The contribution of the e-tutor model in an open distance learning higher education institution: the perspective of the e-tutor[1]

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this exploratory qualitative study was to determine e-tutors' perceptions (only e-tutors' perceptions, not students' or lecturers' perceptions) of the contribution of the e-tutor model towards an open distance learning institution, as well as to its students, from a sample of 31 out of 50 e-tutors in the Human Resource Management (HRM) Department. Open-ended questions were emailed to 50 e-tutors in the HRM Department to be completed on a voluntary basis. The results indicated that according to these e-tutors, the e-tutor model may hold several benefits for the institution, including that it could assist to increase pass rates, provide support to students and lecturers, assist to bridge the ODL gap – the gap between students, lecturers and fellow students due to distance education, and provide a competitive advantage to the institution. The e-tutors' views furthermore revealed that the model may hold substantial benefits for the students such as that it could assist students to understand the content and knowledge of the learning matter better, keep them informed, increase interaction, motivate them, and increase support and the ability of students to graduate. Therefore, the study demonstrates that the ODL institution's use of the e-tutor model could increase its student success rates and institutional competitiveness.

Keywords: contribution, distance education, e-learning, open distance learning, e-tutoring, student support

INTRODUCTION

The use of information technology in higher education is increasing, particularly in distance education. Technological interventions, such as e-tutoring, become imperative for student success in distance education (Govender, 2018; Salmon et al. & Ross, 2016). The e-tutoring model first gained attention in 1984 when Benjamin Bloom (1984) recognised its possible benefits. E-tutoring is a form of e-learning and it entails tutoring (teaching) in an online environment, where the e-tutor offers personal guidance in a context – such as in an open distance learning (ODL) institution – in which regular face-to-face contact between supervisor and student is difficult (Ramorola, 2018; Salmon & Gregory, 2015). The main aim of the e-tutor model is to improve students' learning experience and their success rate (Govender, 2018; Mashile & Matoane, 2012). Furthermore, this model aims to provide students with e-tutors who then ensure that the online learning space is managed so that it provides an appropriate environment for effective learning

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to take place. The model of ODL requires an institution to change its approach to teaching and learning, seeing that regular interaction between students and their lecturers and peers is difficult, to become more student-centred, and to focus on effective interaction as a way of motivating students and promoting student success (Govender, 2018; Joubert & Snyman, 2018; Matoane & Mashile, 2013).

In this article, the researchers examine the contribution of the e-tutoring model in an ODL higher education institution towards students as well as the institution, specifically from the perspective of the e-tutor. The ODL institution where this study was conducted has large numbers of students from diverse backgrounds who are widely spread across South Africa and internationally (Horner & Gouws, 2016; Joubert & Snyman, 2018; Ramorola, 2018), which necessitated the implementation of the e-tutor model in 2013. Because this is a relatively new system, there is a need to explore whether the e-tutor model has had a positive impact and has made a valuable contribution to students and the institution.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to determine what the contribution of the e-tutor model in an ODL higher education institution is towards students as well as towards the institution; specifically, from the perspective of the e-tutor. In an ODL institution, there is a need for more interaction between students and their peers and between students and their lecturer/tutor. Through e-tutoring, which is an online platform, students can be reached more easily throughout South Africa and internationally (De Jong, Verstegen & Könings, 2018) than through a paper–based system. The e-tutor model, which was implemented at the ODL institution where the study was conducted, aims to improve students' learning experience and their success rates (Horner & Gouws, 2016). According to Hew and Cheng (2014), e-tutoring has numerous benefits for the student and the institution; among other things, through e-tutoring, students enjoy more personal attention and quicker replies to their enquiries, and the students' success rates will improve, which will benefit the institution. In a distance education context, students are often left feeling disconnected, isolated and demotivated (Salmon & Angood, 2013). This is why an environment such as an online platform, where students can learn from the e-tutor as well as from each other, can be immensely beneficial to the learning experience as well as to the success rates of students (Mashile & Matoane, 2012).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Background

The development of new technologies in higher education has advanced and changed dramatically over the past few years. Due to the technological advancements and increased reliance on technology, it became imperative that ODL institutions made use of technology-enhanced learning as a means of academic support to students (Abdullah & Mtsweni, 2014). ODL can be defined as a multi–dimensional concept aimed at bridging the time, geographical, economic, social, educational and communication distance between student and institution, student and academics, student and courseware, and student and peers (Simpson, 2013). From this definition, it is evident that ODL is focused on removing barriers to learning and providing more flexible and attainable access to learning for all students. The purpose of ODL is to provide learning, student-centricity and student support, and to construct learning programmes with the prospect of helping students (Abdullah & Mtsweni, 2014). The important aspect regarding ODL is that all systems in an institution have to be integrated to support the academic enterprise and the student.

According to Muirhead (2007), distance education throughout the world is provided increasingly using e-learning and, given the changing face of education provision and technological and advancements around the world, the ODL institution where the study was conducted began to move towards e-learning through a model of e-tutoring. E-learning can be defined as teaching that is delivered by means of computers using numerous methods, such as CD–ROMs, internet or intranet and has the following features (Salmon & Angood, 2013).

The purpose of e-learning ensures that the content is relevant to the learning objectives of the particular module/subject, and that the methodology makes use of teaching methods such as practical examples and application to practise in order to help facilitate learning, makes use of media elements such as words and images to enhance learning of the content, and builds new knowledge and skills linked to individual learning goals or to improved organisational performance (Salmon et al., 2016). E-learning leads to information being delivered in various formats such as graphics, videos, audios, animations, models, simulations and visualisations (Salmon et al., 2016). E-tutoring forms part of e-learning and it entails tutoring (teaching) in an online environment, where the e-tutor offers personal guidance in a context, such as in an ODL institution, in which regular face-to-face contact between supervisor and student is difficult (Salmon & Wright, 2014). E-tutoring can play an important role in distance education and the use of communication technology can be used to market educational products, to support communication and to increase student support (Govender, 2018; Heydenrych, Higgs & Van Niekerk, 2003).

E-tutors interact directly with students in order to support their online learning processes, notwithstanding being separated from their students by both time and space (Chuang, 2014). The past 30 years have seen a move in education theory towards the promotion of a constructivist theory of learning, which saw the role of the professor changing from that of being the 'sage on the stage' to that of being the 'guide on the side' (Chuang, 2014). Scholars suggest that this is also the most appropriate role for an online instructor or e-tutor (Simpson, 2013). The e-tutors employed at the ODL institution where this study was conducted provide support for students and lecturers through the e-tutor system – an e-learning electronic system that connects the e-tutors and the students as well as the e-tutors and the lecturers. It is required from the e-tutor to spend 75 hours of online contact per semester with students and to provide guidance and facilitate learning processes. A group of 200 students are allocated to one e-tutor. The lecturer has direct contact with the e-tutor. Lecturers are required to provide the e-tutor with a 15-week semester plan, to clarify uncertainties, to monitor the e-tutor sites for activity and subject-content discussions, to inform students of e-tutors in the tutorial letters – via SMSs or via email – and to inform students of the role of e-tutors.

The ODL institution where this study was conducted accommodates large numbers of students and has extremely high student enrolments compared to residential universities (Joubert & Snyman, 2018; Mashile & Motoane, 2012). During the first semester of 2012, student enrolment totalled 360 000, including international students from 130 countries worldwide, of whom around 83% are employed (DISA, 2011; Joubert & Snyman, 2018; Matoane & Mashile, 2013), which necessitated a change in the institution: to become more student-centred and to offer enhanced student support (Matoane & Mashile, 2013).

The formal e-tutor model was rolled out for the first time in 2013, when e-tutors were appointed for all students registered for National Qualifications Framework (NQF) Level 5 modules (E-connect 2015), where after it was expanded to all NQF level 6 (2014) and NQF level 7 (2015) modules. In 2018, student enrolment totalled over 400 000, which makes the need for a successful e-tutor model even more pressing (Unisa, 2019).

The main purpose of this study was to determine what the contribution of the e-tutor model in an ODL higher education institution is towards students and the institution, specifically from the perspective of the e-tutor. The e-tutor model, as explained in the previous section, was implemented to bridge the learning gap (the physical, geographical and emotional distance between lecturers and students, and between students) in distance education in an ODL environment (De Metz & Bezuidenhout, 2018; Joubert & Snyman, 2018). It is therefore aimed at student support and student success (Govender, 2018; Mashile & Motoane, 2012). However, the questions arise: 'What do the e-tutors themselves regard their contribution to be?'; and 'Do e-tutors believe that the e-tutor model, in which they play an integral role, really adds value to the students and to the ODL institution itself?' The following section explores e-tutoring in the context of an ODL environment.

E-tutoring

According to De Metz and Bezuidenhout (2018) as well as Quon (2006), the interaction of the distance education student with the institution by means of e-tutoring creates a sense of belonging and satisfaction with the learning environment. The following are important issues relating to e-tutoring:

- Selectivity – e-tutoring does not need to be directed at all students; it could be directed only at those who need or want it; and

- Purpose – e-tutoring should provide social integration, promote collaborative work and help with problems; and it should not be used to lecture.

Quon (2006) found that students enrolled at ODL institutions have three needs, namely: (1) they desire regular contact with the institution; (2) they need to be motivated; and (3) they want interaction with their lecturer, tutor and peers. The main role of the e-tutor is to ensure that the online learning space is managed in such a way that it provides an appropriate environment for effective learning to take place (De Jong et al., 2018; Mashile & Matoane, 2012). The e-tutor performs the role of facilitator of learning, guiding students through the module content so that they are able to complete it successfully (Matoane & Mashile, 2013; Ramorola, 2018).

Abdullah and Mtsweni (2014) explain that there are four main e-tutor roles, namely:

- Pedagogical roles, which include tasks such as guiding and maintaining students' involvement in discussions

- Social roles, which entail the creation of a friendly social environment for students

- Managerial roles, which involve arranging learning activities and tasks, clarifying procedural rules and decision-making rules

- Technical roles, which require the e-tutor to become acquainted with the information and communications technology (ICT) systems and software that form the basis of the e-learning environment.

There are three important aspects that are central to the success of e-tutoring at an ODL institution, namely: (1) participation of the e-tutor and the students, (2) contextualisation of the learning material to ensure that it is put into a meaningful and practical context rather than being treated as isolated items, and (3) presentation of the study material in the online context (De Jong et al., 2018; Gregory & Salmon, 2013).

In the HRM department at the ODL institution where the current study was conducted, in order to qualify for appointment as an e-tutor, an individual needs to have a Bachelor's degree (Honour's/Post Graduate Diploma) and undergo module-based assessment (Unisa, 2019). Each e-tutor is allocated to 200 students per semester on the institution's online platform to which all students have access (Mkhize, 2014). E-tutors are expected to engage with students for at least 75 hours per semester, providing guidance to students and facilitating the learning process (Mkhize, 2014). Lecturers are also expected to engage with their modules' e-tutors in order to streamline the learning process and consolidate the information provided to students (Mkhize, 2014).

Benefits and contributions of e-tutoring towards students and the ODL institution

E-tutoring has numerous benefits for the student and the institution: students enjoy more personal attention and quicker replies to their enquiries and their success rate improves, which will benefit the institution (De Metz & Bezuidenhout, 2018; Horner & Gouws, 2016; Ngubane-Mokiwa, 2017). Active engagement with social and academic activities in an online platform was found to impact positively on student success

and support. One of the most important benefits of e-tutoring is that it creates a supportive learning environment for students in a distance education situation (Heuel & Feldmann, 2014).

Studying through distance education can be extremely challenging for students and they can be left feeling isolated and disconnected, and they can lose motivation (Mashile & Matoane, 2012). This is why an environment such as an online platform, where students can learn from the e-tutor as well as from each other, can be immensely beneficial to the learning experience as well as the success rate of students.

E-tutoring has the advantage of creating new opportunities for students due to students working together and engaging in problem-solving, which will enable them to learn from each other and gain practical experience (De Metz & Bezuidenhout 2018; Horner & Gouws, 2016; Ngubane-Mokiwa, 2017). Salmon and Wright (2014) further contend that a tutor system can prevent students from dropping out of courses, enhance a feeling of support, enhance problem-solving and prevent students from experiencing a feeling of isolation and disconnection. Through online teaching, a bond is created between students and their e-tutor. Because the e-tutor works with adult learners at an ODL institution, they learn from each other as well as from the e-tutor (Anderson, 2010). At an ODL institution, a large percentage of the students as well as the e-tutors are employed, and, in that way, students gain practical knowledge and experience through the e-learning experience seeing that they learn from each other as well as from the e-tutor (Heuel & Feldmann, 2014).

When taking the above discussion into consideration, the conclusion can be drawn that an e-tutor model can be vastly beneficial and can make a positive contribution to students and the ODL institution. Students who experience satisfaction in their learning process are more likely to be successful (De Metz & Bezuidenhout, 2018). Successful students who complete their qualification will benefit the institution as the institution will have a higher pass rate and student numbers will most probably increase as a result of this (Anderson 2010; Ngubane-Mokiwa, 2017).

The importance of the perceptions of e-tutors

An ODL institution needs e-tutoring for student support (De Metz & Bezuidenhout, 2018; Ramorola, 2018). An extensive review of the current literature on e-tutoring revealed that several studies have been conducted on the perceptions of students and on e-learning, but limited literature is available on the perceptions of the e-tutors (De Jong et al., 2018; Joubert & Snyman, 2018; Salmon & Wright 2014). Perception is defined as apprehending by means of the senses or the mind and includes immediate or intuitive recognition or appreciation (Rolfs & Dambacher 2016). In order to comprehend how the e-tutors view their contribution to the students and to the institution, perceptions are important, especially in this qualitative study.

As the e-tutor model is a relatively new initiative (De Jong et al., 2018) and research on this specific topic is limited (De Metz & Bezuidenhout, 2018), the researchers in the present study deemed it important to examine the perceptions of the e-tutors themselves regarding the contribution of the newly implemented e-tutor model at the ODL institution where the study was conducted. The e-tutors are the teachers, mentors and contact individuals to the students and they interact with the students on a regular basis. E-tutors need to perceive their contribution to the students and to the institution to be valuable, otherwise the model could fail in future. They are expected to motivate students as well as to improve their success and to benefit the institution.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Research approach

In this exploratory study, a qualitative research approach was applied. Qualitative research is intended to help researchers understand the views and perceptions of the participants being studied, and to focus

on their interpretations and views rather than on the researchers' own opinion on the subject (Maxwell, 2013). In this research, the qualitative approach is applied to give meaning to and interpret the e-tutors' experience of the contribution that the e-tutor initiative has on the institution and its students. This would have been difficult to achieve if the researchers used only quantitative methods. The findings of this study are based on the literature review and the data obtained from the participants in this study. The e-tutor model is a recent initiative implemented at the ODL institution where the study was conducted, and due to the limited information available on e-tutor initiatives, a qualitative design was used to encourage the discovery of new ideas and insights. It also necessitated a flexible approach. The interpretive paradigm was used in this study because the researchers had to understand the way in which e-tutors interpret their experiences of their views regarding the newly implemented e-tutor initiative and what effect they perceive it to have on the institution and its students.

Research procedure

E-tutors from the Human Resource Management (HRM) Department at the ODL institution where the study was conducted were approached to participate in this study. The researchers have been the e-tutor representatives of the Student Support Committee in the Department of HRM for the past six years and have personal experience of the contribution of the e-tutor model to the institution and its students, which increases the trustworthiness of this study. The researchers also know some of the e-tutors who participated in this study as they are both representatives of the Student Support Committee in the Department of HRM and have direct contact with the e-tutors. This is important as a good working relationship between the researchers and the e-tutors is necessary (Rossman & Rallis, 2011).

Sample and biographical characteristics of the participants

The population for this study consisted of all e-tutors employed at an ODL higher education institution in the HRM department. A total of 50 e-tutors are employed in the HRM department. A purposive sample was used in this study. The researchers emailed all the e-tutors in the HRM Department. To be included in the sample, each participant had to have been appointed as an e-tutor in the HRM Department at the ODL institution where this study was conducted. The researchers asked open-ended questions that enabled e-tutors to answer with detailed narration, giving a deeper insight regarding the contribution of the e-tutor model in an ODL higher education institution towards students as well as the institution, specifically from the perspective of the e-tutor. A total of 31 e-tutors/participants (62%) out of 50 e-tutors in the HRM Department participated in the study.

Table 1:
Demographic characteristics of the participants (N=32)

Gender	Number	%
Female	20	65%
Male	11	35%
Race	Number	%
Black	15	48%
Coloured	2	6.4%
Indian	3	9.6%
White	11	35%

Age	Number	%
26–30	4	13%
31–40	6	19%
41–45	7	23%
46–50	6	19%
51–55	2	6.4%
56–60	4	13%
61–65	2	6.4%
Tenure (months)	**Number**	**%**
0 – 6	4	13%
7 – 12	6	19%
13 – 18	7	23%
19 – 24	5	16%
25 – 30	5	16%
31 – 36	4	13%
Qualification	**Number**	**%**
Degree	6	19%
Honours degree	12	39%
Master's degree	12	39%
Doctorate	1	3%

Data collection methods

Open–ended questions were e-mailed to all the e-tutors in the HRM Department at the ODL institution where this study was conducted. The following two questions were asked:

- In your experience, what is the contribution of the e-tutor initiative towards an open distance learning institution?

- In your experience, what is the contribution of the e-tutor initiative towards the student?

After the e-tutors' responses were received, telephonic follow-up interviews, during which probing questions were asked, were conducted with three e-tutors to clarify some responses. The telephonic interviews were conducted to ensure that there was agreement with the responses received from the open-ended questions.

Data analysis

Important concepts and recurring themes were identified from the responses. Tesch's (1990) data analysis process was applied. The data were stored on a computer belonging to one of the researchers and they were password protected. During the data-analysis phase, the relevant data were assessed and grouped into broader categories (Lobiondo-Wood & Haber, 1994). The researchers analysed the data themselves

and it was unnecessary to utilise more formal methods such as the GABEK or Atlas TI data-analysis programs. All the responses were coded and a list of keywords was compiled. Keywords with similar meanings were grouped together into topics. The topics were abbreviated as codes and written next to the appropriate parts of the text. The most descriptive wording was found for each code and, from that, themes were created by clustering meaning-related codes together. A final decision was then made on the labelling for each theme. The grouping of the material within the themes was then done based on reflection on how the themes related to one another and to the research phenomenon. Lastly, the findings were reported on.

Ethical considerations

Steps were taken to ensure that ethical procedures were followed. The participants were informed of the research and a written informed consent form was obtained from each participant (Silverman, 2002). The researchers ensured that the data were available only to them. Confidentiality was thereby maintained. None of the e-tutors had access to the transcribed data and they remain anonymous.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Two themes were formulated in this study and will be discussed in this section:

Theme 1: Contribution of e-tutor initiative towards an open distance learning institution

Theme 2: Contribution of e-tutor initiative towards the student

Theme 1: Contribution of e-tutor initiative towards an open distance learning institution

It was evident from the participants' views that the main contribution of the e-tutor initiative to the university is support for students and lecturers.

Subtheme 1.1: Student-support

A total of 20 participants (62.5%) confirmed that the e-tutor initiative provides support for the student and lecturer. Some of the participants' responses in support of this view were:

> This initiative gives students an opportunity to communicate with tutors online. Students feel comfortable to ask questions online. It gives students advantage, since some students are far from the lecturers. This helps students to use a simple communication tool to communicate. [P8]

> The knowledge that is available from e-tutors can have a huge advantage on the institution and it offers some opportunity for time management and workload distribution among the other permanent employees. [P22]

Based on the findings, it is evident that there is a strong need for student support in ODL institutions, and the e-tutor initiative can bridge the need for student support in distance learning.

Sub-theme 1.2: Overcome distance learning gap

Broadbent and Poon (2015) confirm that distance learning is a form of self-study and that the isolation and individualisation of the student is one of the most significant weaknesses of distance learning. But, how can ODL institutions overcome the distance learning gap? According to the participants in this study, the e-tutor initiative can be used to overcome the ODL gap. In support of this view 16.12% (5) of the participants confirmed that the ODL gap can be bridged by stating the following:

> The e-tutor initiative takes away the distance in Distance Learning. [P18]

> Give students an opportunity to communicate with tutors online. Students feel comfortable to ask questions online. It gives students advantage, since some students are far from the lecturers. This helps students to use a simple communication tool to communicate. [P8]

Sampson (2003) continues by stating that distance learners have a need for face-to-face consultations, which is undoubtedly important to the students, and if there is a form of interaction with tutors, high-quality learning will still take place. Sampson's (2003) view was once again confirmed by the participants in this study.

A total of 12 participants (38.71%) concurred by stating that another contribution of the e-tutor initiative for an ODL would be an increase in the pass rate of students. Some of the participants' responses were:

> The e-tutor initiative makes studying and succeeding at the university more achievable and manageable. [P15]

> E-tutors assist the organisation by ensuring that the learners have access to information about the subject they are studying and e-tutors assist learners to know their study material better. [P28]

After each examination period, lecturers have to submit a statistical analysis of the pass rate. Since the implementation of the e-tutor system, the pass rate increased with almost 18%.

Sub-theme 1.3: Increase in institution's competitive advantage

The pass rate and throughput rates of students in an ODL institution is a major concern. Should an ODL institution be able to give support, that is in the form of the e-tutor initiative to students, which will help them to be more successful, the pass rate or throughput rates will give the institution a competitive advantage over other ODL institutions.

This statement is confirmed by the participants in this study as a total of 16.12% (5) of the participants confirmed that the institution can increase its competitive advantage through e-tutor initiatives. Some of the responses were:

> It puts the university at the forefront of technology-based education, which is the future way that education will take place. [P15]

> The e-tutor initiative makes this university a more attractive option for students to choose. [P13]

It can be concluded that the e-tutor initiative contributes towards the ODL institution in that it gives support to the students and lecturers, which in turn will help to overcome the ODL gap and increase the student pass rate. An increase in the throughput rate gives an institution a competitive advantage over other ODL institutions (Joubert & Snyman, 2018).

Theme 2: Contribution of e-tutor initiative towards the student

Almost 400 000 students are enrolled with the ODL institution where this study was conducted (Unisa, 2019) and the enrolment figures are much more compared to other residential universities. As the ODL institution where this study is conducted is an open distance learning university, one of the main obstacles of this university is contact between lecturer and student. The question arises: 'Can the e-tutor initiative overcome this obstacle?'

Sub-theme 2.1: Increased student centredness

The ODL model necessitates an institution to change its approach to teaching and learning, to become more student-centred and to focus on effective interaction as a way of motivating students and promoting

student success (Unisa, 2019). Should it be possible to use the e-tutor initiative to overcome this obstacle, other obstacles such as students' knowledge and students' ability to graduate will increase (Joubert & Snyman, 2018).

Some of the responses from the participants in support of their views that the e-tutor initiative bridges the ODL gap were:

> The e-tutor creates an active online community of learners and thus minimises the isolation that comes with learning in an ODL institution. [P27]

> Students feel that the university is not so 'cold' anymore. They have a sense of being involved and have control over the studies on a daily basis. [P26]

This view was supported by the participants as 25.81% of them were of the view that the e-tutor initiative can be used to bridge the ODL gap. Furthermore, the participants (19.35%) concurred that there is an increase in interaction between co-students, lecturers and e-tutors. An ODL institution offers distance learning where there is minimum or no contact between fellow students and limited contact between students and the lecturer. If the interaction is increased between students and their lecturers, it also means that the ODL gap is bridged.

Sub-theme 2.2: Increased interaction among students and with lecturers

Some responses from participants in support of their view that the e-tutor initiative increases the interaction between co-students and lecturers were:

> The biggest benefit of the system for students is that they can combine what they learn from the subject matter with the view of their peers and the e-tutor. [P25]

> The interaction that students have with fellow learners helps to make their experience a positive one, because they no longer get that feeling of loneliness, thinking that they are the only individuals busy with their studies. [P17]

The e-tutor system is an electronic system (e-classroom) that connects the e-tutors and the students as well as the e-tutors and the lecturers. The e-tutors are required to give guidance and execute the 15-week semester plan, received from the lecturer, to the students. The e-tutor is required to facilitate and constantly monitor both the learning processes and the pace of learning and respond to questions. The e-tutors must be active on sites, initiate discussions and exercises to students through the Discussion Forum on the e-tutor site, and add announcements on the Announcement tool, which is another link on the e-tutor site.

Sub-theme 2.3: Increased student motivation

The study further revealed that the participants concurred in stating that the e-tutor initiative contributes to more motivated students (9.68%) and to more support for students (19.35%). As discussed in the literature above, students studying through an ODL institution often feel isolated, demotivated and disconnected. However, if the e-tutor initiative contributes to a student's motivation, and if it provides a platform where they can interact with co–students, lecturers and e-tutors, it will benefit the learning experience and will contribute to the success of the students. Stephens (2015) supports this view by stating that motivated and engaged students are those students who will perform better academically.

The following responses were received from the participants with regard to motivation – one of the contributions that the e-tutor initiative has for its students:

Students who were reluctant to study and start with assignments are motivated by the e-tutor to do the work. [P17]

E-tutors motivate students on a continuous basis to engage with their study material and to finish the assignments on time. [P4]

Sub-theme 2.4: Increased student support

Regarding support, the participants' responses were as follows:

Students feel that they receive personal attention and if they have questions, there is someone who can assist them with their queries. [P21]

The main role of the e-tutor is to guide and support the learning process by helping learners to find and access additional resources, guide interaction with peers and provide support to empower the learners… Creating a comfortable learning environment where students feel respected and encouraged. [P14]

The participants further agreed that other contributions of the e-tutor initiative towards the student are students who are kept informed. When studying at an ODL institution, it is sometimes difficult to keep track of the due dates for all the assignment of different modules. It is the student's responsibility to be aware of the due dates and to meet these deadlines. The risk is that students might hand in their assignments late, which could lead to them not being admitted to the exam. The participants (12.90%) agreed that students are kept informed through the e-tutor initiative and, in support thereof, the participants' responses were:

I think it is immense. The initiative provides regular guidance and reminders that certain tasks must be completed. [P16]

The e-tutor sends reminders for students to participate from the e-tutor website as well as to make sure that they submit their assignments on time. [P9]

Sub-theme 2.5: Improved student performance

Another contribution of the e-tutor initiative to the students is that the students' knowledge and understanding are increased. More than half of the participants (54.84%) concurred that the e-tutor initiative increases the students' understanding of the content and their knowledge.

It provides students with an opportunity to critically evaluate the subject matter and to gain a better understanding of the practical implementation thereof on an actual environment that they are going to work in. [P25]

The e-tutor contributes a lot to students, especially those who are struggling. The e-tutor can assist students with issues that lecturers may not have the time to explain in such detail. [P10]

If students understand the content and are able to increase their knowledge, it would lead to a better chance of graduating. A total of 19.35% of the participants were of the view that the number of students graduating would increase.

Sub-theme 2.6: Better prepared graduates with increased job prospects

There is a great possibility that the students could be successful in the job market after successful completion of their studies. In support of this view, the participants' responses were the following:

E-tutors' contribution towards the university is to produce quality graduates who are relevant in today's job market. [P27]

It provides students an opportunity to critically evaluate the subject matter and to gain a better understanding of the practical implementation thereof on an actual environment that they are going to work in. [P25]

Authors such as Jelfs, Richardson and Price (2009), McGivney (2004) and Yorke (2004) are concerned about distance learning students in that they need more direction and assistance to enable them to manage the demands of this type of learning. Chang (2012) and Rovai (2002) elaborated on these findings by adding that the online learning environment divides students and lecturers and reduces the interaction between a student and his/her lecturer, which results in an increase in student dropouts. According to Chang's (2012) study, the pass rate of students who study at distance learning universities has decreased by between 10% and 20% as compared to traditional universities.

According to Johnson and Bratt (2009) as well as Denard (2003), there is an increase in the demand for online tutors due to its proven effectiveness. Gulbahar and Kalelioglu (2015) are of the opinion that competent online tutors are essential towards the successful implementation of an e-learning initiative in higher education. According to Welch et al.'s (2015) research, there was an increase in student success rates (from 5% to 15%) where online tutors were able to meet the students' needs.

This study concurs with the above authors: the e-tutor initiative contributes to the students in that the initiative motivates and supports the students, it keeps the students informed of important dates, such as assignment dates, there is an increase in interaction, and the ODL gap is bridged. This in turn will help the student to understand the content better and to increase their knowledge, which would lead to them graduating.

ANALYSIS OF THE FINDINGS

The ODL institution in this research study implemented an e-tutoring model to assist the students in making a success of their studies because the students enjoy more personal attention and quicker turnaround on their enquiries. This will improve student success rates, which in turn will benefit the institution. In other words, it is a win-win situation in which the student, as well as the institution, benefits.

Figure 1:
Contribution of the e-tutor initiative to an ODL institution and students
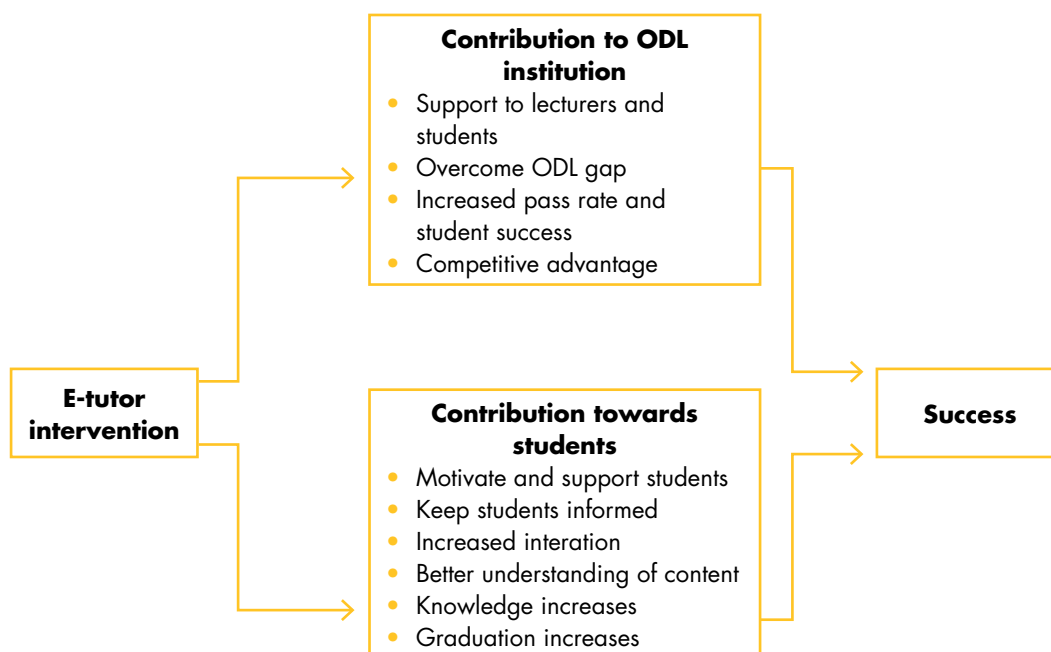
After streamlining and integrating the themes and subthemes, a model is presented as Figure 1. Figure 1 is a summary of the contribution the e-tutor initiative makes to an ODL institution and to its students. This figure confirms that the e-tutor initiative in the ODL institution of this study contributes to the success of the institution and its students.

CONCLUSION

The objective of this study was to explore the contribution of the new e-tutor initiative to the institution and the students. The focus of this study was on the perceptions of the e-tutors in the HRM Department in the ODL institution. However, while e-tutor intervention may contribute to student success, it has to be noted that there are other factors that can affect e-tutoring, e.g. availability of resources, quality of teaching, and quality of teaching and tutoring.

The results indicated that the experience of the e-tutors was that the e-tutor initiative positively contributes to the institution and the students. The participants reported that the initiative contributes to the institution in that the pass rates increased, there is support for students and lecturers, the gaps are bridged, and it provides a competitive advantage over other distance learning institutions that do not have initiatives in place to support their students. This initiative also makes a positive contribution towards the students in that the students' pass rates and performance increase, they are kept informed, interaction increases, they are motivated, they receive support from the e-tutors, and their ability to graduate increases. The three needs of students enrolled at ODL institutions, which are discussed in the literature – that is, (1) the desire to have regular contact with the institution; (2) the need to be motivated and (3) the interaction with lecturer, tutor and peers – are all satisfied through the e-tutor initiative.

The researchers interviewed only those e-tutors who are employed in the HRM Department at one ODL institution. Several other departments and ODL institutions should also be considered as e-tutor initiatives may contribute in the same manner to these departments and institutions The findings in this research demonstrate that ODL institutions make use of the e-tutor model to increase student success and institutional competitiveness.

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