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**Vol 4, 2023**



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Official publication of the Unit for Distance Education  
Faculty of Education  
University of Pretoria  
Web address: <https://upjournals.up.ac.za/index.php/tetfle>  
Email address: [tetflemanager@up.ac.za](mailto:tetflemanager@up.ac.za)

## **Students' views on strategies to promote sustained learning in open distance learning environments: An Ubuntu perspective**

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**DOI: 10.35293/tetfle.v4i1.4166**

## Abstract

Distance learning in South Africa has been experiencing occurrences of low student throughput and retention. Therefore, the purpose of this article was to explore possible strategies for sustained learning. Framed by Ubuntu as its theoretical perspective, the researchers discovered valuable insights through a methodological literature review and an empirical inquiry. Eight undergraduate students reflected on their distance learning experiences and challenges and suggested strategies for sustained learning. From an interpretivist research paradigm supported by a qualitative research approach, the study used a case study to conduct semi-structured interviews to gather data at an open distance learning institution in South Africa. The findings indicate that distance education institutions should provide sufficient learning support, conduct surveys to determine student challenges and needs, improve communication with students, develop a hotline, provide financial aid to all disadvantaged students, provide psychological help, ensure timely delivery of study material, and explore different methods to deliver learning content to diverse students. The study has policy and practice implications, arguing that Ubuntu's values should be considered when drafting policy and implementing strategies to support students.

**Keywords:** distance education; challenges; strategies for sustained learning; student support; Ubuntu



## Introduction

Distance education plays a significant role in providing access to higher education and has grown significantly over the last few years. In South Africa, 34.5% of higher education students were enrolled in distance education in 2019 (Department of Higher Education and Training [DHET], 2021). This expansion has changed the traditional profile of distance education to a model that discards strict admission requirements, making higher education affordable and available to students who would not otherwise have access to it. This model led to Open Distance Education (ODL) underpinned by the social justice value of equal access (Letseka, 2016). Although it provides more opportunities to access higher education, ODL does not seem to lead to success for many distance education students since the retention rate has been low for many years. The DHET (2014) asserts that merely providing access is meaningless unless it is complemented by the chance of success. The same document emphasizes that improvements in student retention, pass rates, and throughput in distance education remain a priority.

Against this background, studying strategies that support sustained learning in distance education in South Africa to improve throughput rates is valuable to institutions offering distance education. The study was conducted at a comprehensive ODL institution with an enrolment figure of more than 350 000 students (DHET, 2020). Student throughput rates at this specific university have been low. For example, the figures published by the Department of Higher Education and Training (2019; 2021) reported the graduation rate for undergraduate degrees as 9.6% and 9.3% for 2017 and 2019, respectively. The possible reasons for such a low graduation rate need to be investigated to raise stakeholders' awareness of the need to align policies and strategies in support of sustained learning in distance education. Therefore, the research question guiding this study was:

*What are students' views on support strategies for sustained learning in distance education in South Africa?*

The article begins with a methodological literature review before dealing with research methodology, findings, and conclusions.

## Methodological literature review

A methodological literature review examining the methodology, designs, and findings

of relevant studies in order to improve theory and/or practice (Onwuegbuzie & Frels, 2016) was used in this article. The process started by searching for articles investigating strategies to support sustained learning in distance education in South Africa. Sustained learning refers to the ability to acquire knowledge or skills and retain them over a prolonged period through consistent effort and practice. It involves a continuous and gradual learning process, where one builds upon their existing knowledge and experiences to deepen their understanding of a particular subject or skill. Additionally, sustained is an ongoing process that requires dedication, perseverance, and a willingness to adapt and learn from mistakes. It enables students to acquire new knowledge and skills that can be applied throughout their personal and professional lives, leading to personal growth and development. Chemosit, Rugutt, and Rugutt (2017) describe sustained learning as the dedication to ongoing, intended learning that needs support, inspiration, and endurance to provide positive results and contributes to a just society. The platforms used to find literature on sustained learning in distance education in developing contexts were Google Scholar, EBSCOHost, Academia, Science Direct, and ResearchGate. However, no literature on this topic was found. Consequently, articles on challenges that could hinder sustained learning in distance education were searched for, and six were found. Of the six, three were local studies and three were international articles in developing contexts. The research methodologies and findings were examined and are discussed chronologically in the following paragraphs (2012–2016).

In 2012 South African researchers Liebenberg, Chetty, and Prinsloo used a quantitative approach with online and paper-based surveys to investigate distance learners' challenges. Their research was based on students' access to and skills in technology used in the ODL context. The study used two groups of students: those who used the university's learning management system or mobile applications to access the technology and those who did not use it. Identified challenges were access to the learning management system and its ability. This investigation may have given relevant stakeholders information about the students' learning needs and their access to and use of technology.

The second article analysed was by De Hart and Venter (2013) who looked at the high dropout rates in distance education by comparing the dropout rates in urban and rural areas. This article used the student database to obtain students' demographic information. The authors found that the effect of urbanisation accounted for only a



1% higher dropout rate for rural students than for urban students. The authors argued that a comparison of dropout rates between rural and urban students was necessary because of the diverse student profiles at the university. Although this study did not focus on student views, it was found relevant as it investigated the high dropout rates of distance education students.

Nyoni conducted another study investigating challenges in distance education in 2014. Using deconstructive discourse analysis, the researcher investigated difficulties with e-learning readiness. Facilitators' perceptions regarding their readiness to use ICT in ODL were investigated. The findings revealed that most facilitators lacked the necessary e-readiness skills to teach and support students and that their training was periodic and insufficient. In this digital era the gap between instructors and students in distance education is bridged by technology; facilitators must therefore develop strategies to support digital learning.

To widen the review of possible causes of low throughput in distance education, relevant investigations conducted in three developing countries were found and analysed. In 2014 Ohene and Essuman investigated challenges in distance education institutions in Ghana. Three hundred participants from three institutions participated in the study, and the authors used interviews and questionnaires for data collection. Students identified institutional, instructional, social, psychological, and financial challenges.

Musingafi et al. (2015) investigated challenges facing open distance learning students at a university in Zimbabwe. Data were collected from 20 students through questionnaires and interviews, which were supplemented by a literature review. The research revealed that the most reported challenges were insufficient time to study, problems accessing and using ICT, poor feedback, and inadequate study materials.

Challenges in distance education were also investigated by Arinto (2016) at a university in the Philippines. The study used semi-structured interviews to determine the views of ten academics about their experiences and obtained their suggestions for improved institutional policy and practice. Focussing on the different generations of distance education, findings revealed that although administrators were willing to consider new practices and directions in ODL, only a few academics were willing to do the same (Arinto, 2016). This research sheds light on some problems that may cause low throughput rates in distance education, as academics can contribute to students' challenges, mainly if it involves student support.

The findings of the literature review are summarised in Table 1

**Table 1:** Summary of literature review on challenges students faced in ODL

Authors	Article title	Methodology	Main findings
Liebenberg, Chetty, and Prinsloo (2012)	Student access to and skills in using technology in an open and distance learning context	Quantitative: online and paper-based surveys	Challenges were access to ICT and the ability to use it.
De Hart and Venter (2013)	Comparison of urban and rural dropout rates of distance education students	Quantitative: descriptive, using student records	The effect of urbanisation only accounted for a 1% higher dropout rate for rural students than for urban students.
Nyoni (2014)	E-readiness of open and distance learning facilitators: Implications for effective mediation	Qualitative: deconstructive discourse analysis	Most facilitators could not effectively use ICT tools to teach and support students in ODL environments.
Ohene and Essuman (2014)	Challenges faced by distance education students of the University of Education, Winneba: Implications for strategic planning	Mixed method: interviews and questionnaires	Challenges were institutional, instructional, social, psychological, and financial.
Musingafi, Mapuranga, Chiwana, and Zebron (2015)	Challenges for open and distance learning students: Experiences of students of the Zimbabwe Open University	Mixed methods: questionnaires and interviews, documentary review	Challenges were insufficient time to study, problems accessing and using ICT, poor feedback, and inadequate study materials.
Arinto (2016)	Issues and challenges in Open and Distance e-Learning: Perspectives from the Philippines	Qualitative: semi-structured interviews	Challenges were the need to stimulate innovative practice among faculty who remain unengaged in ODL and to support and sustain the innovative practice.



The above studies were used as background to determine challenges that might affect the success of first-year students in South African distance education. We were also interested in similarities with previous studies.

## Aim of the study

Against the above background, this study aimed to understand students' learning experiences in a first-year module to determine possible strategies for sustained learning. Before considering the empirical research, the underpinning theoretical perspectives relating to Ubuntu are discussed.

## Theoretical perspectives

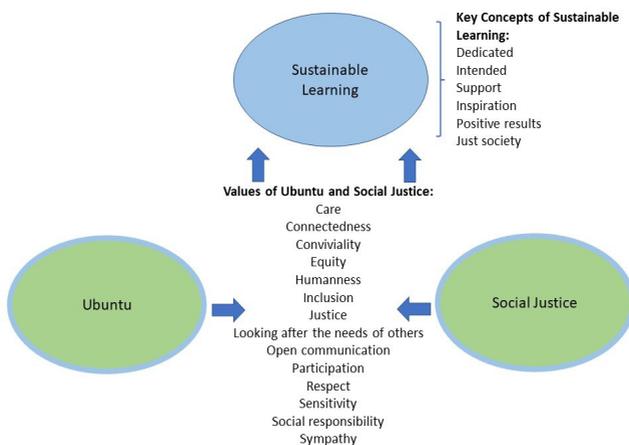
Ubuntu means that a human being is a human being because of other human beings, or *motho ke motho ka batho* (in SeSotho). It is an African philosophy of looking after the welfare and well-being of others (in this case, students). It articulates social interdependence (Letseka, 2011), and it was therefore considered suitable to underpin this research. Additionally, the authors agree with academics such as Metz (2011) and Letseka (2016) who refer to Ubuntu as a moral theory, promoting critical reflection on beliefs and practices to trigger and improve practice and innovation.

When describing Ubuntu, Coetzee and Roux (1998) refer to sympathy, care, sensitivity, the needs of others, and respect as social traits, while Teffo (1992) refers to the value of social responsibility. Of further relevance is the notion of Makhudu (1993, 40) who interprets Ubuntu as “the ability to communicate, open communication and interaction”. Closely linked to the notion of communication is the observation of Metz (2011), arguing that Ubuntu values participation, inclusion, equity, and respect and mentions that these traits are similar to those of social justice, showing the close link between social justice and Ubuntu. Despite limited research on the intersection between Ubuntu and social justice within higher education, Leibowitz and Bozalek (2016) have explored Ubuntu and social justice in the context of scholarship of teaching and learning. The current research adds to the body of knowledge by showing the link between Ubuntu, social justice, and sustained learning in ODL. The authors agree with the notion of Ngubane and Makua (2021) about the compelling connection between Ubuntu and social justice and that the two terms complement each other.

The connection between social justice and Ubuntu lies in the shared belief that all individuals are interconnected and that one's well-being is tied to the well-being of others. Ubuntu emphasizes the importance of caring for others, showing empathy, and working together for the common good. Similarly, social justice seeks to create a more equitable society where everyone can access the resources and opportunities needed to thrive. The connection between social justice and Ubuntu emphasizes the interconnectedness of all individuals and the importance of community and empathy in achieving a fairer and more just society. Referring to Ubuntu and the ODL environment, Letseka (2016) mentions connectedness and conviviality as two more core values of Ubuntu, having the potential to relieve feelings of loneliness and isolation. Students in this article need to experience the values of both Ubuntu and social justice such as interconnectedness and having the access to resources and opportunities to succeed.

The figure below shows how Ubuntu and social justice values can lead to sustained learning in ODL.

**Figure 1:** The relationship between Ubuntu, Social Justice and Sustained Learning in ODL



As described earlier, the values of Ubuntu and social justice can lead to sustainable learning, specifically in ODL, where students and their lecturers are separated and do not share classroom space. By emphasizing the interconnectedness of individuals in a virtual community and promoting a sense of both care and collective responsibility, the values of Ubuntu in education can help to create a more supportive and inclusive learning environment. These values can create a sustainable, equitable, and just learning environment where all students are supported and thus have the opportunity to succeed and reach their full potential. This aligns with a study by Akabor and Phasha (2022), arguing that including Ubuntu values in education can help foster a sense of social responsibility, promote inclusivity, and support sustainable learning. As discussed, Ubuntu emphasizes the importance of community and belonging, and in an educational context such as the one this study covered, it means creating a supportive and inclusive learning environment that fosters a sense of belonging among students, which helps to promote sustainable learning.

The values of Ubuntu, as well as how it resonates with social justice and ODL, are not exhaustive and might even be regarded as eclectic, which is in line with the critique by Matolino and Kwindingwi (2013) and Metz (2011) that Ubuntu is too vague and can mean anything to anybody. However, the above Ubuntu values are regarded as core values that have been used by various authoritative authors in the field and were found to apply to the current research.

## **Methodology**

### ***Research Design***

In gathering students' views on strategies that can support sustained learning in South African ODL, an interpretivist research paradigm was adopted. This paradigm seeks to understand the problem from the participants' perspective (Chilisa, 2012). A qualitative research approach was employed because of its exploratory nature; it seeks to understand underlying reasons for or opinions about occurrences (Creswell, 2014). Lastly, a single case study explored the research problem in a bounded system (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014).

## ***Research methods***

The participants were eight students who were registered for a first-year mathematics module in the first and/or second semesters of 2020 at a public higher distance education institution. They were purposively selected because they were regarded as information-rich and able to provide essential information on procedures that could improve the learning experiences of distance learners. The participants were selected according to three key aspects: students who had passed the module, students who had failed and were repeating the module, and students who had failed the module and dropped out. We have chosen students from these different groups to provide a comprehensive picture of their experiences. Eight participants finally agreed to participate in the investigation: two had passed, five had failed and re-registered, and two had dropped the module. Of the latter, one dropped the module and registered for another course, and the other dropped out of the university completely.

The participants responded to eleven open-ended questions in semi-structured individual interviews, allowing the researchers to probe for information where necessary (Leedy, 2015). The interview schedule used for data collection was first piloted. After determining the validity and credibility of the data collection instrument, the interview sessions were conducted according to the interviewee's preference. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with five participants, two preferred telephone interviews, and the last interview was done using e-mail and a follow-up call on WhatsApp. The different platforms were based on the preferences of the participants, depending on their proximity and connectivity. The interview dates and times were scheduled at the participants' convenience, and in preparation for the interviews the questions were sent to the participants beforehand. Interviews lasted approximately an hour, were recorded, and notes were taken. Written, voluntary consent was sought from all participants before each interview, and the confidentiality of their information was assured.

## ***Data analysis***

The inductive thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's step-by-step coding procedure: become familiar with the data, generate initial codes, search for themes, review themes, define themes, and write up the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Deductive



analysis responded to the theoretical framework discussed earlier in the article. This dual process was used to be both data-driven and theory-responsive (Chaka, Nkhobo & Lephhalala, 2020). Based on the above steps, themes were created iteratively and revised constantly. In addition, the authors acted as independent reviewers to code the data, ensuring inter-rater reliability and validity (Downing, 2003). To maintain the trustworthiness of this investigation, a member check strategy was done by allowing the participants to read the data findings and confirm their credibility.

## Findings

Table 2 presents the profiles of registered participants for the 2020 academic year. Their serial numbers refer to them as Par#1, Par#2, etc.

<b>Table 2: Participants' details</b>			
<b>Participant</b>	<b>Experience in distance education</b>	<b>Results of the module</b>	<b>Registration Status</b>
Par#1	First-year	Passed on first registration	Active
Par#2	Second-year	Failed on first registration and re-registered	Active
Par#3	First-year	Failed on first registration and re-registered	Active
Par#4	First-year	Failed on first registration and re-registered	Active
Par#5	First-year	Failed and did not register again	Dropped out
Par#6	A few years	Failed the module in 2016, dropped out, and re-registered in 2019	Active
Par#7	Second-year	Passed on first registration	Active
Par#8	First-year	Failed on first registration and did not register again	Active, but registered for another qualification

Table 2 illustrates that seven participants were registered for the 2020 academic year, and one participant dropped out. Among the seven registered students, two participants passed on the first registration, four participants failed and re-registered, and one dropped the module.

Two themes emerged from the thematic analysis:

- *The learning experience of the student*
- *Suggestions for intervention strategies for sustained learning*

Theme 1, *The learning experience of the student*, emerged to answer the research question by first understanding students' learning experiences before comprehending their suggestions. This experience allowed the participants to reflect on their learning.

Of the eight participants, five were first-year students in ODL, without any experience in ODL. They reported that the module was challenging to complete without the assistance of the instructors and that they felt they were on their own. In this regard, Budiman (2013, p. 9) warns that instructors must support new distance education students as they may feel isolated. Par#1 explained that his learning experience was difficult because he did not get learning support from the university. He acknowledged that success in distance learning depended heavily on his efforts and, as a result, decided to study harder. Although he emphasized that he found the module difficult, he passed it on the first attempt. Musingafi et al. (2015) confirm that self-motivation and self-direction in distance students are essential skills that yield positive outcomes. Distance education students must manage their time effectively, stay on track with their coursework, and take responsibility for their own learning. Self-motivation and self-direction are essential skills for distance education students because they enable students to manage their time effectively, stay focused and engaged with the material, take the initiative in their learning, and overcome challenges. These skills are critical for success in distance education and were apparent in the case of Par#1.

Three participants (Par#3, Par#4, and Par#5) stated that they did not receive adequate learning support from the university and found the learning matter difficult to comprehend. Attempting to overcome their learning barriers, these participants joined social media groups independently to discuss assignments and the learning material. However, they felt this was insufficient because no one knowledgeable about



the subject content could guide them. Besides a lack of learning support, Par#5 faced additional financial constraints and stated that he could not purchase the prescribed textbook. Although he joined social groups to complete assignments, it was not enough to help him pass the module, and he eventually dropped out. Like the other four participants, Par#8 also pointed out the absence of learning support from the university and reported that the materials were not learner-friendly because they did not have enough examples or simplified notes. This made the learning experience challenging, with the participant perceiving that the questions in the examination had not been adequately presented and explained in the study material.

Three participants were not first-year students in distance learning, meaning they had previous experience with this mode of delivery. According to Par#2 and Par#6, the module was difficult to study independently. Par#2 said that she went to the nearest regional office of the university to enquire about private tutorials, but she was told that they did not offer such a service and that face-to-face tutorials were not offered. Par#2 said that she joined social media groups but confirmed that they were not helpful as students would discuss possible answers, not knowing if they were correct. Par#2 also said that e-mails to the lecturers were not always responded to in time. Par#6 mentioned that studying the module independently was difficult as he needed to interact with the instructor regularly, but he did not have regular internet access. Par#6 said he resided in a rural area with weak internet coverage. Par#7 explained that he faced the challenge of late delivery of study materials, but he could download the materials from the learning management system and buy the prescribed textbook. He pointed out that he did not find the learning experience challenging and argued that this was because of his experience as a distance-learning student. His comment confirms that students need much initial support when they start studying through this mode of delivery—specifically when they come from a face-to-face context. The feedback from participants who were not first-year students shows they had varied experiences, while all the first-year students had difficulty studying the module.

Theme 2, *Suggestions for intervention strategies for sustained learning*, determined students' perceptions of intervention strategies.

Participants' main recommended strategy for supporting sustained learning was implementing frequent face-to-face or online tutorials. Six participants indicated the need for regular tutorials. Par#1's reason was: "We need these tutorials because most

students enrolling at the university are recent high school leavers who are used to being taught by teachers. Thus, coming to an ODL institution can be very challenging.” Kgosinyane (2019) affirms that most students have been learning through eye-to-eye teaching only for their entire schooling years, and distance learning will shock these learners. These participants mentioned the efficacy of this support strategy in providing a better understanding of the learning content. With instructor–student interaction, questions could be answered immediately in a face-to-face or synchronous online environment.

The development of a hotline and improved communication between instructors, students, and the university were among the leading suggestions from Par#1, Par#2, Par#6, and Par#7. Participants felt an improved communication strategy was important in improving learning experiences and students’ grades. In this regard, Uribe and Vaughan (2017) advise that feedback is a fundamental teaching habit because it motivates students, creates a connection between the instructors and students, and helps to support learning, even though there is no face-to-face interaction. On the same strategy, Par#4 proposed that the university should appoint additional staff to balance the student-instructor ratio, which would improve communication. Par#1 and Par#6 believed that a better communication strategy would help students to get counselling or forward their queries to relevant people for immediate responses.

Other important recommendations were that lectures should be facilitated by video conferencing to provide digital two-way communication between instructors and students or recorded on videos, lectures should not be presented in complicated language, and enough examples should be given to meet the learning aptitude of an average learner. Although Par#7 acknowledged that video conferencing was taking place near exam time to support students, a plea was made by the participant for data to be supplied to students so they could attend these sessions: “Currently, the university offers occasional video conferencing, but some students cannot afford enough data to be part of that learning support technique.” More suggestions were delivering study materials on time by using reliable courier services (Par#2); providing psychological help for students in need of counselling (Par#1); and using SMS or WhatsApp for specific modules, especially for first-year modules (Par#6).

Student surveys were highly recommended by Par#7 who argued that if the university conducted frequent surveys to identify challenges and attended to them continuously, this would contribute to positive learning experiences.



Financial aid and developing open educational resources were mentioned as strategies that could positively affect the institution and the students. As indicated by Par#5, these two strategies could eliminate financial barriers among students, enable promising students to complete their qualifications, and improve the institution's student throughput and retention.

## Discussion of the findings

The findings revealed that providing frequent tutorials was the strategy that would improve the student success rate. This was unexpected considering the nature of distance education. However, as confirmed by Par#1, the university is enrolling young school leavers who need more support and guidance than mature students who used to study via distance education in the past. Kgosinyane (2019) states that many newcomers to distance learning experience shock, which may be caused by a lack of prior preparation for distance learning at the basic education level. Instructors can use platforms like Microsoft Teams or Zoom to provide frequent tutorials. Providing relevant and needed content timeously is also a core value of Ubuntu as Letseka (2016) argued in explaining the nexus between Ubuntu and ODL. He remarked that ODL students should not struggle to find needed content because it can negatively affect their learning experience and academic performance. Students who have difficulty accessing the necessary resources become frustrated, disengaged, and unmotivated. In addition, struggling to find content and support can lead to feelings of isolation, which can be particularly challenging in an ODL environment where students may feel disconnected from their peers and lecturers. This can ultimately result in lower retention rates and decreased satisfaction with the learning experience. Therefore, distance education programs must prioritise the availability and accessibility of resources and support, such as regular tutorials for their students. Video conferencing or lessons on YouTube are platforms that can be used to offer tutorials to support learning. Participants highlighted that although video-conferencing tutorials were offered close to exams, more was needed, and support should be provided to students from the start of the module.

Internet connectivity was mentioned as a barrier for some students, confirming the challenge of ICT access in the study of Musingafi, Mapuranga, Chiwanza, and Zebron (2015). Most higher education institutions in the country have a zero-rated

website, meaning students are given Web access without monetary expense. However, additionally, institutions can create platforms that enable instructors and students to interact without using large amounts of data. A study on social justice and digital access in ODL (Author removed for blind review 2021) confirms that the institution has achieved digital access and social justice. However, more is needed to support students sufficiently.

Two participants suggested the use of frequent surveys to get student feedback. This can be informative and valuable to any institution aiming to achieve sustained learning. However, gaining information from students is used mainly by researchers to discover their challenges and dissatisfaction, as confirmed by Musingafi et al. (2015) and Ohene and Essuman (2014).

Three participants stated that lecturers and the university staff should improve communication by responding more quickly. Improved communication between students and instructors can ease the burden of studying in isolation. Open communication and collaboration are needed in a caring context supported by an Ubuntu value system (Makhudu, 1993). Open communication and collaboration are supported by Ubuntu in education because they foster an environment of sharing and support. These values are essential for building a vibrant, inclusive, and effective educational system that benefits all students. Collaboration in education refers to the willingness of students and teachers to work together towards common goals. This can take many forms, such as regular feedback to students. Musingafi et al. (2015) state that students feel anxious by the lack of quick or well-defined instructor feedback. Related to this comment is the participants' suggestion of introducing a hotline for student enquiries that provides instant feedback. A hotline could be valuable to first-year students as it may inform them about services available at the university they might not be aware of. This sharing of knowledge and information aligns with the Ubuntu principle of generosity—people who know should share it generously (Letseka, 2016).

Timely delivery of study material means students can familiarize themselves before attempting assignments. This would result in carefully completed assignments and students being better prepared for the exams. Musingafi et al. (2015) state that late delivery of study materials can result in students submitting assignments that are not properly completed and possibly progressing to the examination inadequately prepared, resulting in poor performance. Therefore, distance education institutions must prioritise the quick dispatch of study materials to reach students on time,



especially those living in rural areas. Many students living in remote areas face problems with internet connectivity as indicated by Par# 6 who confirmed difficulty with an internet connection in his rural area. Therefore, hard copy learning materials are still essential to do justice to a diverse student body and should be supplied to students requesting them.

The development and use of open educational resources promote sustained learning by alleviating the financial costs of purchasing textbooks. A participant mentioned that he could not afford the prescribed textbook and believed that this contributed to his failing the module and dropping out of the university. Open educational resources are growing and mitigating the financial burden on students (Abramovich & McBride, 2018). The availability of resources will further contribute to social justice in higher education and the openness and accessibility of ODL institutions.

Providing financial support can prevent promising students from dropping out. As confirmed by Ohene and Essuman (2014), financial constraints are common among distance education students who argue that many lack the funds to pay for their courses. Although the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) supports needy students in higher education in South Africa, not all students benefit.

Exploiting diverse teaching techniques such as video (to explain the learning content in-depth), video conferencing, and simplified notes and examples could make the learning process manageable. Implementing different techniques for delivery can undoubtedly meet the unique needs of a diverse distance education student body. For example, most participants in this study believed that videos would be helpful because students could watch them independently and as often as needed (Hanover Research, 2011).

Assisting students by providing counselling can provide care, support, and motivation to students when they feel helpless, isolated, and demotivated. Ohene and Essuman (2014) found that psychological problems were among the challenges distance education students face.

Table 3 summarises the participants' challenges, their proposed strategies for sustained learning, and how Ubuntu values could drive these strategies:

**Table 3:** Summary of student views, strategies suggested, and their link to Ubuntu values

<b>Challenges derived from student views</b>	<b>Strategies</b>	<b>Underpinning Ubuntu values</b>
No face-to-face tutorials	Implement face-to-face tutorials Post videos explaining content and concepts on the learning management system Post recordings of lectures on the learning management system	
Financial constraints, leading to the inability to purchase textbooks and data	Provide financial aid for all students (especially those who are needy but do not qualify for the NSFAS scheme). Use and develop OERs	Care Sympathy Sensitivity Looking after the needs of others Respect
Poor communication, for example, late or no response to student e-mails	Establish a hotline for student enquiries and improve communication	Social responsibility Open communication Connectedness Conviviality
Late delivery of study materials	Use reliable courier services for the timely delivery of study materials.	Humanness Justice Participation Inclusion
Students' inability to understand concepts and study material on their own, feelings of isolation, and demotivation	Implement face-to-face tutorials. Implement regular video conferencing from the start of the module. Make simplified notes available. Make student counsellors available	Respect
General lack of student support	Use surveys to determine best practices and challenges. Appoint additional staff in areas where support is needed	



Following the discussion, the table summaries how the values of Ubuntu can address challenges and underpin strategies students suggested to address these challenges. Considering these strategies, South African ODL institutions can implement Ubuntu principles by embracing the strategies. This can be achieved by making everyone realise that the educational institution is a community that should be run by compassion and respect for each other (Robinson-Morris, 2019). In that case, all will contribute to the community's success.

## Conclusion

Using an Ubuntu perspective, this study was undertaken to determine students' views on strategies to promote sustainability in distance learning. Table 3 shows specific challenges which differ in most cases from those identified in the methodological literature review, indicating a need for ongoing research as contexts vary and change. This study also proposed strategies to address challenges that distance education institutions could use to reflect on their policies, procedures, and practices and make the necessary improvements. The authors further argue that the values of Ubuntu, as set out in this article, should be considered when drafting policy and implementing strategies to do justice to its students by providing them with the needed support for sustained learning. In ODL, sustained learning and self-directed learning are particularly important because students are not physically present in a traditional classroom setting with a teacher to guide them. Therefore, it is essential for students to be able to sustain their learning efforts over time and to be self-directed in their approach to learning to succeed in this environment. Self-directed learning involves taking responsibility for one's learning and, with the needed support from lecturers, identifying and utilising resources to achieve learning goals.

This research further adds to the body of knowledge by showing the link between Ubuntu, social justice, and sustained learning in ODL. It is important to note that, although it was carefully planned and conducted, no research is without limitations. A limitation, in this case, was the number of participants because only eight students participated in this study. Nevertheless, the findings are real and should be taken seriously, especially concerning first-year ODL students' experiences. The findings of this preliminary study should form the basis of further research involving different stakeholders in the same and similar settings. ODL is not without its problems, and

many students might be considered unprepared for this mode of delivery. However, core Ubuntu values can address many problems as they imply an interactive ethos in which humanity is shaped by interacting with others as co-dependent beings. For this reason, Ubuntu values should underpin policies, procedures, and practices at ODL institutions in South Africa and beyond to support their students appropriately.

## Acknowledgements

This article is based on the MEd dissertation of Nancy Tafirenyika, entitled “Strategies to support sustained learning in Open Distance and e-Learning in a South African context”.

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