# BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN OPEN DISTANCE LEARNING AND ACADEMIC INTEGRITY IN A SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITY

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*Abstract:* Online Distance Learning (ODL) has emerged as an effective system, decentralising access to higher education for individuals and communities that would otherwise face barriers to university enrolment owing to different impeding factors. However, the credibility and standing of higher education institutions is dependent on its ability to comply with academic integrity standards. Online distance learning, though brimming with transformative potential, faces critical challenges in safeguarding academic integrity. Its virtual nature creates heightened susceptibility to plagiarism and other forms of academic dishonesty, underscoring the pressing need for innovative monitoring and enforcement mechanisms to uphold ethical standards. The study aims to explore and develop effective strategies for bridging the gap between open distance learning and academic integrity in a South African university, focusing on identifying challenges, understanding contributing factors, and proposing innovative solutions to promote ethical academic practices in virtual learning environments. The study utilized Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) as its framework, focusing on how attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control influence students' ethical decision-making in open distance learning. TPB provided a structured approach to examine the psychological and social factors affecting academic integrity, aligning with the study's aim to address challenges and foster ethical practices in virtual education. Employing an empirical research design, the study targeted 15 lectures in the Faculty of Management Sciences, particularly the department of Public Management, Law and Economics for in-depth interviews. Data was analysed using thematic content analysis. The findings highlight that while ODL offers unparalleled opportunities for expanding access to education, it also introduces vulnerabilities that threaten academic honesty. The study concludes by recommending a multifaceted

approach, including comprehensive training and development for students and staff, the adoption of advanced technological tools to detect and deter plagiarism, and the introduction of policies to monitor and evaluate academic practices. Moreover, the research proposes a practical model to bridge the gap between ODL and academic integrity, ensuring that the evolution of higher education maintains the highest standards of ethical scholarship. The value of this study lies in its innovative model, which not only safeguards academic integrity but also reinforces the potential of ODL to deliver quality education that is both accessible and accountable.

# INTRODUCTION

In South Africa, open distance learning (ODL) has long been championed by the University of South Africa (UNISA). Following the COVID-19 pandemic, UNISA fully transitioned to online learning, while other universities adopted blended learning models or continued with face-to-face instruction, (Magsayo (2023). The pandemic disrupted all global sectors, compelling higher education institutions to rapidly migrate to online systems. In this context, online distance learning (ODL) emerged as a dominant mode for teaching, learning, and assessment across higher education. Durban University of Technology adopted online distance learning, which offered flexibility and opportunities for remote teaching and assessments arrangements. The students and lecturers benefit towards online distance learning, because they have an increased time to spend with the family, less stress of traveling in peak traffic, and the flexibility that comes with working in the home are all contributing factors to their increased happiness.

According to Nyerere (2012) the concept of distance learning and higher education access became a transitional instrument that closed the gap that existed within the educational space. Educational accessibility became an option for many people who could not previously access education in Africa. Distance education is a cost-effective educational delivery model, which upholds the standards of teaching and learning.

While working from home has been prevalent in higher education and Durban University of Technology in particular, there has been dominant dissenting views about academic dishonesty as a product of online distance learning.

The concept of academic dishonesty gave birth to the concept of academic integrity, which, according to Roe, and Perkins (2022), Academic integrity describes thoughts and actions that demonstrate respect and honesty toward your fellow learners and scholars. The acknowledgement of sources and a commitment to open, ethical conduct are the foundation of research, learning and teaching in higher education and beyond.

On similar view, most African countries struggled to manage distance and access to higher education due to lack of clearly defined national distance

education policies unlike South Africa, which drafted a distance education policy in 2014 under the auspices of the Council for Higher Education (2014).

The aim of this study is to establish mechanisms to bridge a gap between online distance learning and academic integrity in South African Higher education. To achieve this, the study adopted the following objective: To establish strategies to bridge a gap between online distance learning and academic integrity at Durban University of Technology.. To achieve the above, the study will begin with the systematic review of online distance learning within the context of online distance learning and academic integrity at Durban University of Technology. Furthermore, data collection adopted the structured interviews in the department of Public Management Law and Economics, and thematic analysis will be used as a data analysis tool. These will assist the study to suggest a model that will bridge the gap between online distance learning and academic integrity in the Durban University of Technology.

# PROBLEM STATEMENT

Open distance learning in South Africa has been a key factor in reaching a wider audience of students and making sure that students do not suffer from expenses associated with studying owing to the high rate of unemployment in the country. Open distance learning allows you to use technology to study wherever you are in the country. According to Shen and Ho (2020) the concept of distance learning in South African higher education is a mechanism to bridge the gap between student proximity to institutions of higher learning. However, open distance learning has opened doors for academic dishonesty that is tantamount to higher education reputational damage, and qualification integrity at Durban University of Technology. The study seeks to establish possible mechanisms to bridge a gap between open distance learning and academic integrity in higher education in general and Durban University of Technology.

# THE EXPRESSIONS OF OPEN DISTANCE LEARNING AT HIGHER EDUCATION

The concept of open distance learning is according to Bernacki, Greene, and Crompton (2020) a form of learning that predominantly premised on the use of technology. Furthermore, the use of technology was established in higher education to make sure that there is a curriculum re-design, and re-engineering to make sure that there is a proper access towards higher education. On a similar view, Magsayo (2023) states that the concept of online distance learning in the open distance learning means bringing these technological aspects of learning together in a format that fits today's digital world of work. All great learning organizations should deliver learning solutions

through simulations, collaboration, meeting other people and learning from experts.

Naciri, et al (2020) understands the phenomenon of distance learning at higher education as characterized by the introduction of technology, to which distinguishes the whole learning system in the higher education sector especially with the face-to-face learning, and the use of a computer network to present or distribute some educational content. As in every other walk of modern life, open distance learning and access to higher education use of information and communication technologies, provides the necessary organizational and policy changes that should be implemented to make open distance learning and access to higher education an achievable organisational objective, (Mohd Basar, et al 2021).

According to Shen, and Ho (2020), the concept of distance learning and access to higher education has been understood in this review as a concept that seeks to bridge the proximity to institutions of higher learning. This is because the nature of this distant learning is predominantly a field of education that focuses on teaching methods and technology with the aim of delivering teaching, often on an individual basis, to students who are not physically present in a traditional educational setting such as a classroom.

## OPEN DISTANCE LEARNING AT HIGHER EDUCATION: A SOUTH AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE

Within the South African context, the philosophy of open distance learning and access to higher education is increasingly shaped by the integration of e-learning and mobile computing technologies. Behera (2013) emphasizes that this approach represents a transformative shift, leveraging digital platforms to enhance educational inclusivity and opportunities. That is to mean that when you consider online distance learning to be an extension of e-learning, but the quality of m-learning can be delivered with the awareness of special limitations and benefits of mobile devices (Sa´nchez-Prieto et al,2020).

According to Al-Emran, Arpaci, and Salloum, (2020) the concept of distance learning and access to South African higher education in the education sector continues to expand and diversify, distance learning is one aspect of the expansion and diversification programme. On a similar view, Elfirdoussi, et al (2020) states that the central idea in respect of distance learning and access in the South African higher education is to consider that the teacher and the students are separate in the spatial dimension and that this distance is filled by using technological resources.

This view is held by Coman, (2020) considers the philosophy of distance learning and access to higher education as a central contributing factor in respect of social and economic development in the country, because everyone has access to the system of education, and no one is left outside. Furthermore, Cranfield, et al (2021) states that open distance learning and the access to higher education has provided even people from the developing countries with

access to higher education. Furthermore, the concept of distance learning provides many opportunities for countries for the realization of their education system-wide goals. The growing need for continual skills upgrading and retraining and the technological advances have led to an explosion of interest in distance learning.

According to Mpungose (2020) the distance learning and access to higher education in South Africa has been an instructional delivery system that connects learners with educational resources, furthermore, provides educational access to learners not enrolled in educational institutions and can augment the learning opportunities of current students.

Bao (2020) asserts that for access to higher education in a view of distance learning and An emerging strand in the literature on online learning suggests that university furthermore use the system to address the bigger enrolment plans, and not be affected by the need to spend on bigger infrastructure.  The provision of higher education in South Africa and in many parts of the world is challenged by the enrolment of large numbers of students, many of whom cannot attend classes or afford conventional face-to-face tuition. This has forced institutions of higher education to resort to various forms of non-traditional teaching and learning, among others, open distance learning and blended learning. In South Africa, as elsewhere, official government policy provides for approaches that make extensive use of teaching technologies.

According to Dela Pena-Bandalaria (2013) the distance learning and access to higher education has gained momentum since many institutions regarded it an option to advance teaching and learning agendas. Technology became an enabling mode of instruction to enhance learning communities regarding the social construction of knowledge in the distance education fraternity. It has been established that the online distance learning and access to education is central to e-learning, it is furthermore supported by digital electronic tools and media and mobile learning is the "e-learning using mobile devices and wireless transmission" (Hoppe et al., 2003). According to Igbafe (2016), the concept of distance education in is consistent in making sure that citizens provided opportunities to millions who would not normally have attended school due to their work commitments, and proximity to the higher education infra structure.

Furthermore, distance education has the capability to absorb large numbers of students while offering quality and cost-effective education (Council on Higher Education, 2014). Council on Higher Education (2014) emphasised that information technology proved to have the competence to mediate distance education while providing improved quality education especially in developing countries.

## AN OVERVIEW OF ACADEMIC INTEGRITY IN SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION

Academic integrity is pillar of academic quality, there appears to be clarity on what academic integrity is not. There also appears to be a notion that,

within higher education, academic integrity is situated in two distinct groupings: academic integrity for academics, and academic integrity for students (Christensen, Hughes and Eaton, 2022). According to Bretag (2018) the concept of academic integrity is a concept that was adopted by higher education to preserve the quality of higher education in the academic sector. On a similar note, academic integrity in higher education has adopted modern technologies because of how exacerbated this issue and how educators' concerns about the problem have skyrocketed (Zaiarna, Zhyhadlo, and Dunaievska, 2024).  Another similar view is that academic integrity is a strategy to circumvent academic dishonesty that has been viewed as unethical culture within the higher education sector (Nnoli, and Samuel, 2024). The institution of higher education has a huge responsibility to promote academic integrity and must focus on developing a culture of academic integrity that permeates entire organizations, (Velez, and Rister, 2024). Furthermore, Filson, and Atuase, (2024) advocates that institutions of higher learning should cultivate a culture wherein academic integrity describes thoughts and actions that demonstrate respect and honesty toward your fellow learners and scholars.

The acknowledgement of sources and a commitment to open, ethical conduct are the foundation of research, learning and teaching in higher education and beyond, (Issa, and Hall, 2024). According to Bin-Nashwan, Sadallah, and Bouteraa (2023) when it comes to academic integrity in the institutions of higher learning should establish effective strategies to combat plagiarism that is prevalent within the academic sector. Higher education institutions regard plagiarism as a significant threat to academic integrity (Chavez, 2023). Academic integrity, though central to the educational process, is frequently discussed in negative terms, existing within a context fraught with inherent contradictions. Despite the concept of academic integrity existing for a considerably period, renewed interest in academic integrity at universities, has been a cause for concern (Çelik, and Razı, 2023). According to Altakhaineh, Jarrah, and Younis (2024) for any higher education institution, it is important that the qualifications it offers and the students who are awarded the qualifications are perceived to be of good quality by all stakeholders, including the students themselves, their families, communities, employers and the public. Currie, (2023) states that it is crucial for any higher education institution that the qualifications it confers and the students who receive them are perceived as being of high quality by all stakeholders, including students, families, communities, employers, and the broader publ  Sozon, et al (2024) state that a threat to academic integrity should be protected from plagiarism, which is  a term that resonates with dread among educators and scholars, represents a grave violation of academic and intellectual integrity, (Sullivan, Kelly and McLaughlan 2023).

# FACTORS THAT IMPEDE ON EFFECTIVE ONLINE DISTANT LEARNING AND ACADEMIC INTEGRITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION: A SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT

The philosophy of open distance learning and access to higher education is not without challenges, and this section of the study explores the challenges that are associated with open distance and access to higher education. According to Arashi et al (2020) distance education has to be considered in its relation to global economic, social and cultural development. There is now little doubt that major changes are occurring in the world economy, mainly due to the expansion of new information bearing technologies.

Hermanto, and Srimulyani (2021) states that distance learning and access to higher education continues to lack addressing the fact that those who should be involved in the implementation of distance learning are themselves not trained. The importance of knowledge as an essential component of the economy has influenced the increasing interest of governments in human knowledge resource development.

According to Rainford (2020) another difficulty in respect of the open distance and access to higher education are now in respect of technological inequalities focusing on the large number of students in the South African context predominantly come from rural schools where there is lack of technological understanding. The Southern Universities, Mishra et al (2020) highlight the difficulties experienced during online practical, which required systematic demonstration of the whole process in the students' presence. Jaradat and Ajlouni (2021) argue on the similar view in respect of the challenges to open distance and access to higher education is the mission of a distance learning system that defines its role within the context of national policy. Ferri, Grifoni and Guzzo (2020) posit that the mission statement of a public institution in respect of the open distance learning and access to higher education is not part of a national policy. Chiu, Lin, and Lonka (2021) highlight a critical challenge in modern distance learning: its historical reliance on postal services, a model long familiar and accessible to many. The transition to technology-driven learning, however, has exposed significant disparities, particularly in regions where access to advanced technological infrastructure remains limited. This shift underscores a pressing issue in ensuring equitable educational opportunities on a global scale. On similar note, Xhaferi, and Xhaferi (2020) states that the problem of technology is available to support students in respect to support programmes via distance education as used by other higher education institutions, and has proven very successful. Makafane and Chere-Masopha (2021) argue that within the Southern African context, a comprehensive understanding of open distance learning and access to higher education reveals a nuanced interplay between various modes of technological learning. They note that terms such as electronic learning (e-learning), mobile learning (m-learning), and digital learning (d-learning) are often used

interchangeably or complementarily, collectively referring to technology-enabled learning. This convergence highlights the evolving nature of education in the digital age. Seneviratne (2020) acknowledges that access to higher education has always been a challenge for governments and universities, but the there is an edge to make sure that everyone in South Africa have access to higher education and open distance remains a vehicle to achieve such a milestone within the academic sector in South Africa.

## RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHOD

The study adopted qualitative research methodology in which structured interviews were used to collect data from the lecturers at the Durban University of Technology, Faculty of Management Sciences, and Public Management Law and Economics department. The adoption of qualitative methodology in this study was guided by its strengths that are premised on the following factors: According to Qualitative, research is based on the lived experiences of the participants; as a result, this study is based on the perceptions of lecturers from Durban University of Technology. The researcher had an opportunity to deal with details of all sections of the interview questions, and the research design allowed all participants to freely express themselves in all the questions that were asked during the interviews. Given the stakeholders, the qualitative method was more useful because the matter of open distance learning and academic integrity is important for the integrity of higher education in general and Public Management, Law and Economics in particular. The adopted a qualitative non-probability sampling, where in a total of 15 participants were purposively identified and clustered for data collection, and 13 were available for interviews. In terms of data analysis, a mixture of content and thematic analyses was used.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: DETERRENCE THEORY

Cesare Beccaria and Jeremy Bentham's deterrence theory, developed in the 18th century, posits that punishment should be structured in a manner that prevents future criminal behavior. The theory emphasizes the importance of proportionate consequences, where the severity of punishment serves as a deterrent to potential offenders. In 1973, Franklin E. Zimring and Gordon Hawkins extended this framework, asserting that the likelihood of cheating in academic contexts is influenced by the severity of the consequences. They argue that to curtail cheating effectively, punishments must be sufficiently severe, such as failing the assignment, failing the course, academic probation, or even expulsion.

For this study, the revised deterrence theory is particularly relevant, as it offers a strategic approach to fostering academic integrity within open distance learning. The theory's constructs, certainty, severity, and swiftness of punishment can be adapted to encourage ethical academic behavior by ensuring that consequences for violations are clear, appropriate, and effectively enforced. By integrating deterrence theory, this study aims to explore how the implementation of rigorous academic integrity policies can deter dishonest behavior in a distance learning environment.

Cesare Beccaria and Jeremy Bentham developed the deterrence theory in the 18th century. The main pillar of deterrence theory is that punishment of offenders should be in a way that they do not commit crime again. In 1973, Franklin E. Zimring and Gordon Hawkins argued that:

• Cheating is a function of the severity of the consequences, if it must be curtailed, it should be punish with consequences severe enough to discourage students, including failing the assignment, failing the course, academic probation, or even expulsion.

Deterrence theory is relevant for this study, as it seeks to provide a strategy to promote academic integrity within the context of open distance learning.

## DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

Data presentation and analysis in this study is in line with the study objective that sought to establish strategies to bridge a gap between online distance learning and academic integrity at Durban University of Technology. The impact of distance learning on academic integrity at Durban University of Technology can be significant, given the unique challenges and opportunities that remote education presents. Here are some key considerations:

Student Awareness and Education

• Understanding of academic integrity: The shift to distance learning may require enhanced efforts to educate students about academic integrity, as

they may not receive the same level of guidance as in a traditional classroom setting. Durban University of Technology can implement online workshops or resources that focus on the importance of academic integrity and how to maintain it in a virtual learning environment. This approach seem to differ from the lenses that underpins the study, in that the basic tenet on the framework is that academic integrity is achieved through severe punishment of the offense. There are contending voices between data and theory which creates a conundrum, in that if data suggest exploring understanding of academic integrity, and theory suggest punishment, and question is at what point do you educate student, prior academic dishonesty, or at detection of it? When do you punish lack of academic integrity? at what point do you punish it?. The contending voices between data and theory create a strategic conundrum in respect of a model to bridge a gap between online distance learning and academic integrity.

Technological Solutions

•    Plagiarism Detection Software: Data suggested the use of software tools could help identify instances of plagiarism and ensure that students adhere to academic standards. This could be a strategy to mitigate and bridge the gap between online distant learning and academic integrity. Furthermore, data showed that Durban University of Technology should be strict with turn it in, from first year of university, and adherence of the turn it in, should be compulsory for both students and academics. This will reduce a risk of academic dishonesty, and where there is no adherence of the academic integrity requirements, the tenets of the theory should be effectively implemented, which is to punish through failing of the assessment, and a possible exclusion from the university. Innovative Assessment Methods: Emphasizing open-book exams, project-based assessments, and oral presentations can encourage original thought and reduce the likelihood of cheating.

## MONITORING AND EVALUATION OF PLAGIARISM POLICY

Data concluded that Durban University of Technology has a plagiarism policy that seeks to promote academic integrity, considering the manipulation of online distance learning. The policy warns students against submitting work that is not properly referenced, done by one student on behalf of the other student, and work that is copied from the student. However, all the participants suggested that there is no uniform rule in respect of implementation; as a result, the policy does not have an effective monitoring and evaluation of the plagiarism policy. This is also a conundrum, because the policy does stipulate the question of punishment consequently in respect of academic dishonesty. This is the same as the theory posits, however, there is a gap in the policy in that it does not stipulate at what point should the punishment happen? This means that if the student who is not aware of how to do referencing, is flagged, they will be possibly punished for the offense

committed without knowledge. This is a conundrum, because there is no system in place to monitor implementation of plagiarism policy at the Durban University of Technology.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

Data recommendations in this study is in line with the study objective that sought to establish strategies to bridge a gap between online distance learning and academic integrity at Durban University of Technology. Having considered the data presentation and analysis, the study makes the following recommendations as a model to bridge the gap between online distance learning and academic integrity:

Training and Development of Academics and Students

• The online distance learning does pose a direct or indirect threat to academic integrity, training and development of the academics in respect of academic interiority is paramount, to ensure that academics are aware of the university strict policy in respect of academic integrity. After the training of the academics, the training and development of the students should not be delegated to the library services, but to the academics, this is to make sure that academics do not punish students whom they have not satisfy themselves that they are aware of what is expected of the students in respect of academic integrity. This model will ensure that no one will blame anyone with respect to the expectation of academic integrity. A module can be designed which is compulsory for all students to learn about academic integrity.

Implementation of technological tools

• The study already established the lack of education in respect of the online distance learning and academic integrity. The lack of this education also affect the education in respect of the turn it in, this is because the study also established that Durban University of Technology does not have a strict institutional rule in respect of turn it in and implementation of the plagiarism policy. This will make sure that anyone who is not compliant with the academic integrity policies faces a severe consequence enough to discourage them to do it again, even if it means severe consequences such as expelling anyone convicted of being non-compliant. There should also be an investment in respect of the effective proctoring tools that will flag students for plagiarism, so that those who are found to be actively involved in the academic dishonesty can be punished.

Monitoring and evaluation of technological tool and plagiarism policy

• The study has already established that there is no monitoring and evaluation of the implementation of the plagiarism policy and turn it in software. This may compromise the academic integrity. If the monitoring and evaluation is effectively implemented, academic integrity will be preserved, because the monitoring and evaluation process will be able to assess what should the policy achieve, and whether it is achieving what it designed to achieve, and be able to spot the deviations and or possible deviations, and put

in place corrective measures. This will also ensure that when the punishment is implemented, there is no gap that is not covered in the process of the policy implementation. This should be the same with the proctoring tool and turn it in, these should be monitored whether they are able to ensure effective academic integrity, and that they are not manipulated, especially because these maybe a costly software.

Consequences severe enough to discourage students

•    Higher education and Durban University of Technology should be aware that integrity of the institution and that of the qualifications is paramount; consequently, there should be a strong message towards academic dishonesty. Punishment of academic dishonesty should prioritized to ensure that students are discouraged from any form of academic dishonesty. This punishment will send a message even to those who may not be involved in academic integrity at the time of punishment. They will know that the institution is intentional about academic integrity and as a result has a zero tolerant policy in respect of academic dishonesty.

# CONCLUSION

This study sought to establish strategies to bridge a gap between online distance learning and academic integrity at Durban University of Technology. To achieve that, the study systematically reviewed literature on online distance learning within the context of online distance learning and academic integrity at Durban University of Technology. Furthermore, data collection adopted the structured interviews in the department of Public Management Law and Economics, and thematic analysis will be used as a data analysis tool. The study concludes that distance learning at Durban University of Technology presents both challenges and opportunities regarding academic integrity. While there are risks of increased dishonesty, proactive measures such as enhanced education, technological solutions, and a strong institutional commitment can help uphold academic standards. Building a culture of integrity and adapting to the evolving educational landscape will be crucial for maintaining trust and quality in academic outcomes.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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