


Chapter 7

Self-Directed Learning as the Foundation for Student Success in Open- Distance Education Context in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Self-directed learning is regarded as a foundational requirement for students to thrive in open-distance learning. This is because students in open-distance learning are isolated from their peers and the instructors. Open-distance learning environment is different from contact universities where students have easy access to their lecturers and their peers to seek guidance on their learning. Open distance learning requires students to engage in learning independently, thus the need for them to develop self-directed learning skills. This theoretical chapter discusses self-directed learning, open distance learning environment, and the convergence of self-directed learning and open distance learning extensively. The chapter also outlines in detail the role of technology in fostering self-directed learning in open distance learning. The chapter concludes by discussing the factors that hinder self-directed learning among students in open distance learning environment.

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INTRODUCTION

There is a growing number of students who opt for open distance learning to further their higher education studies in South Africa. This growing trend of students opting to further their studies through open distance learning is evident in both public and private higher education institutions in South Africa. Furthermore, the institutions of higher education learning that were previously known as traditional contact universities are now introducing courses that are offered through open distance learning (Mhlanga, Denhere & Moloji, 2022). This signifies a shift on what used to characterize open distance learning in South Africa. Previously, open distance learning used to cater for mature working adults who did not have time to pursue their higher education studies at full time tertiary institutions (Seeletso & Letseka, 2020). Nowadays, open distance institutions experience a sharp increase in number of young students who come out of basic education and choose to study through open distance learning. In most cases, some of young students who enrol for their first qualifications in open distance institutions do not voluntarily choose to, but they are forced by lack of space in contact universities. This then creates a conundrum for open distance institutions since many of the students who come from basic education are not fully prepared to engage in learning through open distance learning (Ngubane & Adigun, 2024; Sari & Nayir, 2020).

Having students who are not fully prepared to study through open distance learning results to high rates of dropout in open distance institutions. Gunduz and Karaman (2020) opined that students' dropout from open distance institutions is caused by their maladjustment to the nature of education that is offered in open distance learning, and their need for printed materials. This is a reality for many students who study through open distance in South Africa. Many students emanate from schools where they received face-to-face instruction from their teachers, and studied through printed materials, hence shifting to distance and online learning becomes a challenge for them. Furthermore, some students fail to cope in open distance learning due to lack of access to technology and lack of digital skills to engage in learning through technology. This is because some students come from schools where digital skills were not taught, and studying through technology becomes a nightmare for them (Van den Berg, 2020). In addition to this, open distance learning is characterized by the separation between students and lecturers (Van den Berg, 2020) and students are required to engage in learning on their own. This creates a challenge to students who were not trained to take full responsibility for their own learning, and they end up dropping out from their studies. Gani and Van den Berg (2024) stressed that students who succeed in open distance learning are those who possess strong self-directed learning skills. Thus, this theoretical chapter explores

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