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TETFLE also publishes review articles and book reviews. The journal currently appears once in a year, with an additional special edition from accepted biennial conference papers, as applicable. The journal is the official journal of the Distance Education and Teachers' Training in Africa (DETA) biennial conference, hosted by the Faculty of Education, University of Pretoria, South Africa.

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Autonomy versus Care: Adult Learners Respond to the Provision of Affective Support in an Online Setting

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to determine whether adult distance learning students place value on being provided with affective support during their studies, or whether their need to manage their own learning experience perhaps supersedes their reliance on such support mechanisms. The literature suggests that while there is a measure of appreciation for affective support in an online setting, adult learners tend to favour support of a more generic nature that allows them to navigate the day-to-day demands of an online learning environment. Drawing from the literature, a conceptual framework for supporting adult learners was devised and is elaborated on in this study. Using a qualitative case study approach and an interpretivist paradigm, 23 adult online learners enrolled with a private higher education institution in South Africa were invited to share their ideas and experiences of a role known as a Programme Success Tutor (PST), whose sole focus is the provision of affective support for its online students. Using the thematic analysis model of Braun and Clarke, the study revealed that while these adult learners acknowledged the PST presence in a positive light, they placed significantly more importance on their autonomy and the ability to self-manage their learning journey—only seeking support of a more generic nature as and when required. These findings led to a recommendation to replace the current PST designation with one more suited to the needs of the adult learner in an online setting.

Keywords: Adult learners; affective care; autonomy; higher education; online learning; self-management.

Introduction

"*I'm a big girl now, I know what needs to be done, so I just get on and do it*" (Megan). These are the sentiments conveyed by an adult online learner studying at a South African based private higher education institution (PHEI), conveying a sense of autonomy and self-management that is more often associated with a mature learner than it might be with a younger counterpart (Alghamdi et al., 2023; Botha, 2014; Greenstein, 2023; Malone, 2014). In 2016, the PHEI in question began offering several of its qualifications in a distance mode. Central to the model adopted by the institution was the provision of affective care to all online students. This focus on student emotional well-being was facilitated via a Programme Success Tutor (PST) role. Rather than having an academic focus, the PST role's sole mandate was to foster a relationship of care and provide non-academic support to the institution's distance students in mitigation of them experiencing any sense of disconnect and loneliness that is often associated with this mode of study (Grové & Laletas, 2019; Vallade et al., 2020). During an academic year, the PST would regularly engage with the students they had been allocated. Having a dedicated list of students per PST promoted the opportunity for connections to be made and for relationships of care to be established, while also fostering a sense of connection to the institution. In 2022, there was opportunity to revisit the PST role and question whether it continued to align with the needs and expectations of the institution's online students. By engaging with the individuals for whom this role was intended, it became apparent that the way in which younger learners (17–20 years of age) experienced the PST role differed considerably to that of the adult learners (21 years and older).

The current study aims to interrogate those differences as a means of better understanding the support needs of the adult online learner at the PHEI, and whether the targeted provision of affective care via the PST role remains relevant within this particular higher education setting. Following from this aim, the objectives of the current study were to understand the importance online learners place on autonomy, to determine the role that context can play in the need for affective support, and to ascertain whether the PST role should be retained in its current form, or whether it would benefit from being repositioned as a generic support mechanism.

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Background to this study

The South African PHEI at which this study is based was founded in 1991. In 2016, the institution began to offer several of its qualifications in a distance mode. As part of its student support strategy, the PST role was created to provide online students with non-academic, affective support as a means of promoting student emotional well-being and ensuring a greater sense of connectedness to the institution and those facilitating the qualifications online.

In 2022, a study was conducted to better understand how the institution's online students were experiencing the PST role and the affective support that was its primary focus. During that study it was found that while students appreciated having access to a human presence who was able to assist them during their academic journey, very few understood the role as being one focused primarily on affective support and student emotional well-being (Scheepers & Van den Berg, 2022b). In 2024, the data from this study was revisited to determine whether the age of the participants influenced how the PST role had been perceived and received. Returning to the original transcripts, the feedback and commentary from 23 students who were 21 years and older was selected for thematic analysis against the model of Braun and Clarke (2006, 2012). Additional data from eight younger students (17–20 years of age) was also included to provide the opportunity for comparison. It is important to note that for the current study, contextual factors such as ethnicity, geographical location, and socio-cultural influences were not taken into consideration, instead the students' affiliation to the PHEI, and their access to the PST role for the duration of their studies was of interest.

What follows are the literature review and methodology that guided the current study. Themes, and findings are then addressed. The paper concludes with a recommendation, and acknowledges the limitations of this study.

Literature review

This literature review briefly addresses the growing interest in student emotional well-being and social presence in an online setting, before looking specifically at the adult learner within an online context, and their need for a greater sense of autonomy and self-management than their younger peers.

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Emotional well-being and social presence

The last two decades has seen the importance of student emotional well-being in higher education (HE) gaining priority (Douwes et al., 2023; Eloff et al., 2022), with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown regulations further bolstering this attention (Doolan et al., 2021; Magson et al., 2021). Tait (2000, p. 2) breaks down student support into three "truly interrelated and interdependent" aspects: cognitive support; systemic support; and affective support. It is this notion of affective support, which is also referred to as "non-academic support" (Fynn & Janse van Vuuren, 2017; Karp, 2011; Waight & Giordano, 2018), that most closely aligns with nurturing a student's sense of well-being in an online learning environment. Referring specifically to students entering an HE context for the first time, Douwes et al. (2023, p. 12) suggest that it is reasonable to assume that they will have a need to feel connected to their institution and to others, and that having this sense of connectedness "plays a central role in [their] well-being". Prior to gaining a sense of autonomy, students will almost certainly go through a process of "learning and adjustment in which social and affective processes" have a crucial role to play (Douwes et al., 2023, p. 12, citing Crone & Dahl, 2012). When these processes are experienced as positive, it can have a direct impact on a student's sense of achievement (Chen et al., 2021) and lead to feelings of stability and motivation (O'Regan, 2003; Williams, 2017). These findings closely align with those studies that emphasise the value of enhancing social presence in an online learning environment and the positive impact this can have on student satisfaction and retention (Lim et al., 2021; Phirangee & Malec, 2020; Weidlich & Bastiaens, 2019). Peacock and Cowan (2019) add to the discussion by positing that the tone adopted by an online facilitator (OF) can greatly influence the perception of trust, care, and encouragement that exists within an online learning community. Simpson (2004, as cited in Rotar, 2022) concurs and suggests that online students who had received an encouraging phone call from their OF, were more likely to remain committed to their studies than those who had not. Although each of the mentioned studies reaffirms the connection between a positive social presence and the emotional well-being of students studying in an online context, what is not readily apparent is whether this applies to adult learners in the same way, or to the same extent as it does to their younger peers.

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Autonomy and self-management

According to Miller (2021) and Salikhova et al. (2021), adult learners who have intentionally opted to enrol for online studies are those who seek a degree of autonomy and self-management that this mode of study requires. Cocquyt et al. (2019, p. 231) agree, suggesting that due to their being more mature, adult learners tend to be more autonomous and self-managed than traditionally younger learners, preferring to "make decisions for their own learning". In a study conducted with 37 adult learners at a Russian university, Salikhova, et al. (2021) found that the need for autonomy and self-management proved to be a dominant theme. Here participants emphasised the convenience of online learning and being able to decide for themselves, how much time to dedicate to their studies. Cocquyt, et al. (2019, as cited in Abedini et al., 2021, p. 8), refer to adult learners as being "life-centered", possessing an "intrinsic motivation to learn personally relevant skills", while Hashim et al. (2015) speak to the practical approach that adult learners tend to adopt towards their studies. Botha (2014, p. 244) further corroborates these findings and suggests that adult learners are "usually fairly sophisticated and independent", thus, possessing the ability to manage their learning more intentionally than their younger peers.

Support for adult learners in an online setting

According to Whiteman (2002, p. 4), adult learners are not looking for a "traditional relationship" with their institution, instead they prioritise "service, convenience, and quality control". The author goes on to suggest that, since many of these learners are re-entering HE seeking some form of "academic redemption" or personal enrichment, the support they need will differ to that which is sought by the more traditional, younger learner. Whiteman (2002) goes on to suggest that adult learners require support with navigating the technologies associated with online studies, academic writing, and understanding how to achieve the necessary work-life-study balance many younger learners do not have to contend with. Fensie (2023, p. 37) adds to the discussion by highlighting that instruction for adult online learners must be "efficient and effective", so that they can meet the requirements of their programme of study "without spending additional time that they generally do not have". Although Fensie (2023, p. 48) does acknowledge the importance of emotional well-being for adult learners, the author also speaks to the need for a "social partnership" with the OF; one that encourages "increased effort and attention on the part of the learner". This frames

the relationship as a form of academic support mechanism, rather than one focused on the learner's social identity and integration (Fensie, 2023).

Based on the literature review, Figure 1 provides a suggested framework for supporting online adult learners.

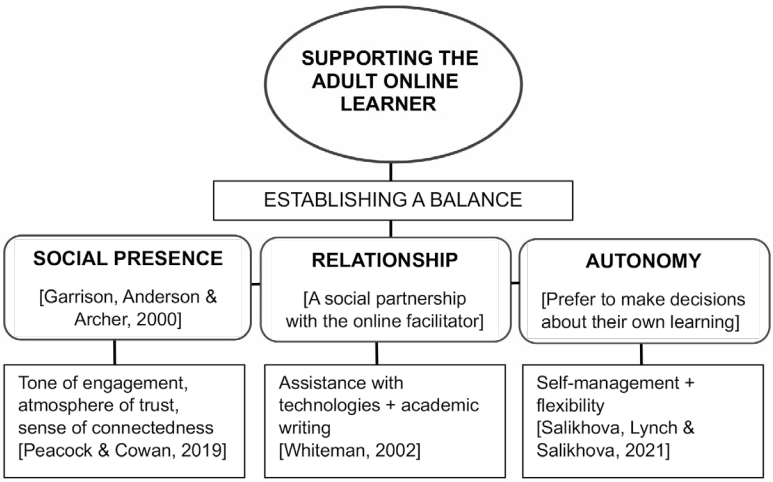

Figure 1: Supporting the adult online learner

Source: Author's own

Support for the adult online learner can be achieved by establishing a balance between social presence that is created through positive engagement with the online facilitator, fostering an atmosphere of trust and a sense of connectedness to the institution. This sense of connectedness is further enhanced through building a social partnership with the online facilitator who provides the learner with support in the use of technologies and academic writing (Whiteman, 2002). The adult learner's need for autonomy is clearly supported by the literature and can be delivered by providing a flexible learning environment that fosters self-management and allows the learner to remain in control of their learning journey.

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Methodology

Design and methods

This qualitative study adopted an interpretivist paradigm allowing for the interrogation of the phenomena from the individual perspective of the participants. Guba and Lincoln (1994, p. 111) explain that, rather than reducing events to "simplistic interpretations", an interpretivist paradigm allows for "new layers of understanding to be uncovered as phenomena are thickly described". Within this qualitative approach a case study was used, since it facilitated an "intensive analysis of a particular event, situation, or social unit" (Schoch, 2020, p. 245).

Population and sample

As noted, the PST role was central to the online model of the identified PHEI. In 2022, a larger study was conducted to understand the value students placed in the provision of focused affective care within an online HE setting (Scheepers & Van den Berg, 2022b). To ensure purposive sampling, students who were registered with the PHEI for an online qualification were invited to participate in a series of semi-structured interviews and focus group sessions where they shared their experiences of this role. A theme that was not explored during that initial study was whether the age of the participant influenced in any way their interest in, or reliance on, this non-academic support mechanism (Scheepers & Van den Berg, 2022a). Finding that there was sufficient cause to explore this concept further has led to the current follow-up study that focuses specifically on the feedback that was provided by the adult participants (21 years and older). From the original group, 23 students met this criterion and provided the purposive sample for the study. Feedback from eight students between the ages of 17 and 20 years of age was selected to provide the quota sample, thus, allowing for any comparisons to be drawn.

Data collection and tools

In the initial study, 12 semi-structured interviews were conducted as well as five focus groups comprising at least four participants each. Prior to conducting these engagements, a group of 10 volunteer online students participated in a pilot exercise where they were provided with the 10 questions that would be used during the interviews and focus groups. The aim of this pilot exercise was to allow for feedback

regarding the clarity of the proposed questions and their intent. The questions were divided into four sections:

1. The PST role
2. The Importance of affective support in online studies
3. The perceived value of the PST role
4. The support online students seek

Considering their responses to the questions, students were asked to 'vote' for whether the PST role should be retained in its current format or adapted to become a support mechanism of a more generic nature.

Because participants were based across the country, sessions were conducted via the Microsoft Teams platform and recorded with their consent. Audios were then manually transcribed verbatim, after each session. The decision to manually transcribe the sessions was made to "allow for a fuller emersion and deeper understanding of the data that [came] from hearing the students speak" (Scheepers & Van den Berg, 2022a, p. 10). These same manual transcripts provided the dataset for the current study and were re-analysed using the six-phase thematic analysis (TA) model of Braun and Clarke (2006, 2012). TA was selected as it allows for "systematically identifying, organizing, and offering insight into patterns of meaning and [themes] across a data set" (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 57). Heeding the caution of Braun and Clarke (2012), who explain that it is inevitable that the researcher brings with them their preconceptions when interrogating a data set, an inductive process was adopted when deciding which themes were most relevant to the study.

Ethical considerations

According to Terrell (2022), of key importance when conducting research that involves human participants is ensuring that all ethical considerations are accounted for. Participants in this study were made aware that the data gleaned from the focus groups and semi-structured interviews would be used for the purpose of informing the institution's provision of affective support to online students in general, and the PST role in particular. Participants were assured of confidentiality as well as the voluntary nature of their involvement in the study. Prior to engaging with these students, the necessary ethical clearance was obtained from the PHEI in question. All engagements with the participants were further guided by the three fundamental principles at the core of ethical research: respect for persons; beneficence; and justice.

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Trustworthiness

Qualitative research is required to follow clearly established concepts and procedures, allowing the researcher to establish objectivity (Creswell, 2021). To achieve trustworthiness triangulation, peer debriefing and member checking were undertaken. As this study unfolded, each process was carefully documented to ensure dependability, while confirmability was achieved through adopting a position that was as neutral as possible and allowing the data to accurately represent the thoughts and ideas shared by the participants (Cope, 2014; Terrell, 2022). In the current study there was no preferred outcome guiding the process and because the aim was an improved experience for adult online learners, it was imperative to allow the rich quotes shared by the participants to lead the way.

Presentation and discussion of findings

During the six-phase TA process, the following three sub-themes emerged in support of the main theme: determining whether adult learners attribute value to the provision of focused affective support when enrolled for online studies?

- Sub-theme 1: Autonomy first, support second
- Sub-theme 2: Context determines the need for support
- Sub-theme 3: Generic support makes us feel better

Each theme will be discussed below, as they relate to the objectives of the current study and the literature review conducted.

At the outset of each of the sessions, participants were provided with a summary of the intention behind the PST role, and the institution's rationale for including this affective support mechanism within its online model. From the responses received, it was clear that although students were aware of the role and the individual who had been allocated as their PST, they did not necessarily associate the role with their emotional well-being. As one participant commented, *"I did not know that, and I have to say I am quite curious why [the institution] thought of having a role dedicated to that kind of thing"* (TD23). This apparent curiosity regarding the need for affective support gave rise to the first sub-theme.

Sub-theme I: Autonomy first, support second

Of the 23 adult participants (21 years and older), 17 indicated that the overarching reason for having enrolled in distance studies was related to their preference to work autonomously and at their own pace without the need for additional external support mechanisms. As three participants shared:

> Megan: *I'm a big girl now, I know what needs to be done, so I just get on and do it. I really prefer to just sort things out for myself. I know that the support is there if I need it, but I haven't yet.*
>
> Ananda: *I am a self-starter; I like to work on my own and to just put my head down and do what needs to be done. I will say it was nice to hear from [my PST] and [the institution] … but none of the information I could not have found out on my own if I needed to. So, for me specifically, I would say the [PST] support was a nice-to-have, but I wouldn't say it was necessary.*
>
> Imran: *We know the [PST] support is there if we need it, and that's great, but personally I just like to keep it simple; set up a schedule that suits me and tap into the knowledge of my lecturers to guide me through the course work when I need them.*

This emphasis on autonomy and not actively seeking additional support aligns with literature and the adult learner's preference to manage their own learning (Alghamdi et al., 2023; Malone, 2014). It also begins to address the objective of understanding the importance adult online learners place on their autonomy. As Leong (2022, p. 6) explains, self-managed learners "feel they can successfully make decisions that are related to their learning needs, and they see themselves developing autonomy with respect to these decisions". Although eight of the adult learners shared that they had made some use of the support offered by their PST, they also referenced their preference for "*getting things done on [their] own*" (Daniel).

> Annelize: *I didn't reach out too much to [my PST] because, like the others have said, I'm also a self-starter, I can motivate myself, I can go out on my own … I prefer studying online, and the reason for that is because it's in the comfort of my home and at my own pace.*

In contrast to the above, five of the adult learners, and six of the younger participants from the quota sample indicated that they believed the support provided by the PST to be essential. Their reasons for placing importance on this form of support varied, resulting in the second sub-theme.

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Sub-theme 2: Context determines the need for support

When discussing the reasons certain participants placed value on having access to the PST role, the responses varied depending on the individual's context and experience in an online setting, as two adult learners explained:

> Jenna: *I completed my undergrad qualification in 2010, so getting back into studying, and studying online, has been a massive adjustment for me. I will take all the help I can possibly get. Knowing my PST is just a WhatsApp away is really reassuring.*

> Karel: *I was last in an academic setting seven years ago, and to get back into that mindset has been daunting. Knowing that I have my PST to help me with the basics has been incredibly important.*

Comments such as these corroborate the findings of Lolich and Lynch (2017, p. 124) who found that several adult learners who had participated in their study who had been "out of education for a while", felt overwhelmed due to their not being provided with the "support that matched their needs". A study by Kenyon et al. (2022) also found that several adult learners believed they were possibly too old to resume their studies and feared that without the necessary support, they would not cope.

While these two participants cited the hiatus in their studies as their reason for valuing their access to a PST, others attributed this reliance to having to manage multiple roles in addition to being a student:

> Daylene: *I am studying while also juggling work and family, so it's my PST that helps me to stay on top of my studies. If it wasn't for his calls and reminders about deadlines and stuff, I would have given up ages ago.*

This comment echoes the findings of Garip et al. (2020), Farrell and Bruton (2020), Kahu et al. (2014), and Veletsianos (2020), who each found that the need to balance the competing demands of work, family, and social commitments often placed adult learners under severe pressure which could have negative consequences for their studies if not correctly managed and adequately supported.

Three of the younger learners from the quota sample shared their own, significantly different, reasons for relying on the support provided by their PST:

> Sakhile: *You have to do all of the assignments on your own, you have to do all of the work on your own … so just having somebody looking out for you makes a massive difference. I think this is definitely the best way to do distance studies.*

Shannon: *Oh, I place a very high importance on [PST support], like, I need it. I'm young and my parents have always been there to take care of stuff, so I need a person like [my PST]. I can't sit and feel like I have no help, no one to just WhatsApp. I need that, so I would say [PST support] is absolutely essential throughout the year.*

Tamara: *I switched from contact to online after my first year and it was so different that I felt really lost to start with. Having a PST to call on, even for just basic help with access, really made a huge difference to my confidence.*

Whatever the reasons provided, it was clear that context played a dominant role in determining the frequency and nature of the support online students were seeking from their PST. It was also apparent that this was linked to an understanding of PST support as being essentially generic in nature, rather than presenting as an affective support mechanism. Having such timeous access to this generic support ensured a sense of emotional well-being, which led to the third sub-theme.

Sub-theme 3: Generic support makes us feel better

As noted, none of the participants in the current study appeared to have made the connection between the presence of a PST and their emotional well-being. Instead, students' appreciation for access to their PST tended to be grounded in this individual's ability to problem-solve and to provide them with information as and when they needed it. As three participants shared:

Zama: *[My PST] is like my go-to person; anything I need I know I can just ask her, and she will get it sorted.*

Kamini: *[My PST] helped me with my student card and timetable, he also showed me how to order my books online.*

Stanley: *I was having trouble contacting one of my lecturers, so I asked my PST for help, and she was happy to help me, so that was great.*

This appreciation and apparent preference for support that is essentially generic in nature aligns with the finding of Junaidi and Tasir (2021), whose study found that even though students acknowledged the importance of emotional support and affirmation, what they valued most was support that provided them with the information they sought. It is not uncommon for students entering an online learning environment to experience levels of anxiety or self-doubt regarding their ability to navigate the various systems, access their course content, and generally make sense of what can appear to be a strange and daunting learning environment (Eloff et al., 2023; Khairuddin et al.,

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2020; Peacock & Cowan, 2019). The data gleaned from the current study revealed much the same, with the PST being a key role-player in assuaging many of these initial fears:

> Jack: *Even after orientation I was nervous, I honestly felt quite overwhelmed by the whole thing. My PST scheduled a few extra sessions to take me through the basics of the online platform we were using and encouraged me to 'play'. She joked and said, "you can't break it", and I think that made me feel better.*
>
> Sumaya: *I moved from a contact campus to online and the difference was huge. My PST helped me with my registration and selecting the correct modules, she also sent me the link for our online orientation when I couldn't find it. Just knowing I could ask her when I was uncertain about anything definitely made me feel calmer.*

Summary of findings

Figure 2 provides a visual summary of the themes and findings, and suggests a shift in the focus of the current PST role.

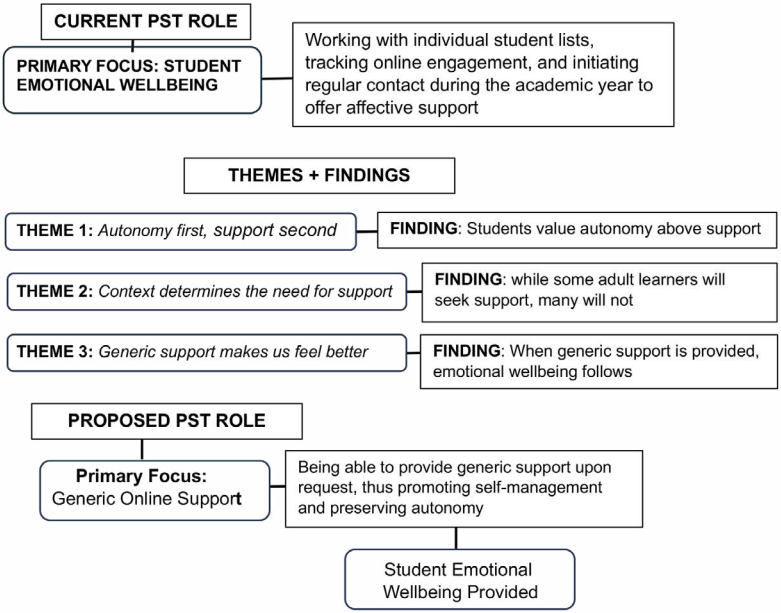

Figure 2: Summary of findings

Source: Author's own

From the experiences shared by the participants in the current study, it was clear that although the adult learners engaged in distance studies with the institution were aware of the PST role, they appeared to view this as more of a help-desk type service, rather than a role intentionally crafted for the purpose of their emotional well-being. While some spoke of enjoying frequent informal engagements with their allocated PST during the academic year, the majority admitted to only knowing this person in passing, suggesting that the role in its current format was not adding to the student experience in the way the institution had envisioned. The findings of the current study suggest that by shifting the focus of the current role from the proactive provision of student emotional well-being to a role that caters for on-demand support of a more generic nature, the needs of the adult learner will be better served.

Limitations and further research

The researcher acknowledges that this is a small exploratory study with certain limitations. The current study was conducted with students who attended the same PHEI in South Africa and who were enrolled for a qualification being offered in the distance mode. The aim of this study, however, is for institutions outside of the private HE arena to find meaning in the results and to use the findings to improve the learning experience of adult learners enrolled in their distance programmes. In addition, this study only considered the students' age and did not take into consideration broader contextual factors such as ethnicity, socio-cultural influences, or the geographical location of participants. As such, further research that addresses these factors in relation to the need for affective support in online education, particularly within a South African context, would be of value. In addition, there is merit in exploring whether the provision of generic support that is qualification-specific would be of value to adult learners. Do students enrolled in numerical or financial modules require different support to those engaged with more theoretically based content?

Conclusion

As the literature suggests, and the current study confirms, a significant number of adult learners who enrol for online studies do so because of the autonomy and opportunity for self-management that this mode of study affords them. The research also strongly suggests that while adult learners may value having access to support during their studies, their preference appears to be for the type of support that allows them to navigate the day-to-day complexities of online study, rather than a support mechanism

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solely focused on their emotional well-being. Naturally, there may be exceptions to this when adult learners either opt to resume their studies after a lengthy break, or decide to add the role of student to their already busy lives. In these instances, it would not be unusual for students to reach for support that offers the type of affective care provided by a PST, or similar role. Based on an analysis of the data, and engaging with the participants in the current study, however, the recommendation is to consider replacing the current PST role with one that is focused on providing support of a more generic nature; with student emotional well-being becoming the end-goal rather than the starting point. As the data suggests, there is already a disconnect between the institution's intention behind the PST role and how the participants in this study have interpreted or made use of this support mechanism. The researcher believes that by responding to the student voice and making the recommended changes to the nature of the support provided, the institution would be taking a clear and decisive step towards better meeting the needs of its adult online learners.

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