"Exploring Novice Academics' Perceptions of Support Structures in ODEL: A Focus on Participative Management and Mentorship"

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Abstract

The purpose of this conceptual paper is to explore the perceptions of novice academics regarding support structures in Open Distance and e-Learning (ODEL) systems, with a particular focus on participative management and mentorship. **The main research question guiding this study is**: How do novice academics perceive the effectiveness of participative management and mentorship as support structures in ODEL environments? **This qualitative** study is based on a comprehensive review of recent scholarly books and articles (2018-2024) serving as the underpinning foundation. **Data collection** employed qualitative methods within the interpretive paradigm, including reflective journals, to capture the ubiquitous challenges faced by novice academics in ODEL settings. **Findings** highlight numerous challenges such as feelings of isolation, insufficient guidance, and difficulties in navigating institutional policies. Despite these challenges, participative management and mentorship are perceived as crucial for professional growth and integration into the academic community. **The study emphasizes** the importance of individually designed mentorship programs and inclusive participative management practices tailored to the unique needs of novice academics in ODEL systems. **These findings contribute** to the existing literature by providing insights into how support structures can be enhanced to better serve novice academics, ultimately leading to improved job satisfaction and retention in ODEL institutions.

Keywords: Novice Academics, Participative Management, Mentorship, Support Structures, Open Distance and e-Learning

Introduction:

Tuomi (2024) asserts that education is a crucial phenomenon for human growth. Its purpose is to serve as an essential foundation for the advancement of society. The acquisition of specialised knowledge, critical thinking, and problem-solving ability are crucial tools for personal and professional progress (UNESCO, 2015). Education has had a significant impact on communities worldwide, leading to substantial reductions in poverty and advancements in gender equality (World Bank, 2020). For example, in Finland, a strong education system has played a significant role in maintaining low levels of unemployment and ensuring good living standards (Paukkeri et al., 2024). likewise, reforms to education in South Korea have played a significant

role in contributing to economic growth and technological advancements (Lee & Choi, 2024).

Despite these successes, significant gaps remain issues of great concern particularly in the context of Open Distance e-Learning (ODEL) institutions. Globally, access to quality education is still asymmetrical with many regions facing infrastructural and technological barriers (UNESCO, 2015). In the South African context, ODEL institutions face unique challenges such as limited internet access, insufficient support systems and inadequate funding (Ajani, 2023). For example, many rural areas in South Africa struggle with unreliable internet connectivity which makes it difficult for novice academics to access online learning resources (Gredley & McMillan, 2024). In a similar vein, Smith (2024) found that there is often a lack of experienced senior lecturers to support the unique needs of novice academics.

This study seeks to fill these gaps by investigating efficient techniques to improve the standard of education at ODEL institutions, particularly within the South African setting. The objective of this study is to find and apply the most effective methods to improve accessibility, support systems, and overall educational achievements for novice academics. This research is of utmost importance as it seeks to not only close current disparities but also make a valuable contribution to the wider discussion on educational fairness and excellence. The authors want to offer practical insights that policymakers and educational institutions can implement to promote inclusive and supportive environments.

Background:

Participative Management and Mentorship are pivotal elements in the organizational framework, particularly within the context of Open and Distance e-Learning (ODEL). According to Huettermann et a., (2024) participative management refers to a management style where decision-making processes are decentralized and allowing for inputs and collaboration from various organizational stakeholder levels. This approach fosters a sense of ownership and accountability among staff members by enhancing motivation and commitment. Mentorship, on the other hand, involves experienced individuals guiding and supporting less experienced colleagues through the facilitation of professional and personal growth and development where knowledge and skills are acquired (Vlerick et al.,2024). In the academic world, these concepts are instrumental in nurturing novice academics ensuring they are well-supported and integrated into the institution's culture and objectives.

Participative Management in academia entails roles such as faculty members contributing to curriculum development, participating in committees and engaging in strategic planning. For instance, a university might form a committee comprising junior and senior faculty members to review and redesign a particular program (Driscoll & De Noriega, 2023). This inclusive approach not only leverages diverse perspectives but also empowers novice academics, making them feel valued and integral to the institution's success. Notably, Cameron et al., (2024) found that mentorship roles include senior academics providing guidance on research methodologies, navigating publication processes and offering career advice to novice colleagues. The interconnectedness of these concepts is evident as participative management often facilitates effective mentorship by creating a collaborative environment where knowledge sharing is encouraged and valued.

The integration of Participative Management and Mentorship significantly enhances the quality of outputs in academic institutions. For instance, in ODEL environments, these practices can lead to increased research outputs, higher student satisfaction, and improved teaching methodologies (Jacob & Centofanti, 2024). Participative management ensures that all voices are heard, which can lead to innovative ideas and solutions, directly impacting the institution's key performance areas (KPAs) such as research quality and teaching excellence. Mentorship, meanwhile, aids in the professional development of novice academics equipping them with the necessary skills and knowledge to contribute effectively to the

institution's goals. These practices foster a culture of continuous improvement and excellence, ultimately leading to both individual and institutional growth and development (Warner et al., 2024).

The main research question guiding this qualitative inquiry is: "How do novice academics perceive the effectiveness of participative management and mentorship as support structures in ODEL environments?"

The research objectives pertinent to this study "How do novice academics perceive the effectiveness of participative management and mentorship as support structures in ODEL environments?" are:

- To evaluate the perceived effectiveness of participative management as a support structure for novice academics in Open and Distance e-Learning (ODEL) environments.
- To investigate the role of mentorship in supporting novice academics and enhancing their experiences in ODEL environments.

Theoretical framework:

The authors believe that the theoretical framework encompasses exploring "Novice Academics' Perceptions of Support Structures in ODEL: A Focus on Participative Management and Mentorship," which includes several key theoretical perspectives and concepts.

Participative **Management** Theory (PMT) serves as a foundation for understanding how involving novice academics in decision-making processes can enhance their engagement, sense of ownership and professional development within the ODEL environment. This approach is grounded in the idea that inclusive decision-making fosters a supportive and collaborative workplace culture which is crucial for novice academics who are navigating new and potentially challenging educational landscapes.

On the other hand, the concept of **mentorship** is integral to this framework. Mentorship Theory

(MT) emphasizes the importance of experienced colleagues providing guidance, support and knowledge transfer to less experienced individuals (Junça & Pinto, 2024). In the context of ODEL, mentorship can help novice academics acclimate to unique teaching and administrative demands, develop effective online teaching strategies and build confidence in their expected professional roles. Thus, Palacio & Digo (2024) postulate that the mentorship relationship can also facilitate the sharing of best practices and innovations within the online education which is particularly valuable in rapidly evolving ODEL settings.

In the same vein, these frameworks incorporates **Social learning Theory (SLT)** which highlights the role of observation, imitation and modelling in the learning process. This theory is relevant as novice academics often learn from observing the practices of more experienced colleagues both in participative management and mentorship contexts (Burger, 2024). The social aspect of learning is particularly significant in ODEL environments where the sense of community and connectedness can be less tangible compared to traditional educational settings.

Undoubtedly, the authors regard the **Organizational Support Theory (OST)**, which suggests that the perceived support from an organization including access to resources and professional development opportunities, positively influences employee satisfaction and performance (To & Leung, 2024). In ODEL environments, organizational support can manifest through accessible training programs, technology resources and structured mentorship programs all of which can help novice academics feel more supported and capable in their roles.

Through the integration of these theories and concepts, the theoretical framework seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of how novice academics perceive and benefit from support structures in ODEL environments, specifically focusing on participative management and mentorship. Ben-Amram & Davidovitch (2024) found that these frameworks serves as a

basis for examining the effectiveness of these support structures in promoting professional growth, satisfaction and overall success among novice academics in ODEL settings.

Method:

This qualitative study utilized a systematic literature review as its primary research method. The review focused on scholarly books and articles published between (2016 – 2024) to enhance our understanding of "Exploring Novice Academics' Perceptions of Support Structures in ODEL: A Focus on Participative Management and Mentorship." According to Fan et al. (2022), an integrative literature review is a research approach that critiques and synthesizes existing literature in an integrated manner, offering new perspectives on the topic. This type of review allows for the combination and synthesis of findings from various sources.

Data Collection:

In conducting the systematic literature review on "Exploring Novice Academics' Perceptions of Support Structures in ODEL," recent evidence from sources published between (2016 – 2024) was meticulously gathered. This comprehensive approach aimed to capture detailed insights into the experiences and perceptions of novice academics regarding participative management and mentorship in ODEL environments. The analysis included a wide range of scholarly books and articles, aiming to reflect on the effectiveness of these support structures and their contribution to the professional growth and satisfaction of novice academics in ODEL settings.

Data Analysis:

The analysis of the literature on "Exploring Novice Academics' Perceptions of Support Structures in ODEL: A Focus on Participative Management and Mentorship" employed an interpretivist paradigm within a local context, as highlighted by Pervin & Mokhtar (2023). This approach acknowledges the deep social and cultural foundations inherent in ODEL settings and the limitations of a purely objective stance. By embracing subjective perspectives, the authors examined nuanced aspects of the topic, considering the complexities of participative management, mentorship, and the unique challenges faced by novice academics in ODEL environments. This interpretive lens provided a deeper understanding of the support structures' impact, allowing for insights into how these strategies can be tailored to meet the specific needs of novice academics (Sibay & Gonzales, 2024). Through this holistic approach, the study aimed to offer practical recommendations for enhancing the effectiveness of support structures in ODEL, thereby fostering a supportive and inclusive environment for novice academics.

Literature Review:

Akella (2024) argues that the introduction of organised support systems greatly improves the professional development and retention of novice academics in the field of open and distant e-learning (ODEL). Carvajal & Sanchez (2024) unequivocally determined that leadership development programs and mentorship programs are essential aspects of these work frameworks. Höl (2024) defines participative management as the practice of involving novice academics in decision-making processes, which aims to cultivate a sense of ownership and active involvement. Within the framework of ODEL, this refers to the inclusion of novice academics in the process of developing long-term strategies, creating policies, and carrying out new projects (Aithal et al., 2024). This strategy not only enables individuals to gain power and control, but also makes it easier for people to acquire crucial abilities such as analytical reasoning, problem-solving and collaboration together with others. Novice academics are more inclined to actively participate in shaping the direction of the institution and their own professional growth when they perceive that their views are acknowledged and their contributions are considered. Therefore, when novice academics participate in institutional governance, they have a more profound comprehension of the organisational culture and operational dynamics, which is essential for their integration and

advancement in their careers (Senivongse & Bennet, 2023).

Mentorship, on the other hand, is a significant aspect of support for novice academics in ODEL. It establishes an organised pathway for knowledge and skill acquisition. Experienced faculty members or senior academics serve as mentors, providing guidance, support, and feedback on a regular basis. According to Taylor (2024), this relationship is important in managing the complexity of the academic environment, especially in an ODEL situation when issues such as isolation and a lack of direct collegial support might be more prevalent. Similarly, mentorship creates a caring and supportive atmosphere by encouraging novice academics to pursue innovative teaching and research methodologies. Clegg et al., (2024) explicitly assert that mentors are capable of helping novice academics excel in academic life by teaching, performing research and innovation, supervising master's and doctoral students, and producing research outputs as well as work-life balance with insights into institutional policies and imperatives.

Significance of Participative Management and Mentorship

The significance of participative management and mentorship in aiding novice academics in open and distant e-learning (ODEL) contexts is indispensable. According to Sadera et al. (2024), these interconnected aspects of support systems are critical for the professional development and retention of novice academics. Participative management, which actively engages employees in decision-making, and mentorship, which provides support and guidance to novice academics, work together to empower and develop them (Smith, 2024). Globally, many higher education institutions have recognised the benefits of this collaborative approach, which has been shown to improve job satisfaction, dedication, and general engagement, ultimately helping to the retention of novice academics in ODEL environments (Desselle et al., 2024).

Mentorship programs and collaborative decision-making processes in countries like the United States, Canada, and Australia have effectively facilitated the transfer of knowledge, development of essential skills and competencies, and a smooth transition into the academic profession for novice academics (Mahalingam, 2024). Consequently, this has resulted in enhanced academic achievement and a greater chance of retaining novice academics as professionals in the ODEL sector. Conversely, the ODEL environment in South Africa is frequently described as lacking democratic management and established mentorship programs for novice academics. This has resulted in challenges related to transferring knowledge, developing skills, and fostering personal growth, which has contributed to a high rate of turnover among novice academics (Schutter & Lehmann, 2024). Therefore, the effective implementation of participatory management and mentorship in South African ODEL institutions has been hindered by issues such as inadequate resources, institutional bureaucracy, and a lack of awareness regarding the benefits of these support structures (Grey & Lombard, 2024).

Consequences of the Absence of Participative Management and Mentorship

According to Williams (2023), the absence of participative management and mentorship for novice academics in open and distant e-learning (ODEL) contexts might negatively impact their professional growth, work fulfilment, and ability to continue in their current role. Similarly, according to Kayyali (2024), novice academics in ODEL environments often face challenges understanding the intricate nature of academic life when they lack essential support systems. This may result in the development of stress, feelings of isolation, a sense of inadequacy, and an increased risk of attrition. The absence of participative management and mentorship programs for novice ODEL academics in countries such as the United Kingdom and Australia has been associated with increased rates of employee turnover, reduced research productivity, and a diminished sense of community within the institution (Sánchez-Tarazaga et al.,

2024). Consequently, this can have a detrimental effect on the overall excellence of education and the institution's capacity to attract and retain highly skilled new academic personnel.

In South Africa, the absence of these support systems has been a significant factor in the ongoing challenges faced by the ODEL sector. Novice academics frequently experience a sense of isolation, as they lack the requisite guidance and support to successfully navigate the many different demands of ODEL teaching and research requirements and outputs (Bertram & Rusznyak, 2024). Without a doubt, these factors can lead to a decrease in job satisfaction, reduced levels of engagement, demotivation, and eventually greater rates of attrition among novice academics in the professional academic environment (Martínez et al., 2024). The absence of participative management and mentorship in the South African environment can be attributed to various factors, including insufficient financial resources, institutional bureaucracy, and a lack of awareness of the benefits of such practices (Farrell et al., 2024). Similarly, the enduring impact of apartheid and the continuous reform of the higher education system in South Africa have posed distinctive difficulties in cultivating a culture of cooperation and assistance for novice academics (Khumalo & Ndlovu, 2024).

Challenges that impede participative management and mentoring in ODEL

The current body of research emphasises certain significant challenges that impede the execution of participatory management and successful mentorship initiatives for novice academics in open and distant e-learning (ODEL) contexts. A significant challenge is the absence of institutional support and commitment to promoting a collaborative culture (Grey & Lombard, 2024). However, ODEL institutions frequently have resource limitations, such as insufficient financing and staffing, which might pose difficulties in prioritising the establishment of comprehensive support systems for novice academics and professionals (Balona & Digo, 2024). Moreover,

the natural geographic distribution and isolation of ODEL novice academics can pose significant challenges to the development of impactful mentorship relationships and inclusive management approaches (Woldegiorgis & Chiramba, 2024). As a result, novice academics may experience a lack of connection with their peers and management in their institution, which could impede their capacity to obtain the necessary direction and assistance to traverse the intricacies of academic life. Moreover, the absence of physical interactions and reliance on digital communication can pose challenges in establishing the trust and relationship required for successful mentorship (Jayavelu et al., 2024).

The South African ODEL context poses distinct challenges that have contributed to development of these impediments. The past consequences of apartheid and the continuous process of transforming the higher education system have resulted in an inequitable allocation of resources, with certain institutions and areas experiencing notably more difficult circumstances than others (Dorasamy & Kikasu, 2024). This has led to the continuation of a culture that is defined by isolation and competitiveness, rather than one characterised by collaboration and support. Avolio et al. (2004) conducted a study that revealed how the geographical divide between ODEL faculty and institutional leadership in South Africa has impeded the establishment of a participative management approach. This is because novice academics often feel detached from the processes for making decisions which affect their professional growth. Simultaneously, Steyn (2024) argues that the socio-economic and cultural diversity of the South African ODEL landscape has brought about further challenges, such as language obstacles, different interpretations of authority and mentorship and the necessity to adapt to diverse approaches to learning and preferences. Therefore, these circumstances have contributed to a challenging environment for the establishment of extensive and efficient support systems which have further intensified the challenges experienced by novice academics.

Neo-Liberalism and Managerialism in ODEL:

The open and distant e-learning (ODEL) landscape has been greatly influenced by the broader developments of neo-liberalism and managerialism that have extended throughout the global higher education sector (Phan et al., 2024). Taylor & McDonald (2024) argue that Neo-liberalism is an economic and political ideology that prioritises the free market, privatisation, and minimising state intervention. Managerialism, on the other hand, refers to the implementation of corporate management practices and principles in public sector institutions, such as universities.

These imperatives have significantly affected how ODEL institutions deal with the mentoring and coaching of novice academics (Diab & Green, 2024). Most notably, Carducci et al. (2024) assert that ODEL programs are seen as profit-making endeavours rather than places for collaborative learning and knowledge-creation because Neo-liberal policies have made education a commodity. The authors Ridzi & Cyrus (2024) contend that this has led to an overemphasis on metrics, performance indicators, and output maximisation, often at at the expense of encouraging employee participation in management or providing extensive programs for mentoring.

The focus on competitiveness and the prioritisation of economic market demands in ODEL has negatively affected novice academics who may find it challenging to navigate the progressively intricate and demanding scholarly publications and research productivity context (Kayyali, 2024). Similarly, Zhao et al., (2024) discovered that in this context, novice academics frequently face enormous strain when trying to publish in prestigious journals, obtain external funding, and showcase tangible outcomes of their research. This pressure may detach them from critical aspects of professional growth, such as participatory management and mentorship. These circumstances might result in emotions of seclusion, exhaustion and a reduced sense of belonging which exacerbate the challenges experienced by novice academics within ODEL contexts as professionals.

The South African ODEL context is not immune to these developments worldwide, since the country's higher education system has been shaped by neoliberal and managerial mandates (McKay et al., 2024). Notably, Koot et al., (2024) observed that the legacy of apartheid, as well as the sector's ongoing transformation, have created a complex landscape in which resource constraints, unequal access to opportunities and the need to rapidly expand access to higher education have all contributed to the prioritisation of measurable outcomes and competitive metrics. Thus, in this environment, the development of participative management structures and comprehensive mentorship programs for novice academics has frequently been overlooked in favour of more immediate concerns such as increasing student enrolment, securing external funding and improving institutional rankings (Khumalo & Ndlovu, 2024).

The South African and international ODEL institutions need to critically investigate the foundational premises and prerequisites of managerialism and neoliberalism if they are to find resolutions to these challenges. Consequently, they need to come up with novel approaches that put novice academics' development and support at the epicentre (Almlöv & Grubbström, 2024). A more transparent and collaborative approach to decision-making, increased support for mentorship programs, and an acknowledgement of the significance of participatory management in creating an efficient academic community are all potential advances in the right direction (Burnett, 2024). According to Mertler (2024), ODEL institutions have the opportunity to establish supportive environments for novice academics by coordinating these systemic challenges; this will lead to societal progress and higher levels of understanding.

Millennium Development Goals in Higher Education:

Singh et al., (2024) found that the challenges faced by novice academics in open and distance e-learning (ODEL) institutions are multifaceted and

addressing them can contribute to the broader goals of sustainable development in higher education. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), adopted by the United Nations in 2000 provide a framework for addressing global issues including those related to education and professional development. One of the key MDGs relevant to this topic is Goal 4: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all (United Nations, 2015). Novice academics particularly in ODEL settings often encounter barriers to professional development and career advancement which can undermine the quality of education and limit their ability to contribute to the broader academic community. In addition, Rampersad (2024) advises that by implementing robust support structures such as participative management and comprehensive mentorship programs ODEL institutions can empower novice academics and foster an inclusive and equitable environment that aligns with the MDG objectives.

Recent studies have accentuated the significance of support structures in improving job satisfaction, scholarly productivity, and overall well-being among new academics (Wang et al., 2024). Similarly, Wandersman & Scheier (2024) argue that these findings highlight the importance for ODEL institutions to prioritise evidence-based strategies that resolve the unique challenges faced by novice academics. Rieckmann & Muñoz (2024) suggest that by integrating with the MDGs, ODEL institutions are capable of improving the experiences of novice academics and contribute to the broader goals of sustainable development in higher education. This approach can ultimately benefit both novice academics and the institutions they belong to, fostering a more inclusive, equitable, and prosperous academic community.

Conclusion:

The authors have noted that the findings from the study apply to the global educational landscape however, they apply specifically to the South African open and distance e-learning (ODEL) context. Thus, the research studies highlights the

critical importance of participative management and mentorship for novice academics in this environment. Without these support structures, novice academics and professionals often struggle with feelings of isolation, decreased job satisfaction with the resultant higher attrition rates (Welch, 2024). In the South African ODEL sector, the lack of participative management and mentorship programs has exacerbated the challenges faced by novice academics by contributing to a weakened sense of community and decreased research output productivity (Kilag et al., 2024). For example, a study by Padayachee et al., (2024) found that the legacy of apartheid and the ongoing transformation of the higher education system in South Africa have presented unique challenges in fostering a culture of collaboration and support for novice academics.

Challenges in Implementing Millennium Development Goals for Novice Academics through Participative Management and Mentoring

Attaining the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in higher education, specifically for novice academics at open and distant e-learning (ODEL) institutions, encounters substantial challenges. Rampersad (2024) asserts that the implementation of participative management and thorough mentorship programs are essential for the professional growth of inexperienced academics. Participative management, which prioritises collaborative decision-making and empowerment, frequently conflicts with conventional academic hierarchies that prefer top-down approaches (Lizier, et al., 2024). Therefore, it is crucial but difficult to achieve a harmonious relationship between academic independence and institutional oversight in order to cultivate a truly inclusive atmosphere.

Beyond that, the availability of experienced mentors, the compatibility of mentoring goals, and the maintenance of mentor-mentee relationships over time may impede the implementation of effective mentorship programs for novice academics (Mataboge, 2024). According to

Rehman et al. (2024), the development and implementation of institutional support and policies that promote and sustain mentorship projects are vital but can be challenging. In order to ensure that ODEL institutions' activities are in accordance with the MDGs, notably Goal 4 which focusses on providing inclusive and equitable quality education, it is crucial to address these challenges (United Nations, 2015). Institutions may empower novice academics and improve their job satisfaction and productivity by eliminating these challenges. This, in turn, will contribute to the broader endeavours of sustainable growth in higher education.

Recommendations:

In order to resolve these significant and ever-present challenges, it is important for South African ODEL institutions to prioritise the essential steps that improve the support systems for novice academics in this context. Implement participatory Management: ODEL institutions should embrace a participatory management strategy that empowers novice academics to actively participate in decision-making processes about their career advancement and development. This will cultivate a feeling of ownership and working together, ultimately enhancing the organisational culture and job satisfaction. Implementing comprehensive mentorship programs is crucial to equip novice academics with support, resources, and emotional support. Experienced faculty members can serve as mentors by providing individualised guidance and promoting professional growth based on attainable objectives.

Practical implications:

Examining the analysis of neo-liberalism and managerialism in the context of open and distant e-learning (ODEL) reveals the significance of ODEL institutions critically evaluating their support systems for novice academics. Mensah (2024) suggests that in order to resolve the issues presented by these larger patterns, ODEL institutions should give priority to the adoption of participatory approaches to leadership and robust mentorship programs for new academics.

Participative management is a successful approach to give novice academics the opportunity to contribute to decision-making processes. It creates a sense of community and encourages a collaborative learning environment (Musengamana et al., 2024). On the contrary, comprehensive mentorship programs can offer novice academics the essential support, resources, and emotional support to navigate the intricacies of academic life. This eventually improves their professional growth and research production (Kilag et al., 2024).

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