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Student Teachers' Acceptance and Experiences of an Online Teaching Practice Placement Tool in a South African ODeL Institution: A TAM–UTAUT Perspective

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Abstract

Teaching practice placement connects universities and schools in an attempt to ensure that student teachers have the opportunity to learn to teach. However, placements are fraught with challenges. This study adopts the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT) models as lenses to investigate the experiences of student teachers on using online teaching practice placement tool in a selected Open Distance e-Learning (ODeL) institution in South Africa. A qualitative research approach was employed, anchored in an interpretivism paradigm. An online qualitative survey was administered to collect data from 20 student teachers enrolled in teaching practice modules at the ODeL institution. The study found that student teachers had varied experiences when using the online teaching practice tool for their placements. Some student teachers found the tool to be useful and easy to use while others encountered challenges such as lack of support from the Teaching Practice Office (TPO) when reporting challenges associated with using the online placement tool. The study also found that there were substantial delays in the approval of the student teachers' placement applications by the TPO which led to some student teachers engaging in their teaching practice sessions late. Based on the findings, the study concluded that student teachers had varied experiences with the online teaching practice placement tool which can be attributed to the uneven and inconsistent support provided by the TPO to student teachers when engaging in online placement. The study recommends that the ODeL institution must consider automating the approval of the student teachers' teaching practice placement applications to avoid delays that have serious implications for student teachers.

Keywords: Comprehensive open distance education; online placement; student teachers; teaching practice; user-friendly

Introduction

Teaching practice is a compulsory and critical Work Integrated Learning (WIL) component of initial teacher education (ITE) programmes in South African higher education institutions (HEIs). As a result, it is regulated by the Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualification (MRTEQ) (Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), 2015), which is a policy that stipulates how student teachers should engage in school-based teaching practice (Dlamini, 2024). The MRTEQ policy outlines three benefits of teaching practice. Firstly, teaching practice enables student teachers to accumulate 'concrete' classroom experience (DHET, 2015). This suggests that exposing student teachers to actual classrooms allows them to gain real teaching experience that cannot be achieved solely through campus-based learning activities. Bouwer et al. (2021) refer to this as learning in practice and learning from practice. Secondly, MRTEQ stipulates that teaching practice provides student teachers with opportunities to engage in learning (DHET, 2015). Student teachers are said to acquire this knowledge by observing and reflecting on lessons taught by experienced school-based mentor teachers. This helps them gain first-hand experience by observing their mentor teachers using different teaching strategies in the classroom. Thirdly, teaching practice contributes to student teachers' situational learning (DHET, 2015) which means student teachers have a chance to develop professional competencies and skills during their teaching practice.

Given the importance of teaching practice in ITE programmes, MRTEQ mandates HEIs in South Africa to facilitate the placement of student teachers in schools for teaching practice. MRTEQ stipulates that student teachers enrolled in the Bachelor of Education (BEd) should spend between 20 to 32 weeks in schools over the duration of their four-year degree (DHET, 2015). Those student teachers enrolled in the Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) are required to spend eight to 12 weeks on school-based teaching practice (DHET, 2015). HEIs are, therefore, expected to closely monitor student teachers' placements and adherence to the policy requirements as stated by MRTEQ. This is despite the fact that some HEIs have a high number of student teachers enrolled in both BEd and PGCE programmes. For example, the ODeL institution in South Africa where the current study was conducted has a large number of students enrolled in ITE programmes. Like any other HEI in South Africa, the ODeL institution under investigation is still expected to ensure that all student teachers are placed in schools for teaching practice. Due to the high number of student teachers enrolled in ITE programmes, the ODeL institution under investigation has been struggling to ensure that all student teachers are placed in

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schools for teaching practice. This was also confirmed in a study conducted by Van Wyk et al. (2024), which found that the College of Education (CEDU) in the ODeL institution under investigation struggles with placing student teachers in schools for teaching practice. Failure to ensure that all student teachers are placed and assessed during teaching practice may threaten the accreditation of CEDU's teacher qualifications (Van Wyk et al., 2024). To overcome this challenge, the Teaching Practice Office (TPO) at the institution under study introduced an online teaching practice placement tool to facilitate the placement of student teachers in schools for teaching practice. Hence, the current study investigates the student teachers' acceptance, and experiences of the online teaching practice placement tool in a selected ODeL institution in South Africa.

Research questions:

- What are student teachers' experiences of the online teaching practice placement tool in open distance HEIs?
- How do student teachers perceive institutional support provided by the TPO during online teaching practice placement?

Literature review

Benefits of teaching practice placement for student teachers

As stated earlier, teaching practice is an integral part of ITE around the globe; hence, there is a need for all student teachers to be placed in schools for teaching practice. By participating in teaching practice, student teachers learn through active engagement in purposeful lesson planning, which enables the integration of theory with meaningful teaching practices relevant to their subject methodology or professional development (Zegwaard et al., 2023). This assertion suggests that teaching practice placement expose student teachers to real lesson planning and delivery under the guidance of a school-based mentor teacher, enhancing their understanding of how their major subjects are taught. Jung (2022) asserted that teaching practice engages student teachers in the transition from campus-based learning to real-world experience through work-integrated learning. In other words, during teaching practice placements, student teachers have the opportunity to put into action the knowledge acquired from the university. Nguyen and Singh (2023) added that during teaching practice, student teachers learn through real-world, complex problems and problem-based activities.

Furthermore, during teaching practice, student teachers have the chance to reflect on

their professional learning, learn through guidance from their mentor teachers, and build relationships with their university supervisors (Loughland et al., 2025). Thus, both mentor teachers and university supervisors should work together to ensure that student teachers learn and reflect on their own practices during teaching practice placements in schools. Teaching practice placements provide student teachers with the opportunity to plan, teach, reflect on their own lessons, and receive feedback on their teaching from their school-based mentor teachers (Rusznyak & Bertram, 2021). They can then use the feedback from their mentor teachers to improve their teaching practice both during the teaching practice and after entering the teaching profession. From this, it is clear that teaching practice is a critical component of ITE programmes; hence, all HEIs should ensure that all student teachers are placed in schools for teaching practice. The next section of the literature review focuses on the use of technological tools to facilitate student placements on WIL, including teaching practice.

The role of online placement tools in WIL

Leveraging technology to facilitate teaching, learning, and administration in HEIs in South Africa was accelerated by the outbreak of COVID-19. For example, during the pandemic, HEIs in South Africa transitioned education and administrative activities to online platforms using various software and digital tools (Sepulveda-Escobar & Morrison, 2020). Post-COVID-19, many HEIs in South Africa continue to intensify and expand the use of technology across different aspects of their universities, including teaching practice. For instance, some HEIs in South Africa still utilise technological tools and platforms to assess student teachers online during their teaching practice. To supplement face-to-face teaching practice supervision, some HEIs employ platforms such as Microsoft Teams for online supervision of teaching practice (Taole et al., 2024; Van Wyk et al., 2024). Furthermore, during the pandemic, senior teaching practice academics at the ODeL institution under investigation launched a teaching practice mobile application. The aim of the app was to facilitate online supervision during teaching practice for student teachers from this ODeL institution in South Africa (Davids et al., 2023).

Additionally, technological tools and platforms such as emails, WhatsApp, and Zoom have been adopted to support teaching practice in some HEIs globally (Cavanagh, 2021; Kim, 2020). Moreover, HEIs utilise specialised tools to facilitate the placement of students for WIL programmes in various workplaces. Technological placement tools such as InPlace and the Placement Integrated Management System (PIMS) are among those that facilitate student placements for WIL. InPlace is a placement management tool that offers flexible

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functionality for safely managing the student placement process within a single system, optimised for efficiency and coordination. As a comprehensive placement tool, it can assign, manage, and administer student placements, providing benefits to all system users. Similarly, IPLACE features extensive and adaptable capabilities that aid in various stages of student placement, improving the technological experience for students and confirming appropriate placements while ensuring secure data management (Mogoale et al., 2025). By using automation and workflow recording on a single platform, PIMS enables a smooth transition between student data, record management, and efficiency.

Depending on the features of the placement tool, administrators can choose it and modify it to suit their needs as a university. When stakeholders have seen the potential features and advantages of each placement tool, they decide whether to adopt the innovative tool (Samuels, 2021). Furthermore, to meet the diversity of students, technological tools and software can offer a variety of materials to enable easy student access (Shanmugam et al., 2024). These tools increase efficiency by automating student placements that were previously done manually. Additionally, technological placement tools have the advantage of being scalable, meaning that many students can access them simultaneously and process their placements. Technological placement tools offer essential benefits, including efficiency and speed (Shanmugam et al., 2024). Hence, many HEIs embrace technological placement tools rather than manual systems.

Students have shared their experiences using the placement tools, and it was found that they expressed positive feelings about the user-friendly value of the tool, stating that it is easy to use and saves time while reducing stress (Navas, 2025). They also mentioned that the placement tools improved communication, as they are well informed about their placement status and details, and that the tool provides information about their schools and the supervisor who will evaluate them after placement (Navas, 2025). Conversely, some students have had negative experiences with the technical issues of the placement tools, such as problems when uploading documents and slowness during specific times. Some studies found online placement tools to be inflexible, with little choice in changing students' uploaded placement details. Additionally, some students felt that there were insufficient support resources, such as tutorials, user guides, and technical support. They expressed dissatisfaction and frustration when they did not receive immediate feedback or a response to their placement applications. According to a McMaster University study that used the InPlace tool to support their students' competency-based learning during teaching practice, students reported that it took longer to learn and become familiar with

the placement tool (Navas, 2025). They also found it difficult to locate the link to continue using it and stated that the language used to access the link was more technical than everyday language (Navas, 2025).

Summarily, the literature reviewed in this section shows that several studies on teaching practice placements have been conducted both locally (Rusznyak & Bertram, 2021; Taole et al., 2024; Van Wyk et al., 2024) and internationally (Jung, 2022; Zegwaard et al., 2023). The existing studies show that different HEIs in South Africa embrace technology in teaching practice activities. For example, Taole et al. (2024) indicated that an ODeL institution in South Africa adopted Microsoft Teams to conduct online teaching practice supervision. Similarly, Van Wyk et al. (2024) confirmed that Microsoft Teams is a valuable platform for facilitating online supervision during teaching practice. Despite these studies, a gap remains in the existing literature regarding the role of technology in facilitating student teachers' placements for teaching practice, especially in the ODeL context, where high numbers of student teachers need to be placed. Hence, the current study was conducted to make a unique contribution to the body of knowledge by sharing findings on student teachers' experiences and usage of the online teaching practice placement tool in the selected ODeL institution in South Africa.

Theoretical framework

The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), developed by Davis (1989), and the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT), developed by Venkatesh et al. (2003), were adopted as the theoretical lenses for the current study. TAM is an information systems' model that explains how users accept and use technology. When users are exposed to new technology, several factors influence their decisions regarding how and when they will use it. The TAM model theorises two constructs—perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness—as the primary determinants of an individual's intention to use technology (Davis, 1989). According to TAM, perceived ease of use is defined as "the degree to which a person believes that using a particular system would be free from effort" (Davis, 1989, p. 320), while perceived usefulness is defined as "the degree to which a person believes that using a particular system would enhance his or her job performance" (Davis, 1989, p. 320).

Although TAM has been used in various studies to explain technology adoption and use (Musa et al., 2024; Toraman, 2022), some critics have argued that it oversimplifies the complexity of technology adoption (Prasetyo et al., 2025). In response to this criticism, UTAUT was also employed to provide a more comprehensive understanding of technology

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adoption. The theoretical model of UTAUT suggests that the actual use of technology is determined by behavioural intention (Venkatesh et al., 2003). Hence, the likelihood of adopting technology depends on four key constructs: performance expectancy, effort expectancy, social influence, and facilitating conditions (Venkatesh et al., 2003). Of these four constructs, two—namely, social influence and facilitating conditions—have been used in the current study, as they assist in explaining student teachers' adoption of the online placement tool. Performance expectancy and effort expectancy were excluded from analysis because they are mainly influenced by other variables such as gender, age, and experience among others, which are beyond the scope of the current study. Social influence is defined as "the degree to which an individual perceives that important others believe he or she should use the new system", while facilitating conditions are defined as "the degree to which an individual believes that an organisational and technical infrastructure exist to support the use of the system" (Venkatesh et al., 2003, p. 426).

In the current study, TAM and UTAUT were used to investigate the adoption of the online teaching practice placement tool by student teachers in an ODeL institution in South Africa. The online teaching placement tool was viewed as a technology that student teachers must adopt to successfully complete their placement and hence, their teaching practice module. It was important for the authors to understand the factors that influence student teachers' intention to use the online placement tool. Based on TAM and UTAUT, we assumed that student teachers' perceived ease of use, perceived usefulness, social influence, and facilitating conditions of the online placement tool may significantly influence their intention to use the tool.

Methodology

This section outlines the methodology that was followed to answer the main research questions of this study.

Research paradigm, approach and design

The current study is located within the interpretive research paradigm. Pervin and Mokhtar (2022) assert that an interpretive research paradigm is based on the premise that social reality is shaped by way of human experience and social backdrop, thereby, making it well suited to do research on human behaviours which are related in the context of its socio-cultural issues. Thus, an interpretive research paradigm is deemed relevant for the current study since it explores student teachers' acceptance and experiences in relation to the

online placement tool used to place them for teaching practice in an ODeL institution in South Africa. Locating this study within interpretive paradigm enabled the researchers to describe and narrate the acceptance and experiences of the participants in detail. In line with the interpretative research paradigm, a qualitative research approach was employed for the purposes of the current study. Qualitative research aims to gain in-depth understanding of human behaviour and the reasons that govern such behaviour (Seamon & Gill, 2016). In this study, a qualitative research approach assisted the researchers to explore in detail rich experiences of student teachers on the use of the online teaching practice placement tool. Adopting a qualitative research approach enriched the findings of the study since the online teaching practice placement tool is a new innovation to student teachers, hence, they had a lot of experiences to share. Descriptive phenomenology research design was adopted as the blueprint of this study, since it studies the lived experiences of the participants as described by them (Sharma-Brymer & Fox, 2008). Hence, it was found suitable to study student teachers' experiences and acceptance of the online teaching practice placement tool in an ODeL institution in South Africa.

Sample, sampling technique, and data collection methods

Given the nature of the context where the study was conducted being ODEL institution of higher learning, it would be challenging to conduct interviews. As a result, open-ended online questionnaires were used. Although this was a phenomenological study, the use of open-ended online questionnaire for data collection was deemed suitable. Braun et al. (2023) support this approach by asserting that researchers have increasingly recognised that open-ended online surveys can generate rich, descriptive qualitative data when carefully designed with probing questions that encourage detailed narratives (Braun et al., 2023). In line with this, open-ended questionnaires assisted the participants to express their experiences and views with regards to the online TP placement tool. The open-ended questions allowed respondents to phrase their answers in their own words. The online qualitative survey was developed and hosted using Microsoft Forms. Since the researchers are teaching practice module lecturers, they invited all student teachers to participate in the study. Emails were sent to all student teachers enrolled in the teaching practice modules taught by the researchers and the first 20 student teachers who responded were given the link to Microsoft Forms to complete the online survey. Thewes et al. (2018) refer to this technique of sampling as a consecutive sampling. The first part of the online qualitative survey contained the information about the study to the participants, and they were required to consent to participate before answering the questions. The qualitative survey

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contained questions that solicited student teachers' experiences, challenges, and the usage of student teachers towards the online teaching practice placement tool. Online surveys are praised for enabling researchers to ask questions of participants located around the world, thereby gaining in-depth insights into new or understudied phenomena (Thomas et al., 2024). This was the case in the current study, as the researchers successfully recruited participants from different parts of the country, since the institution where the study was conducted is an open distance learning institution where students are located in different parts of South Africa. In spite of this, the researchers acknowledge the limitations associated with online surveys as a data collection method. For example, online surveys are prone to self-selection bias and to avoid this, the researchers were transparent in detailing the procedures followed when collecting and analysing data. Furthermore, the first 20 student teachers who participated in the survey might have been quick in their responses, leaving those who might have had rich and detailed information on the phenomenon behind. Nevertheless, the participants were given a period of two weeks to respond, which gave all students who were willing to participate sufficient time to respond to the online survey.

Data analysis

In Clarke and Braun's (2017) thematic analysis, six steps were followed when analysing data. Firstly, the researchers downloaded the participants' responses from Microsoft Office as an excel spreadsheet. The raw data was made available to all researchers for them to familiarise themselves with it. The researchers individually engaged in data analysis where they assigned codes to the raw data, and the codes were later changed into initial themes while other codes were collapsed together to form single initial themes. The initial themes were revised, and final themes were developed which were eventually used to report the findings. Although the researchers engaged in data analysis individually, they had continuous meetings after each and every step to compare their codes, initial themes, and final themes. This ensured that all researchers were in sync with the themes they finally agreed on and used to report the findings. Thematic analysis was deemed suitable for the current study, because through repeated reading of the responses, coding, and the development of themes, the analysis captures the essential meanings embedded in participants' descriptions of their lived experiences (Braun et al., 2023; Naeem et al., 2023). The themes represent shared meanings while preserving the richness and complexity of individual experiences, thereby supporting the phenomenological aim of understanding the essence of the phenomenon under investigation (Polat, 2025; Van Manen, 2023).

Ethics considerations

Research ethics distinguish between right or wrong and acceptable and unacceptable behaviour when conducting researching. Ethical clearance with reference number 2023/10/1190507746/34/AM was obtained from the institution's ethics committee where the current study was conducted. The researchers abided by the ethical standards regarding consent, confidentiality, and anonymity. Additionally, since the participants were students to the researchers, they acknowledged that and indicated to students that they can express their views and experiences freely, since the findings would be shared with the TPO to assist in improving the quality of the online placement tool. Codes ST 1-ST 20 derived from Student Teachers 1-20, were used when reporting the findings to protect the identities of the participants.

Data presentation

Two main themes emerged during data analysis, and they were used to report the findings. These themes are student teachers' experiences and support received from the TPO.

Experiences of student teachers

This theme reports the lived experiences of student teachers towards the online teaching practice tool. It emerges from this theme that student teachers had different experiences when using the online teaching practice placement tool. Some student teachers had positive experiences while others had negative experiences when using the online teaching practice placement tool. The participants' experiences are captured in their commentaries below. For example, ST 13 stated:

> *I feel that teaching practice administrative aspect and guidance in general easy much better than previous years, as a result of the placement tool.*

The commentary by ST 13 suggests that the participant's experiences of placement changed in 2025 due to the introduction of the online teaching practice placement tool. This might be because the online teaching practice placement tool allows student teachers to place themselves by selecting their preferred schools, and dates on the online teaching practice placement tool. This is unlike previous years where they used to fill and email forms to the TPO and wait for the office to place them in their schools of choice before they can commence with their teaching practice. Some student teachers had to wait a long time before the TPO placed them, hence, others ended up missing their teaching practice and this had serious implications for them.

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ST 4 also confirmed that they had a positive experience with using the online teaching practice placement tool and how they encountered a few challenges. the participant reflected:

> *My experience using the placement tool has been generally positive; it is user-friendly and allows for easy navigation, though I encountered some technical glitches.*

The sentiments from ST 4 suggests that the participant found the online teaching practice placement tool to be user-friendly and easy to navigate. This shows that some student teachers, such as ST 4, successfully used the tool to place themselves without needing assistance from the TPO to place them in schools. The participant also noted that this was not without technical glitches, which was expected since students were using the tool for the first time in 2025. Similar experiences were also shared by ST 19 who indicated that the online teaching practice placement tool was easy to use though some challenges were encountered. The participant accentuated:

> *The placement tool was easy to use, but I had problems as well with this tool because my teaching language was changed and supervisor without notice which made me struggle to get a hold of my supervisor and an explanation why my teaching language was changed.*

From the above, it is clear that ST 19 did not experience challenges with the tool per se, however, there were challenges with interference with the details of the student's placement. It might happen that one of the officials from the TPO changed details such as the language of teaching and the supervisor unilaterally without informing the student. This had serious implications for the student, since they ended up not getting hold of the supervisor.

ST 1 had an experience that was slightly different from those of ST 4 and 19. ST 1 found the tool to be useful, and it was without challenges. ST 1 said:

> *It was good experience, because I only had to ask placement in a local school and provided me with school stamp and signatures.*

This shows that some student teachers had good experiences with the online teaching practice placement tool. This might be caused by the fact that ST 1 easily found their school on the system and did not struggle with uploading the stamped principal's letter in the system, hence, had a good experience using the tool.

It also emerged from the participants' comments that some student teachers had negative experiences when using the online teaching practice placement tool. ST 15, 16, and 18 narrated their experiences and said:

It was not an easy experience in the beginning, but I was able to complete my placement even though I struggled as when it came to block periods and didn't get responses as to how I was supposed to go about it as it was very tricky as I did it at 2 schools. **ST 15**

It was good. I only had difficulties when selecting block dates or no block dates. When I selected no block dates the system would not let me select my dates. Other than that, it was easy to use. **ST 16**

I struggled to insert correct dates as I was registered for two practical modules due to being a final year student. I received placement with wrong dates more than twice, but the co-ordinators helped me. **ST 18**

The contributions made by the above participants confirm that not all student teachers experienced the new innovation (online teaching practice placement tool) positively. The sentiments suggest that some student teachers had very bad experiences when using the tool. ST 15 mentioned struggling with selecting the block dates and there was no support from the TPO to help her navigate the tool. This is concerning, since such challenges delay student teachers from getting placed and ultimately missing the due dates for their assessments, especially Assignment 1 that requires students to attach proof that they have been placed for teaching practice. This was the case with ST 18 who failed to capture dates in the online teaching practice placement tool. However, the student was assisted by the TPO which resulted in the student being successfully placed. From this, it can be deduced that the assistance provided by the TPO to students remains inconsistent; other student teachers get effective assistance while others struggle with getting assistance with regards to online placement for their teaching practice.

Support from the TPO

This theme presents findings on the experiences of student teachers on the support they received from the TPO to help them apply for posts through the online teaching practice placement tool. The support from the TPO was critical to student teachers, since they were using the tool for the first time in 2025 and they needed assistance. It transpired from the student teachers' sentiments that they had varied experiences with regards to the support provided by the TPO. For instance, ST 17 and 19 stated:

I would say they are supportive; I did the online placement and waited for the confirmation email. I then sent a placement letter and I then escalated the placement with one of the Teaching Practice office's staff members who was very helpful. **ST 17**

The support from the teaching practice office administrators has been excellent. They responded promptly to my queries and provided clear guidance on using the placement tool.

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Their communication was professional and helpful. **ST 1**

It appears from the sentiments above that ST 1 and ST 17 were satisfied with the support they received from the TPO staff members. The participants pointed out that their enquiries were attended to timeously when reporting challenges with the online placement. Providing prompt responses and support to student teachers must be a priority for the TPO, because prompt finalisation and approval of their placement in schools is a requirement for them to commence their teaching practice sessions.

ST 14 also found the transition from manual placement application to online placement application through the online teaching practice placement tool to be seamless due the support received from the TPO. The participant underscored:

> *The Teaching Practice Office administrators provided excellent support throughout the online placement process. They were responsive to my inquiries, offered helpful guidance, and ensured a smooth transition to the online environment.* **ST 14**

The assertion by ST 14 confirms that when student teachers are supported, they easily embrace change. This is probable, given that the students involved are enrolled in the ODeL institution where most of the activities are done online. Thus, it was easy for them to embrace and adopt the online teaching practice placement tool.

Amidst the positive sentiments and experiences of some student teachers with regards to the support received from the TPO, there were participants who raised serious concerns. For example, ST 2, 7 and 8 complained:

> *The process of applying for the placement is simple, but it can be prolonged for it to be confirmed which is what happened to me this year, the confirmation of placement was not sent until the due date of Assignment 1. I failed the assignment because of the placement was not being sent.* **ST 2**

> *It is an easy method to use when applying for a placement, but the fact that it takes time, makes it hard for us to resume our teaching practice at school.* **ST 7**

> *I did not get any support; they did not respond to any emails that I sent to them when I needed assistance regarding my online placement.* **ST 8**

It can be inferred from the sentiments above that these participants found the actual use of the online teaching practice placement tool to be easy, however, the confirmation of their placements by the TPO was poor. This is evident in the sentiments of ST 2, that the delay in the approval of the student's placement led to the student failing Assignment 1.

This means that such delays have a negative impact on students' academics which is unfair, since they do not have any control over the delays in the confirmation of their placements.

In the same vein, ST 10 and ST 11 decried that emails in relation to online teaching practice placement were not responded to timeously. They said:

> *Most of the time when you send emails regarding your placement, you do not get any response and most of the time the Teaching Practice Office administrators are out of the office.* **ST 10**

> *It was good, but sometimes you find it difficult to get response from the practical office when you need some help. Like proof of placement were incorrect. When I try to contact the office, I couldn't get any help from anyone.* **ST 11**

Overall, the comments from the participants suggest that there is poor communication in the TPO, especially when student teachers must be assisted with the confirmation of their placements or some corrections to be made in their placements. This has serious implications for student teachers in the ODeL institution, since communication with units such as the TPO is crucial for them to smoothly engage in different academic activities, such as teaching practice.

Discussion of the findings

This study investigated the student teachers' acceptance and experiences of the online teaching practice placement tool at the ODeL institution in South Africa. The study revealed that student teachers had varied experiences with regards to the use of the online teaching practice placement tool. Some participants found the online teaching practice placement tool easy to navigate. This finding aligns with a study conducted by Navas (2025), which reported that students find online placement tools user-friendly. This finding aligns with the TAM variable of perceived ease of use, since the participants believed that it was easy to use the online placement tool to facilitate their online teaching practice placement. In the context of the current study, the ease of use of the online placement tool may be facilitated by the guidelines provided by the TPO to streamline the Teaching Practice placement process. The TPO provides online placements guidelines on Tutorial Letter 102, for every teaching practice module for student teachers to follow when applying for teaching placement online. In spite of these findings, there are some participants who had negative experiences when using the online teaching practice placement tool. Some student teachers reported delays in the confirmation of their placements by the TPO,

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causing some student teachers to miss due dates for their assignments that are linked to their school placements. This finding shows that delays in the placement of student teachers have serious implications for their academic activities. Having student teachers miss due dates for their assignments, may have significant consequences for students in this ODEL institution, because proof of placement is required in Assignment 1 and this assignment is a prerequisite for students to submit other assignments and qualify for examinations. Furthermore, missing the first assessment may mean that the student is disadvantaged on their year mark, leading to students performing poorly in their studies which may result in repeating the teaching practice module/s which in turn, may lead to dropping out. The failure rate and drop-outs in this ODEL institution remains high, thus, the need for strong support to be provided to students. This finding contradicts the findings of Ngonda et al. (2024) that revealed technological placement tools in WIL offer essential benefits, including efficiency and speed. In the current study, instead of improving the efficiency of the online teaching practice placement, some student teachers experienced it as a tool that was inefficient. Despite this, the participants continued to use the online placement tool, because the 'important others' believe that they have to use it (Venkatesh et al., 2003). In the context of the current study, the "important others" is the TPO, the College of Education and the lecturers.

Consistent with the varied experiences of student teachers on using the online teaching practice placement tool, the current study further revealed that the participants had diverse experiences with regards to the support received from the TPO. Some participants found the support from the TPO to be satisfactory and helpful to them during the teaching practice placement application process. The participants specifically indicated that their enquiries were attended to timeously when reporting challenges with the online placement. This finding is in accordance with that of a study by Navas (2025) which reported that WIL placement tools improved communication, as students are well informed about their placement status and details, and that the tool provides information about their schools and the supervisor who will evaluate them after placement. It can be presumed from the finding by Navas (2025), that the online placement tool studied had features that allowed students to track their placement status, indicate their supervisors in advance, and provided information about their schools. The online teaching practice placement tool that is studied in the current study has similar features; however, student teachers' information can still be altered by the staff members in the TPO without the student teacher being notified. This was evident in ST 19's commentary where details such as the language of teaching and the supervisor's details were altered. Furthermore, the study revealed that some student

teachers' online placement applications took a long time to be approved by the TPO. The participants reported that they sent emails to the TPO enquiring about their placements, however, they were not responded to timeously. This finding contradicts that of Navas (2025) which revealed that students expressed positive feelings about the user-friendly value of the PIMS tool, stating that it is easy to use and saves time while reducing stress (Navas, 2025). In the current study, it appears that the lack of support by the TPO caused much stress for student teachers instead of alleviating it. A finding of this nature takes away the recommendations of online placement tools, as suggested by several scholars (Navas, 2025; Samuels, 2021) who believe that the introduction of online placement tools leads to increased efficiencies in WIL placements. The findings above suggest that some student teachers believed that the support systems put in place by the HEI was adequate to create suitable conditions for a successful placement. On the other hand, there were student teachers who believed that the support systems put in place were not adequate to facilitate their online placements effectively. These contrasting views from the participants suggests that student teachers received inconsistent support from the TPO during their online placements.

In summary, it can be concluded that most of the findings of the current study align with different variables of the TAM and UTAUT theoretical underpinnings. This is because some findings align with some key variables of the theoretical underpinnings while others did not. For example, the study found that many student teachers believed that the online teaching practice placement tool was easy to use. This aligns with the TAM variable (perceived ease of use) that a person is likely to accept the new technology (online placement tool) if they believe that using a particular system would be free from effort (Davis, 1989). However, it could not be ascertained if the student teachers found the online teaching practice placement tool to be useful. This is due to the challenges they encountered with regards to the approval or confirmation of their placement application. The participants expressed dissatisfaction with the time taken by the TPO to confirm their placements. Thus, it can be concluded that the student teacher participants did not believe that using a particular system (Davis, 1989) enhanced their teaching practice placement process. Similarly, the two variables of UTAUT, which are social influence and facilitating conditions, were used to analyse the findings of the current study. It can be assumed that the student teachers used the online teaching practice placement tool because the "important others" believe that they have to use it (Venkatesh et al., 2003, p. 426). In this case, the TPO (important others) mandated student teachers to apply for teaching practice placement online, hence they used the online placement tool. However, it cannot be concluded that

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student teachers believe that an organisation (TPO) and technical infrastructure exists to support the use of the system (Venkatesh et al., 2003). This was evident in the findings where student teachers decried the lack of support from the TPO when enquiring about the delays in their placements.

Conclusions and recommendations

The current study investigated the experiences and the usage of the online teaching practice placement tool by student teachers at a selected ODeL institution in South Africa. The finding of the study suggests that student teachers had diverse experiences when using the online teaching practice placement tool. It was concluded that student teachers' varied experiences were due to the uneven and inconsistent support provided by the TPO to student teachers when engaging in online placement. Based on the findings, the study recommends that the ODeL institution must consider automating the approval of the student teachers' teaching practice placement applications to avoid delays that have serious implications for student teachers. This will minimise human interaction in the system and result in the teaching practice placement process being fully online. Additionally, the HEI under study should consider providing continuous training to student teachers on the use of the online placement tool. This will allow student teachers to correctly place themselves with less reliance on the administrators from the TPO. Furthermore, the TPO should enforce the 24-hour standard response time for student teachers' emails to be attended to, to avoid delayed responses which affect the students negatively. In future, a quantitative study must be conducted to allow for the larger number of student teachers to participate and indicate their acceptance of the online teaching practice placement tool. This will help to generalise the findings to the entire student teacher populace in the ODeL HEI.

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Appendix A: Questionnaire

Student Teachers' Acceptance and Experiences of an Online Teaching Practice Placement Tool in a South African ODeL Institution: A TAM–UTAUT Perspective

Biographical information

Age:

Gender

Year of study: 1 2 3 4

Programme/qualification:

Questions

1. What has been your experience of using the placement tool?

2. What has been your experience regarding the support that you received from the teaching practice office administrators with online placement?

3. Do you have any suggestions to improve the placement tool to make it better next year?

4. How can the teaching practice administrators improve their communication to you about the online placement?

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