutors also perform pedagogical, administrative and affective roles (Unisa, 2012), similar to those described by Tait (2003).

7. Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework chosen for the study is Salmon's (2000) Five-stage Model of E-learning due to the blurred boundary between online and e-learning. A combined definition is that it is a structured learning activity which relies on technology – especially a computer (e-learning) and the intranet with its tools and resources (online learning) – to provide the necessary delivery modes to suit a particular academic purpose, which is effective teaching, learning, assessment and research (Gumbo, 2016).

The first stage of the model is access and motivation, where the tutor welcomes students online, guides them on how to access some of the materials, and motivates them to engage with him/her and with one another. Online socialisation is the second stage which, according to Westbrook (2012), is where the tutor is expected to create an environment that is conducive for learning and interaction to take place. Here, students are encouraged to engage with one another online as guided by the interaction framework developed by the tutor. Information exchange is the third stage where students are expected to discuss a particular topic or activity using discussion boards and chat rooms. A tutor intervenes and contacts those students who are not participating in the discussion, encouraging them to take part and contribute (Westbrook, 2012). The fourth stage involves knowledge construction, which requires students to handle complex activities, while working collaboratively and contributing to discussions (Salmon, Nie & Edirisigha, 2010). Development is the last stage of the framework, where students reflect on the goals set versus those that have been achieved, and how they can apply the acquired knowledge in their own lives.

The framework explains the tutor-student activities as they pertain to the context of the ITM in this study. Salmon's five stage e-learning model is relevant for this study because it synchronises the support that the tutors give students right from access and motivation to the development of their learning. It explains students' learning in five stages of online tutor support. The tutors welcome, encourage and motivate the students in the first stage. During the second stage, students are expected to socialise and introduce themselves on the

platform by providing a short biography. This is the first tutor-student interaction and student-student interaction on the platform. In the third stage, the students enjoy the tutor support as they engage with the material content and exchange information about their assignments and the challenges that they encounter in the course. They are given the liberty to solve problems by themselves and, at the same time, construct new knowledge. The fourth stage is when the tutors facilitate the process of learning for the students. Supporting and responding culminates in the fifth stage in the framework, which is about the development of students as they gain new knowledge in the course.

According to this framework, students should be supported through a structured developmental process if online learning is to be successful. It scaffolds a structured and paced programme of what Salmon (2000) calls “e-tivities” (online-based activities). Support and development are offered to students at each stage as explained above, enabling them to realise their online learning expertise incrementally. The weaknesses of the framework may be reduced flexibility caused by timetabling (Lisewski & Joyce, 2003).

8. Problem statement

For many years, Unisa has supported students using f2f tutorials as a strategy to increase participation and improve throughput rates. Recently, Unisa decided to change the strategy of supporting students by implementing a new tutor model known as the ITM. This change meant that the tutors had now to support students online. The tutors' views of the ITM are however not known yet. This creates a need for a study that explores the tutors' views of the ITM as they attempt to support the students in an ODL. Consequently, the present study addressed the following question: *What are the tutors' views of the ITM for student support at Unisa?* This main question gave rise to the following sub-questions:

- What are the tutors' views regarding the success of the ITM in tutorial classes?
- What are the tutors' views regarding the challenges of the ITM in tutorial classes?
- How does the ITM impact the tutors' delivery of tutorials?

9. Methodology

This study followed a multiple case study design to get an in-depth analysis of the tutors' views in a single ODL institution. An intrinsic case study involves the investigation of one unique case (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). According to Punch (2009) and McMillan and Schumacher (2010), a case is a design which helps the researcher to study a problem or issue in depth within a bounded context. We entered the participants' life worlds to study their views as tutors involved with Unisa's tutoring systems and to understand the meaning that they ascribe to their practice as tutors. The study was conducted at the five Unisa regional service centres that are geographically dispersed in the Gauteng region.

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data from six purposively selected participants who tutored in both the f2f and online platforms. According to Laforest (2009, 1), “semi-structured interviews can be used to gather qualitative information”. Laforest (2009) claims that semi-structured interviews are suitable for working with small samples hence we applied them in interviewing the six participants who were selected in the study. Salmon's framework helped with the design of the interview guide that solicited the participants' views about the ITM. The interview guide covered these aspects which helped to gather the tutors' views on tutors'

understanding of the ITM, effects of the ITM on their facilitation of learning and support, support that they need in order to support students effectively in turn, students' access and participation, success factors about the ITM and challenges they experienced in the ITM.

The interview instrument was pre-tested on two tutors whose tasks resembled those of the participants selected for the study. This accounted for the trustworthiness of the study. According to Turner (2010), a pre-test should be done with participants who have similar characteristics as those selected for the actual study. No change was made to the interview guide as the pre-test did not reveal any problems with the tool. Appointments for the interviews were negotiated with the participants. Each interview lasted about 30 minutes and was conducted face-to-face. The interviews were recorded as that "ensures completeness of the verbal interaction and provides material for reliability checks" (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010, 360).

McMillan and Schumacher (2010, 367) define qualitative data analysis as "primarily an inductive process of organizing data into categories and identifying patterns and relationships among the categories". Guided by this assertion, data analysis in this study followed a thematic analysis. We adopted Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework of analysis. Following these phases, we familiarised ourselves with the data, generated initial codes, searched for themes, reviewed themes, defined themes (guided by the research questions) and carried out the write-up. Thematic analysis was suited to this study due to the flexibility that it can offer; it is not rigid, rather, it enables the research to move back and forth during analysis in an attempt to make sense of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Its flexibility is thus suited for analysing the data which involves a complex phenomenon, such as teaching and learning. The goal of thematic analysis is to identify themes which are important and which address the issue at hand (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). The analysis yielded the following themes: tutors' knowledge and understanding of the ITM and its importance in the ODL environment, success factors in the implementation of the ITM for student support, challenges in the implementation of the ITM in facilitating learning and the impact of ITM on tutors' delivery of tutorials.

Ethical clearance for the study was obtained in 2015. Permission was also obtained to use Unisa employees as study participants. The participants were promised absolute confidentiality once the aims of the study had been explained to them, and they were assured that they could withdraw their participation at any time. All interviews were recorded after obtaining their consent.

10. Findings

The success factors of the ITM

All the tutors who participated in the interviews had three years of f2f and online tutoring experience. According to them, the appointment of qualified tutors to facilitate tutoring through ITM is the first success factor in the programme. The success of their tutoring roles lies more in the institutional support that they receive. They thus expressed their appreciation for the support received from Unisa as follows:

Regional administrative support staff [are] quite helpful, such as Tutorial Officers who provide scheduling and constant communication on the changes in the programme.

As they represent the primary lecturers, they expressed opinions about support that they received from them:

Academic staff insisted that all face-to-face tutors should have activities for students, at least two questions. The questions would be sent to the lecturer for quality purpose[s] and [would] be sent back to the tutor to give to students and work it out with students to assess them. These efforts close the gap between the tutor and the academic staff, which is really essential. One needs to be proactive and start the conversation. Every time I send an e-mail to them, the lecturers do come back to me, however if you don't start the communication, the lecturer will never [do so].

Another aspect regarding the success of their tutorage lies in the training about the ITM accompanied by the supply of computers for learning and internet access, training in basic computer skills and the use of tutorial equipment to facilitate effective learning. The participants claimed that they were also orientated on how to use the myUnisa platform for f2f and e-tutoring. However, they needed a practical experience of working with the technology online:

a power point presentation ... [We] would like to see trainings being done practically, where tutors will go to a computer lab and navigate on myUnisa, and [we] wanted the training to be done continuously, so that [we] would not forget.

The support that the tutors got from the lecturers would, in turn, make them offer learning support to their students in accordance with Salmon's model. There is therefore a need to give support to tutors so that the four interactions, identified by Hillman et al. (1994), Sher (2009), Moore and Kearsley (2012), Vaughan (2010) and Zhou and Xu (2015), can be realised.

The challenging factors of the ITM

Once tutors have been appointed and "activated" on myUnisa for the task of f2f or online tutoring, they are expected to start working with students. However, not all of them had access to the tutoring materials on the myUnisa Learning Management System (LMS). They were allocated the passwords but they were unable to log in, as one tutor explained:

... twice already I found that the password does not work, I used the student's password to download the material.

They found out that, for f2f tutorials, they do not have access to materials that are loaded on myUnisa until the lecturer gives them permission to do so. Sometimes the lecturers granted permission late in the semester, which prevented the tutors from assisting the students.

The tutors were also frustrated by the non-participation of students in online tutorials. They stated that participation happened more readily in a f2f tutorial class where it was easier to manage and engage. When students worked in groups, it was easy to notice whether someone participated or not. The non-participation of students left the tutors unsure of whether the students understood the content. Students logged in online to:

open the material [...] I suppose they read [it], but they do not respond. Very few of them interact with the tutor.

Role clarification is crucial in any interaction where certain tasks should be performed. Tutors felt that the students did not understand the students' role and that of a tutor. Some students expected the tutors to teach them. Although the literature makes the role of tutors and students explicit (Commonwealth of Learning, 2003; Tait, 2003; Anderson & Dron, 2011; Unisa, 2012), the tutors felt that most students did not grasp what their role entails and waited to be "spoon-fed" by their tutors. The tutors felt that student orientation should be considered soon after

student registration. A lack of internet access for students, feedback from the module lecturers, and tutor guidance by the module lecturer were enumerated as further challenges.

The tutors felt that Unisa has a role to play in terms of alerting students about their expectations when studying in an ODL context. A tutor stated:

Students need to receive information from the institution about the role of an e-tutor, so that they are able to interact with her and get help at all times.

The most important hindrance to tutorage via the ITM involved access for both the tutors and the students. While access is hailed as a special feature of distance education (Moore & Kearsley, 2012), the findings of this study showed that not enough is being done to ensure access, thus the ITM is not working as expected when it comes to the tutor-student interaction.

This finding does not support the literature in terms of the four interactions that should happen in tutorage (Anderson & Dron, 2011; Moore & Kearsley, 2012). Furthermore, the finding does not support Salmon's model fully; in terms of this finding, the tutors cannot give the expected support if students are passive.

The impact of ITM on tutors' delivery of tutorials

The tutors acknowledged that the ITM had changed the way they facilitated as it required them to be creative and to explore best practices for tutoring online as well as f2f. The varied groups of students that they engaged created this need for creativity. One participant explained:

The support that I get from the administrative staff assisted me to cope and understand that I am dealing with a different kind of group, compared to [the] face-to-face group.

The tutors indicated that dealing with students online, rather than f2f, is challenging since they are required to prepare with students in mind in order to be able to assist them to achieve their learning objectives. However, one tutor held a different view:

I get to imagine students' existence even if they are not there and that helps me a lot, although it is a challenge, but this is one of the strategies that help me to cope with the changes as a tutor involved in both offerings.

Tutors are expected to integrate technology even in the delivery of f2f tutorials which requires creative thinking, research and learning from others, for instance, in terms of the need for enhanced communication using myUnisa, as one participant noted:

When you have posted something online, you need to make an announcement so that even those who did not visit the site should be able to see that there is something new on the platform.

Overall, the findings reflect some success and tutors' positive views about working online with students within the ITM. However, based on the challenges revealed above, the ITM seems not to realise the developmental goals stated in Salmon's (2000) framework. The basic challenge lies at the baseline of Salmon's model, which is access. It, in turn, affects everything that follows during the developmental stages. Based on the students' passivity and their limited online participation, information exchange, knowledge co-construction and student development cannot be realised optimally. Student passivity runs counter to the tutors' provision of support. While the tutors seem to be happy with the support that they get, the support that they give to the students, in turn, is compromised due to this passivity. This means that, in the light of students' need for blended teaching and learning (online

and f2f) at Unisa, Salmon's framework cannot be implemented. Oscillating between online and f2f is an unavoidable truth in the context of a distance education university such as Unisa. Hence, the standards and rigidity which are imposed by Salmon's framework, i.e. the "dangers" (Lisewski & Joyce, 2003), do not allow the ITM to fit comfortably into the mould of the framework.

11. Conclusion

In exploring the views of tutors regarding the use of the ITM for tutor support at Unisa, the findings revealed three main aspects: the successes, challenges and impact of the ITM on tutors' delivery of tutorials. The success of the ITM can therefore be adjudged partly in terms of what these findings reveal within the context of Salmon's five-stage e-learning model. While it benefits students to a certain extent, as reflected in the tutors' views, tutorage (especially online) revealed a number of challenges which require attention. In addition to tutor training, Unisa should orientate students into the ITM, especially in respect of the tutor-student roles. Salmon's model provides a basis for implementing the ITM. However, issues of access compromise its envisaged realisation. Without access to computers and internet, there will be no interaction between the tutors and students, or among students themselves, an aspect on which Salmon's model places a high premium. This calls for Unisa to improve computer and internet access for students wherever they are. The mobile station service should be extended to tutorage. Unisa could also consider collaboration with other universities to facilitate student and tutor access. This study contributes knowledge about tutors' views as they relate to the use of tutor models to support student learning. The tutors' views highlight the successes and challenges of the ITM. The complexities of the ITM are evident when it is juxtaposed against Salmon's framework.

The limitations of this research lies in the absence of the students' voices which future studies should investigate.

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