Assessing the quality of the integrated tutor model for student support in Open Distance Learning

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Abstract

The demand for university education has put pressure on institutions of higher learning to provide access and quality student support because increased access to higher education should not compromise the quality of student support services. Tutorial support in Open Distance and e-Learning (ODeL) is one of the support services used by institutions to ensure increasing academic access, participation, and success. The Senate Teaching and Learning Committee (STLC) of the University of South Africa (Unisa) appointed a committee in 2012 to develop the Integrated Tutor Model (ITM) to enhance academic activities. We established that there is a need to inquire into the quality of the ITM on tutor support services. We developed this qualitative exploratory study from the first author's PhD study that assessed the quality of tutorial support services that Unisa offers through the ITM. The ITM model integrates face-to-face (F2F) and online tutor systems in Unisa. We purposively selected students who participated in the F2F tutorials of the first and second semesters in 2022 to participate in this study. We collected data through individual semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs). We learned that the students hold positive views about the quality of tutorials in terms of time management and the quality of recordings on Microsoft Teams, the competency of the tutors offering the modules, and the communication that they receive from the tutors. There were, however, challenges that the students faced such as load-shedding, network-related problems, and personal issues. The tutors mitigated these challenges by sending the students the recordings of the sessions. The study shares knowledge about the tutors' skills and creativity in the use of the ITM to provide quality support of student learning in an ODL higher institutional environment.

Keywords: tutoring, open distance e-learning, integrated tutor model, quality

Introduction

The widening of access to higher education has increased the demand for student support services for many universities to enhance teaching and learning and improve retention of students, most particularly students in distance learning (Younger et al., 2019). Higher education, especially in ODL, has been actively encouraged to find more effective and flexible student support models. These models include multimodal, collaborative, and self-directed learning (Shabani & Maboe, 2021). The purpose of these models is to provide students with access to quality learning experiences to meet institutional imperatives for effectiveness and efficiency. Student support is the link between an educational institution and its students, and it includes course materials, the institution's systems and subsystems, and various support services (Shabani & Maboe, 2021). Student support is crucial, especially in ODL (Ntuli & Gumbo, 2021). One of the crucial aspects of student support is the quality of education offered to students. Quality is a multidimensional term that is dynamic and may be perceived differently in varied contexts (Dicker et al., 2018). However, for this article, we consider quality to be offering education that is socially desirable and transformative for students, their teachers, and the culture of the institution. Dicker et al. (2018, p. 1) argued that

> students who perceive themselves as receiving poor-quality education may be less likely to engage and fulfil their academic potential or may fail to continue their studies. Students may feel dissatisfied with their university education if what the university offers and delivers does not match their expectations.

There is a close link between student learning, engagement, and retention. Universities should, therefore, devise means to mitigate attrition and demoralisation that may result from poor education resulting from a lack of quality student support. Unisa identified the ITM to ensure that all students (online and F2F) are supported effectively. However, 13 years after its implementation in 2012 (Unisa, 2012), the quality of the ITM-based tutor support services is yet to be established. Ntuli and Gumbo (2019) claimed that it is crucial to ensure that distance learning institutions employ tutors who will provide quality, efficient, and effective tutor support. This could be done through quality platforms of engagement that will encourage different forms of interaction during tutorial sessions. It is also crucial that academics provide support to tutors who facilitate learning for students and ensure that all the necessary resources are provided to allow tutoring to succeed. To this end, we undertook this study to assess the quality of tutor support services through the ITM at Unisa. The objectives of this study were:

- to describe the quality of tutor support service provided to the undergraduate students at Unisa;
- to explore students' views on the quality of tutors in the ITM at Unisa; and
- to assess the response of the ITM to students' academic needs at Unisa.

To achieve these objectives, we reviewed relevant literature on the provision of quality tutorials and tutoring in distance learning as they pertain to the ITM at Unisa, tutor

competency, and enhanced quality tutor support services. We describe the transformative learning theory that we chose and justify it as well as show its relevance to the study. We then describe the methods we applied, motivate for them, and offer the findings.

Literature review

Quality provision of tutorials through ITM at Unisa

Institutions of higher learning in South Africa have experienced growth in terms of student intake because of their response to the government's call to increase access and participation in higher education and to redress issues of inequality in education. According to the South African Department of Education (1997, p. 222), this call intended to "transform higher education through the development of a programme-based higher education system, planned, funded, and governed as a single coordinated system." An increase of access to education suggests that the quality of education and support to students entering higher education should not be compromised if we are to avoid student attrition. We suggest that the quality of education in higher institutions could be enhanced through effective student support programmes. Increasing the numbers of students admitted without enhancing quality can negatively affect the reputation of the institution. It is in this light that we view the quantity and quality of institutional growth as being inseparable and complementary.

According to Ntuli (2020), Unisa provides tutorial support through the ITM, and students expect not only to be supported, but to receive quality support. "Some of these expectations are impacted by the increased student fees because, if students pay more, they expect quality services to be provided to them" (Jacklin & La Riche, 2009, p. 739). However, Dicker et al. (2018) criticised the importance of the focus on student fees in the United Kingdom as being an overly simplistic view of student success. This implies that apart from placing value on the money paid, quality service happens at the point of learning.

One of the key features of Unisa's Strategic Plan 2016–2020 was that it aimed to provide quality student experience during the years of study at the institution. This means that the institution would ensure that students receive tutorial support that would assist them to manage and succeed in their studies. Chikoko and Chiome (2013, p. 155) claimed that "quality tutorials are the cornerstone of a university's business." Research can determine the level of quality education provided to effect an improvement. The focus of this study was on the quality of tutorials offered to students, the competency of tutors who facilitate learning, and the quality of communication between the student support department and the students.

Quality tutoring in distance learning

Tutoring is one of the strategies used in distance learning environments worldwide to support students with their studies. According to Ntuli (2020, p. 57), the quality of tutoring is determined by the interactions between the tutor and the students "who both contribute to the learning process." These interactions, during tutorial sessions, assist the students to understand concepts and what is expected of them to fulfil the learning outcomes. In addition,

the student-driven activities that are executed in class allow the students to learn from one another in these sessions. A good teacher promotes teamwork and collaborative work among students (Zhou et al., 2019). Playing this down may compromise the quality of tutoring in distance learning environments given that students' interaction is crucial to learning (Zhou et al., 2019). It is clear that tutorship impacts on the quality of educational offerings to the students.

The competency of tutors for quality educational provisioning

Tutors in distance learning environments attempt to find innovative ways to enhance the quality of tutoring to ensure the retention and success of students. The tutoring community can redefine its strategies to provide quality tutor support particularly in technology-based environments. The characteristics of tutors that enable them to facilitate learning in a distance learning environment, according to The Commonwealth of Learning (2009, p. 36), include:

- being friendly and approachable; encouraging students to stay in the tutoring session;
- knowing the content well; planning and preparing thoroughly around students' needs;
- facilitating learning and helping students with academic and technological support in the related course of study;
- assisting students to develop time management and study skills;
- knowing that students are unique and autonomous learners;
- guiding the dialogue or interaction in the tutorial session; and
- observing tutorials and changing tutoring strategies should a need arise to ensure interaction or dialogue.

Clearly, it is important that these characteristics are enhanced by the institution to ensure that students benefit from tutorials and that certain requirements are met before tutors are appointed. These include having a master's or doctoral degree as a prerequisite. All tutors must attend training provided by the Centre for Professional Development (CPD) to develop the quality of their facilitation skills. This assists those who come from the corporate world and may not have adequate pedagogical skills.

Enhanced quality tutor support services through communication

Unisa as an ODeL institution is unique because it is aimed at bridging the gap that exists geographically, economically, and socially between students and the institution. It focuses on removing barriers to access learning and promoting flexibility of learning since students are seen as the main foci of the education process. ODeL depends on peer support and uses a broad range of teaching, coaching, and mentoring activities. Unisa values the relationships it builds between the students and itself that are anchored in student support. For students to have a positive learning experience and to have their academic needs met, the university must provide open lines of communication (Buultjens & Robinson, 2011) and provide quality support for students who enrol for the tutorial programmes (Ntuli, 2020).

The universities need to use various platforms to reach out to their students to build equity of access and increase the quality of communication. A study conducted by Zarzycka et al. (2021), on the role played by social media in students' communication and collaboration in distance learning found that the increasing use of Facebook for professional purposes improved communication and collaboration among the students during distance learning. To a large extent, Unisa, as an OdeL institution uses various technological and social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Telegram, Facebook etc., for example, short messaging systems, emails, and university portals such as myUnisa to support students. This study can enhance our understanding of this service from the perspective of the ITM.

Theoretical framework

Transformative learning theory guided this study in assessing the quality of tutor support through ITM. This theory is depicted in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1
Pillars of transformative learning theory
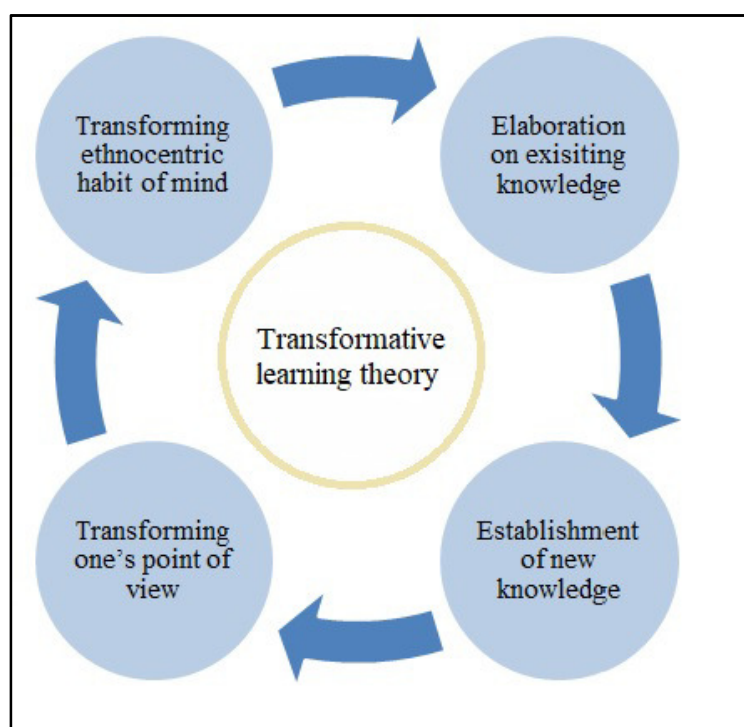
According to Mezirow (1997), transformative learning theory involves a process that develops autonomous thinking through effecting change in a frame of reference in an individual and that transformative learning happens when a student moves towards a frame of reference that is inclusive, discriminating, self-reflective, and integrative of experience. This can happen only when circumstances permit, and the environment is conducive to executing the learning tasks given. Transformations in frames of reference take place through critical reflection and the change in a habit of mind, or they may result from an accretion of changes in points of view. Transformative learning theory emphasises an autonomous way of thinking on an individual level and is rooted in the way human beings communicate.

This theory is based on four processes of learning that culminate in transformation. They include learners being able to elaborate on an existing viewpoint, establish a new point of view, transform their point of view, and transform the ethnocentric habit of their minds by becoming aware of, and critically reflecting on, their generalised bias in the way they view other groups.

This theory operates in the discourse of a tutorial session in which the tutor facilitates learning and communication in the learning process. According to Mezirow (1997), transformation happens in an individual who is, in this case, an adult learner whose goal is to become an autonomous and responsible thinker in the learning environment. We are cognisant of the fact that not all Unisa students are adult learners. However, they suit the definition because, given the quality support, their goal is to become autonomous and responsible thinkers. The implications of this theory are that tutors should be able to transform the teaching and learning spaces by facilitating learning that assists the students in discovering the knowledge they possess, transferring what they know to new contexts, and elaborating on existing knowledge to establish new knowledge that changes their frames of reference. Robertson et al. (2012) claimed that prior knowledge enables students to make connections and transfer their prior knowledge to new contexts. The tutor's responsibility is to validate what and how they understand so as to arrive at the best judgment of the topic under discussion.

Students are motivated to establish new points of view if they understand that the goal of learning is to transfer what they learn between two contexts (Niyonsaba et al., 2022). Establishing a new viewpoint may happen as they interact with the tutor and their peers on the new topic. This is in line with the principle of *Ubuntu* that emphasises the fact that human beings are social beings who are in constant communication with each other for the purpose of learning as they are in this context. *Ubuntu* subscribes to collectivism versus individualism because learners need one another to learn (Khomba, 2018); learning is a social process, and discourse becomes central to making meaning.

When learners transform their points of view, it means that they can take prior knowledge and apply it to their learning or social environment to solve new problems. This means that their minds are transformed, their frame of reference has changed, and they no longer think and act in a stereotypical way. They can reflect on, and discriminate in, the way they view things, and they can develop different perspectives. This happens if an institution provides quality tutoring with competent tutors who possess pedagogical tutoring skills that will assist students to become responsible thinkers and reach a level of autonomy that assists them to function independently in a distance learning environment.

Research design

The constructivist belief that deals with the world of human experience underpinned this study (Cohen et al., 2017). "Reality is socially constructed" (Mertens, 2014, p. 12) and the interpretivists/constructivists validate the participants' views regarding the topic under study

(Creswell, 2018) and recognise the impact that this can have on their own background and experiences. Constructivism supports the transformative learning theory, thus facilitating an understanding of the interactions that take place during the ITM-based tutorials. Considering this, we adopted a qualitative research approach and an exploratory case study design because it "provides a detailed account and analysis of one case" (Johnson & Christensen, 2012, p. 395). According to Creswell (2007, p. 74), "every case should be bounded by certain elements such as time, size of people involved, place and the context in which the study will be undertaken." Here, of course, the case refers to the quality of the ITM that we assessed in the context of Unisa.

Participant selection and data collection methods

We purposefully selected five Unisa students from the College of Accounting Sciences, the College of Human Sciences, the College of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences, and the College of Law, making a total of 20 students. We selected these students because of their involvement in tutorials during the first and second semesters of 2022. Of these 20 students, 16 participated in a focus group discussion (FGD) and four took part in individual semi-structured interviews. We conducted two FGDs to source information that would help us better address the research objectives. According to Punch and Oancea (2014), focus groups consist of a small group drawn from the larger population under study, so each group was comprised of eight students. Interviews enable participants to reveal their understanding of the world in which they live and to express their own point of view (Cohen et al., 2017). Tutoring of the targeted students happened through the ITM so that they could share information about its quality. The semi-structured interviews enabled flexibility and follow-ups since we only had standard questions and provided space to add more questions or to probe during the interviews to get clarity on certain aspects.

We conducted both FGDs and individual semi-structured interviews virtually using Microsoft Teams to complete the verbal engagements and provide material for reliability checks in accordance with McMillan and Schumacher (2014). Each FGD lasted between 45 and 60 minutes, while the individual interviews lasted for about 30 minutes. After obtaining the students' consent, we used the recording functionality of Microsoft Teams to capture the data. According to Jamshed (2014), this makes it easier for interviewers to focus on the interview content and the verbal prompts and to generate verbatim transcripts of the interviews.

Data analysis

We analysed the collected data thematically by 1) familiarising ourselves with the transcripts by reading them repeatedly; 2) coding the data as we started observing the patterns that were coming through; 3) organising the data into categories followed by the identification of patterns and relationships among those categories; and 4) deciding on the themes that best described the categories. Four themes were generated ultimately. A fundamental task in qualitative research is to identify themes (Mishra & Dey, 2022). This process was followed to get information that provided answers to the research questions. According to McMillan and

Schumacher (2014), inductive analysis is the process through which qualitative researchers synthesise and make meaning from the data by starting with specific data and ending with categories and patterns.

Validity and trustworthiness

We ensured validity by spending three months in the field collecting data on the quality of the ITM (both online and in F2F modes) and in ODeL through Microsoft Teams online platform. We used semi-structured individual interviews to collect data on Microsoft Teams. This entailed allowing the participants to express their views as we asked them questions and probing for more information and clarity. Later, we consulted the participants to verify the transcriptions to ensure full representation of the information that they provided.

Ethics

Unisa granted us ethical clearance and permission to interview the students in this study and consent forms ensured that their participation was voluntary. The students opted for privacy, anonymity, and confidentiality all of which were upheld and guaranteed during the interview sessions. Furthermore, we promised the students absolute confidentiality once we had explained the aims of the study to them, and we assured them that they could withdraw their participation at any time. We recorded all the interviews after obtaining the students' consent.

Findings

We report the findings under the following themes that we aligned with the research questions: quality of tutorials, competency of tutors, and meeting students' needs through the ITM. We referred to participants through the codes St-1 to St-20 where St stands for Student.

Quality of ITM tutorials

This theme was comprised of two sub-themes, namely, quality of time and quality of recordings. The students expressed an acceptable level of satisfaction with the tutorials they received from the Unisa regional service centres that are placed strategically throughout the country to provide F2F access to students and bridge the geographical gap. The staff in these centres coordinate the F2F tutorials. During the FGDs and individual semi-structured interviews, the students indicated that they would not have coped with their academic needs had it not been for the tutorials. They shared their views on the quality of tutorials with a specific focus on time management by tutors and the quality of online recordings.

Quality of time

According to the students, quality tutorials run smoothly, and time is well managed in F2F tutorials. St-4 (FGD1) indicated in reference to both F2F and online classes, "The tutor manages the class very well; I have no doubt about that." St-3 (FGD2) stated, "The time is well managed in our tutorial classes because our tutor starts on time, we actually find her on [Microsoft] Teams already before we arrive." St-5 (FGD 2) supported this view by saying

that "the time is well managed, and tutorials always take place, they are never cancelled." It is important for tutors to manage time in the tutorials (see Sahito et al., 2016) and this was evident to some extent in these findings. While students were satisfied with time management, some expressed dissatisfaction in individual interviews. According to St-6 (FGD1), "some students attend late, and the tutor always waits for these students to log on into the class. Then the tutor starts addressing the content." St-7 (FGD2) added that online classes are quite comfortable and of good quality except that time is too limited.

St-6 also alluded to the issue of time in saying, "Oh, the class is time managed, however, students are not attending well [so] the class would delay for accommodating the latecomers."

The findings of this study show that time management is essential to the running of tutorials because it promotes efficiency. As students attend tutorials, they learn the art of organising and managing their own time in their studies. Considering this, some students complained about their peers joining the tutorials late since this contributed to the tutors starting late. The acquisition of time management skills assists the students in coping with the demands associated with distance learning. We believe that time management is essential for the student who is still to become independent in the ODeL environment and may be facing a full schedule of assignment submissions. This skill will ensure that students are well prepared, organised, and focused to manage their daily lives and complete their academic tasks on time. This finding is in line with the first pillar of transformative learning theory that seeks to help learners become independent and transform their frame of reference to cope with the demands of the ODeL (Mezirow, 1997).

Quality of recordings

The quality of recordings of tutorials offered by the institution was also raised. Participants expressed their gratitude that tutorials are recorded and shared with all students, in particular, those who may have missed them. St-1 (FGD2) said, "The recordings are very useful because we also get an Excel file that we use in the class so that we can go and practice in our own time and understand more using the recordings." According to St-4 (FGD1), "The quality of the information coming through, such as sound quality and video quality, is fine and there's no loss of information during the process." During a one-on-one interview, St-11 was of the view that access should be granted to all recordings for all students even if they are not located in a region where the tutorial was held. For her,

> I would love to always be able to connect to the other regions, not just be limited to my region and gain access to their recordings. I have really found them very helpful considering that, during the past years, I never really heard [about] such interaction with the recorded content.

St-8 supported St-11 by saying,

> The only thing is, sometimes, not all the recordings are available. I appreciate the class recordings because it's not always possible to attend live. So, for me, being able to look at the recordings again, especially for examination preparation, that's also useful even though I attended the live sessions.

These findings suggest that when tutorials are recorded, content can be accessed at any time if the recordings are made available by the regional administrators. Even if they were not able to attend the class, if students receive the recorded content, they would be able to interact later with the tutor and with other students to gain insight into an area they might have difficulty understanding. Collaborative learning fosters new and creative ideas in the learning environment (Zhou et al., 2019). Students who listen to the recordings can come to understand the content and engage with their peers and the tutor as a collective. It is in this light that student interaction is critical (Zhou et al., 2019). It is through interaction with others that transformation occurs in the learning environment. This finding can be understood in terms of the second pillar of the transformative learning theory that encourages students to reach a level of understanding that will assist them in their learning. Their interaction in the co-construction of knowledge will boost a high level of understanding.

The key competencies of a tutor in ODeL environment

This is the second theme that was identified in the analysis of the data. The success of the tutor support is linked to the tutors who facilitate teaching and learning as directed in the ITM and the support for students. Tutors are subject specialists; they are employed because they are qualified to tutor a particular module and they are expected to have mastered the content. The students expressed gratitude for the tutorials they received from their tutors, and they shared their views in this regard. According to St-3 (FGD2), "The tutor is a very knowledgeable person. She can engage and explain concepts that I met at the university for the first time." St-12 (FGD2) indicated, "I am very satisfied with the quality of the classes tutors provide; they are helpful to me."

Tutors need to prepare before they engage with students online and their level of preparedness is another determinant of the quality of the tutorials. The students mentioned that their tutor presented content in PowerPoint, and this shows that she took time to prepare for the tutorial. As a result, such observations boost students' confidence and raise the level of trust in the content facilitated during a tutorial. St-1 (FGD2) expressed these views in saying,

> The tutoring skills of this tutor [are] good because I am benefiting a lot . . . From what I could see and experience from all the tutorial classes, the tutor is always well prepared, she always has the slide summarising the study guides and all of that and it's very helpful . . . And I would say, for me, [I] always . . . feel confident after a tutorial class [about] my calculations and I can attempt other calculations too.

St-13 (FGD1) said, "The class has been very informative for me because the tutor is able to explain concepts thoroughly for us; he makes sure that everyone understands by giving practical examples."

The abovementioned facilitation skills are in line with the point made by Ntuli and Gumbo (2019) that employing quality tutors will ensure efficient and effective student support, especially during the facilitation of learning on the platforms made available by the institution. In relation to the ITM, it is evident that tutors play an important role by transforming students' frame of reference in accordance with transformative learning theory. The students mentioned that their tutors can explain new concepts in a practical way that enables them to understand the concepts. Once students understand these concepts, their level of confidence increases, and they can build on this to create their own understanding. This happens when they engage with peers and learn collaboratively because the goal of learning is to be able to transfer knowledge to other contexts (Niyonsaba et al., 2022). From the constructivist and transformative learning theory perspectives, the tutors emphasise the active involvement of the students in finding their own understanding of the concepts.

As much as students were happy about the quality of tutorials offered through the ITM, there were also views that indicated that the quality was compromised. During a one-on-one interview, St-14 indicated that access to tutorials is compromised by load-shedding and network connectivity. She added, "I wish this load-shedding would come to an end because we are struggling, and we need to get as much information as we can in the tutorials." Another aspect that students highlighted was poor and late attendance of other students online. St-13 (FGD 1) explained, "I missed one hour in my classes because of load-shedding. I also needed to ask some questions during the class, but I couldn't because I was disconnected." St-17 (FGD2) supported St-15 by indicating that "network is also a problem, it compromises the quality of our tutorials, because during the tutorial, you find that network is not good, and I lose some information that would assist me with my assignment."

The findings in this theme revealed that tutors involved in the ITM are competent because they possess the facilitation skills required for an ODeL environment. The tutors also meet the academic needs of students and know what strategies they need to apply to respond to the students' challenges in the module content. According to the Commonwealth of Learning (2009) and Ntuli (2020), a tutor who understands that each student is unique, and that students learn differently determines the quality of the tutorial. This finding implies that a blanket approach to the provision of quality tutorials is not effective in the ODeL environment. Given the diverse student population in tutorial classes, different approaches should be used to facilitate learning effectively.

Meeting students' academic needs

It became apparent that the students understood the role of the ITM in their academic journey. The findings indicated that communication is key to meeting students' academic needs. According to the students, communication challenges should be addressed by the institution by investigating the efficiency of the platforms or modes of communication that

students use to contact each other. St-18 (FGD1) highlighted the need to enhance communication with students to meet their learning needs in saying,

> I want to attend classes because there are parts of my module that are difficult since I did not study accounting at high school. Attending these classes would help, but we do not receive communication on time [although] sometimes we do.

St-19 (FGD1) stated,

> I don't have a problem and the ITM is meeting my needs more especially that I work during the day, and I can attend tutorials in the evening and on Saturdays. I can say, ja, ITM is meeting my needs.

The regional administrators and the planning of the ITM contribute positively to meeting students' academic needs. The administrators in the regions provide students with a tutorial schedule for the month. This schedule is adjusted as and when new information is received from the tutor who will be presenting the academic content. The schedules are shared through various communication channels such as emails, Facebook, and Yammer. Emails are mostly used to provide information to students, and they can access such information only if they check their myLife email account regularly. St-20 (FGD2) said,

> We get regular emails and if I do have a question or ask for information because of missed part of the class, the staff send us a link to a recording . . . so that I can catch up on the information I missed because I didn't attend or was unable to attend the full session.

All tutorial schedules are also regularly posted on Facebook because this platform is used by students to source the information they need to function academically. The regions have taken advantage of this platform to enhance communication with students so that they do not miss their classes. St-L (FGD2) described the ITM communication through Facebook in saying,

> My experience is not that bad because I was just going through my Facebook, and I saw a tutorial scheduled for Gauteng. It was then I started attending. However, due to connectivity, I was listening, maybe half, and going out. Maybe because I didn't come prepared and somewhere I was lost on what they were talking about in the class.

St-6 (FGD1) indicated that she learned about tutorials on a specific module on Telegram. According to this student, "Region [X] is limiting and if it wasn't for Telegram, I wouldn't have known about this class, I wouldn't have access to links of other regions at all."

The quality of communication during a class relies on being connected online. If the network is disrupted, this affects the quality of a tutorial. The students indicated that the quality is sometimes compromised by things that cannot be controlled such as load-shedding and connectivity issues. This was expressed by St-16 (FGD2), who indicated that "the quality is compromised by load-shedding and connectivity, too." St-6 (FGD1) supported St-16 (FGD2)

by stating that "network is also a problem; it compromises the quality of our tutorials because, during the tutorial, you find that network is not good, and one cannot hear well what the tutor and other students are saying."

The findings in this theme show that communication and the ITM offerings are inseparable, and both play a significant role in the life of students, particularly in distance learning. Consequently, communication is part of the effort to build relationships between the students and the university. This finding calls for the university to take a conscious decision to build relationships with students through open lines of communication. According to the students, communication from Unisa regional centres enabled them to attend tutorials and get clarity in areas of the modules where they were struggling. Communication not only enhances students' experiences and meets their academic needs, but it builds a sense of belonging and creates a bond between the university and the students (Buultjens & Robinson, 2011). Most importantly, it provides quality support to the students who enrol in tutorial programmes (Ntuli, 2020).

Conclusion

The findings show that the students are generally satisfied with the quality of the ITM as it pertains to tutor support and feel that the ITM responds well to their needs. The quality of tutoring enables students to become more confident and better organised, and to learn more effectively in an ODeL environment. The students' shared experiences revealed that the quality of tutoring includes the provision of online tutorial recordings so that learning continues, even after a live tutorial, by interacting with other students and learning from them. The students, including those who missed the live tutorials because of network and load-shedding problems, are provided with the recorded content. The tutors support the students through the ITM and this satisfied them to a great extent. This indicates that the tutors are friendly and approachable and this is a demonstration of *Ubuntu* as well.

The tutors showed a high level of competency and skill in making the students understand the content of the module. They attended their tutorials on time, except when students who delay joining stall the starting time because the tutors are willing to wait for them. The findings reveal the need for Unisa to consider social media platforms for communication, such as Telegram, because Unisa students use this platform to interact with other students regarding their studies. Network connectivity and load-shedding issues also surfaced. However, loadshedding, which is a national problem, cannot be blamed on Unisa and does not connect to the quality aspect of tutorials. However, as stated above, the tutors understand the challenges presented by load-shedding and other network-related and personal issues that the students face, and they showed *Ubuntu* by offering recorded classes as extended support. It is critical that students also show accountability by being punctual during tutorials because it is to their benefit in the end in terms of the planned coverage of material in the tutorials.

The study contributes knowledge about the effective use of the ITM to support student learning in an ODL environment. The ITM offers good quality service to the students and meets their academic needs.

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