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FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO STUDENT SUCCESS AND FAILURE IN OPEN DISTANCE E-LEARNING AMONG OFFICIALS STUDYING IN SOUTH AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

Open Distance e-Learning (ODEL) has widened access to higher education in South Africa, particularly for working officials who pursue studies while remaining employed. For many officials, ODEL offers a pathway to professional development, promotion, personal growth, and improved public service capacity. However, access to ODEL does not automatically translate into meaningful participation, retention or success. Many officials continue to study under difficult conditions shaped by heavy workloads, limited study time, socio-economic pressures, household responsibilities, poor connectivity, limited access to suitable devices, electricity disruptions, and weak academic support. These challenges are intensified by South Africa's broader inequalities in digital access, public-sector working conditions, and support for adult learners. Underpinned by the Capability Approach, this paper argues that educational access should not be measured only by admission or registration, but by whether students have the real opportunity, resources, time, and support to succeed. A qualitative desktop research design was adopted, using document analysis of South African and international scholarly literature, institutional reports, government policy documents, and public statistics on distance education, digital inequality, and student support. The findings indicate that officials' success in ODEL is shaped by lecturer responsiveness, flexible learning design, digital capability, workplace support, family support, motivation, and institutional care. Conversely, failure is often linked to time poverty, digital exclusion, emotional fatigue, limited feedback, socio-economic hardship, and support systems that do not fully recognize the realities of employed adult learners. The study concludes that ODEL can function only as a meaningful system of access and success if institutions move beyond formal admissions and design context-sensitive support for officials studying under the demanding conditions of South African work and family life.

KEYWORDS: Open Distance E-Learning; Officials Studying; Student Support; Socio-Economic Challenges; Officials

1. INTRODUCTION

The South African ODeL tradition is located within a broader history of distance education scholarship. Globally, distance education has been theorised by scholars such as Wedemeyer (1971), Holmberg (1989), Keegan (1996), Moore (1993), Peters (1998), Garrison and Anderson (2003), Tait (2000), Simpson (2013), Zawacki-Richter and Anderson (2014), and Bozkurt et al. (2015), who have examined independent learning, learner support, transactional distance, teaching presence, student persistence and institutional responsibility in distance education.

Higher education in South Africa has long carried the promise of transformation, redress and social mobility. For many working officials, especially those employed in government departments, municipalities, correctional services, law enforcement agencies, health institutions and other public-sector environments, studying through Open Distance e-Learning is not merely an academic exercise. It is a route to promotion, professional confidence, improved service delivery, personal dignity and intergenerational mobility. ODeL allows officials to remain employed while pursuing qualifications, supporting households and continuing to serve the public. In this sense, ODeL has become a democratic educational bridge for students who are unable to attend contact-based universities because of employment, geography, age, family responsibilities or financial pressure.

According to Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000), the Community of Inquiry framework further shows that meaningful online learning requires cognitive presence, social presence, and teaching presence. In other words, online learning is not achieved merely by uploading material onto a digital platform. It requires active teaching, intellectual engagement and a sense of belonging. This is significant for officials studying while employed because many of them participate in ODeL from isolated spaces, often after long shifts, during lunch breaks, or at night when household responsibilities have been completed. Similarly, Tait (2000) and Simpson (2013) argue that student support is not an administrative extra in distance education but a central condition for student persistence and completion.

In the South African context, scholars such as Letseka and Pitsoe (2014), Subotzky and Prinsloo (2011), Mays (2017), Ngubane-Mokiwa (2017), Makoe (2018), Tladi (2013), Mphahlele (2021), Nsamba (2021), and Mouton (2023) have contributed significantly to debates on ODL, ODeL, student

support, student persistence, digital readiness and institutional responsiveness. Their work is important because South African ODeL cannot be understood only through Euro-American theories of distance education. It must be read through the country's own realities of inequality, unemployment, rurality, electricity instability, language diversity, historical exclusion and uneven access to digital infrastructure.

Moreover, Letseka and Pitsoe (2014) argue that access to higher education through ODL must be examined together with success, throughput and learner support. This argument is important because widening access without meaningful support may reproduce exclusion in a different form. Subotzky and Prinsloo (2011) similarly caution against individualising student failure in open distance learning. Their socio-critical model of student success shows that academic outcomes are shaped by the interaction between student agency, institutional systems and broader socio-economic conditions. This is directly relevant to officials studying through ODeL because their academic performance cannot be separated from workload, household pressure, digital access, emotional fatigue and workplace support.

The promise of ODeL is consistent with South Africa's post-apartheid higher education policy direction. The White Paper for Post-School Education and Training emphasizes expanded access, articulation, lifelong learning, and redress in the post-school system (Department of Higher Education and Training [DHET], 2013). The Policy for the Provision of Distance Education in South African Universities recognizes distance education as necessary because the physical university sector cannot accommodate all who require higher education opportunities (DHET, 2014). ODeL is therefore not a marginal educational arrangement; it is central to the democratic project of widening participation in higher education.

However, the South African experience also shows that access without meaningful support may reproduce exclusion in a different form. A student may be registered, but still be excluded by poor connectivity, limited study time, lack of feedback, high data costs, fatigue and weak academic guidance. This is consistent with Subotzky and Prinsloo's (2011) argument that student success in distance education should be understood as a socio-critical issue rather than a narrow matter of individual motivation.

Recent literature strengthens this argument. Badaru (2026) emphasizes that technology and digital literacy are important drivers of student

success in ODeL environments. Mphuthi, Ngoveni, and Mphahlele (2025) demonstrate that the digital divide continues to shape student teachers' ODeL experiences in South Africa, with rural students facing weaker connectivity, limited resources, and inadequate support. Ajani (2025) also shows that participation in learning management systems in rural South African higher education is shaped by infrastructure, digital literacy, pedagogical support, and institutional responsiveness. These recent studies confirm that ODeL access must be examined together with digital capability and support.

For officials, these barriers are often hidden behind the respectability of employment. The assumption is sometimes made that employed students are more stable than unemployed students. Yet many officials study under difficult conditions. They may work long shifts, overtime, weekends, and public holidays. Some operate in high-pressure public institutions where they deal with offenders, patients, public complaints, crime scenes, community conflict, administrative backlogs, or service delivery crises. After work, they return to households where they are parents, caregivers, breadwinners, spouses and community members. Their academic work is often done late at night, during lunch breaks, on public transport, at a workplace desk after hours or on a mobile phone when the household is quiet.

This paper therefore argues that student success and failure in ODeL among officials should not be reduced to individual motivation, laziness or poor time management. Such an interpretation is too narrow and unfair. Drawing from the Capability Approach, this paper views student success as a question of real opportunity. Sen (1999) argues that development should be understood as the expansion of substantive freedoms, while Nussbaum (2011) emphasizes the importance of creating conditions that allow people to live and function with dignity. Applied to ODeL, this means that officials may have admission, study material and online access, but they may still lack the practical freedom to convert those resources into academic achievement.

1.1. Research Question

The study is guided by the following research questions.

RQ1: What factors contribute to student success among officials studying through ODeL in South Africa?

RQ2: What barriers contribute to student failure among officials studying through ODeL in South Africa?

RQ3: How do socio-economic, technological, institutional and workplace conditions shape the learning experiences of officials in ODeL?

1.2. South African ODeL Scholarship and Student Success

South African scholarship has made a significant contribution to ODL and ODeL debates, particularly through research associated with UNISA and other higher education institutions. Letseka and Pitsoe (2014) have written on access, success and the challenges of under-prepared students in ODL. Their work is important because it challenges the idea that students who struggle are simply weak or undisciplined. Instead, they argue that institutions must interrogate whether their systems are prepared to support the students they admit.

Subotzky and Prinsloo's (2011) socio-critical model of student success is particularly valuable for this paper. Their model argues that student success in ODL must be understood through the complex interaction between students, institutions and broader social conditions. This is important because officials studying through ODeL are shaped by more than academic ability. Their success is affected by their work environments, family responsibilities, digital resources, financial pressures, emotional health and institutional support systems. Subotzky and Prinsloo (2011), therefore, help move the discussion away from a blame-the-student model towards a more socially grounded understanding of success and failure.

Mays (2017) also contributes to the field by emphasizing the importance of learning design, student support, and quality assurance in open and distance learning. His work reminds us that ODeL requires careful planning. It cannot be reduced to uploading notes, recording lectures or creating online assessments. Proper ODeL requires intentional design that anticipates the needs of students who are geographically dispersed, technologically unequal and often academically under-supported.

Ngubane-Mokiwa (2017) examines the implications of the move from traditional open distance learning to online e-learning. Her scholarship is useful because it shows that the move to online platforms can create new opportunities but also new exclusions. Students who were previously able to manage print-based or blended forms of distance learning may struggle when institutions become more digitally dependent. This is especially relevant for officials who may not always have reliable data, devices, electricity or workplace

permission to study online.

Tladi's (2013) work on self-efficacy in distance learning is useful because it shows that students' belief in their ability to regulate learning, manage distance education and use online technologies affects academic performance. However, this paper argues that self-efficacy must be read carefully. Officials may have confidence and discipline, but confidence alone cannot overcome poor connectivity, workload pressure or institutional silence. Self-efficacy is important, but it must be supported by enabling conditions.

1.3. Theoretical Framework: The Capability Approach

This study is guided by the Capability Approach, associated mainly with Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum. The Capability Approach is useful because it shifts attention from formal access to real opportunity. Sen (1999) argues that development should be understood as the expansion of substantive freedoms. In education, this means that it is not enough to ask whether a person has been admitted to a university. It is necessary to ask whether that person has the real conditions to participate, learn, complete, and benefit from the qualification.

The Capability Approach distinguishes between resources, capabilities, and functionings. Resources refer to what students may formally have, such as admission, study material, a learning management system and assessment opportunities. Capabilities refer to what students are able to do with those resources. Functionings refer to achieved outcomes, such as submitting assignments, passing modules, completing qualifications, and using education to improve one's life.

In the context of officials studying through ODeL, this distinction is important. An official may have access to an online module site but may not have stable electricity, data, time, academic confidence, or lecturer support. Another official may receive study material but may work night shifts or be stationed in an area with poor network coverage. A third may have a smartphone but no laptop suitable for writing assignments. In all these cases, formal access exists, but capability is constrained.

The Capability Approach, therefore, allows this paper to argue that student success should not be reduced to motivation or discipline. Officials may be motivated but structurally constrained. They may be registered but unsupported. They may be capable adults in the workplace, but academically vulnerable in an ODeL system that demands digital confidence,

independent reading, academic writing, and time management. The theory helps expose the gap between being given an opportunity and being able to use that opportunity meaningfully.

The Capability Approach is also appropriate in the South African context because the country remains marked by inequality. Educational access is shaped by race, class, geography, household income, digital infrastructure, and historical disadvantage. For working officials, these inequalities do not disappear when they enter university; they follow them into the online classroom.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative desktop research design to examine factors contributing to student success and failure in Open Distance e-Learning among officials studying in South Africa. A desktop approach was appropriate because the study relied on existing scholarly literature, government reports, institutional documents and public statistics rather than primary interviews or fieldwork.

The study used document analysis as its primary data collection method. Sources included South African and international literature on ODL, ODeL, adult learning, student support, digital inequality, and student persistence. Policy and government documents were also consulted, including reports from the Department of Higher Education and Training, Statistics South Africa, ICASA, and the CSIR. These sources helped locate the study within the broader South African context of higher education, digital access, electricity instability and public-sector working conditions.

The data were analysed using qualitative content analysis. The selected documents were read closely to identify recurring patterns, concepts, and arguments related to officials' experiences in ODeL. The analysis focused on how literature and policy sources explain both success and failure among working students. Particular attention was given to workload, time poverty, digital access, lecturer support, institutional responsiveness, socio-economic pressure, workplace support, and emotional fatigue. The main themes that emerged from the analysis were then interpreted through the Capability Approach, which allowed the study to examine whether officials have the real opportunity, resources, and support to convert access to ODeL into meaningful academic success.

Because the study used publicly available secondary sources and did not involve human participants, no direct ethical risk was posed. However, ethical care was taken to avoid blaming

officials for failure without considering the structural and institutional conditions that shape their learning experiences.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

1. *Officials succeed when ODeL recognizes them as workers, not only as students*

The first finding is that officials are more likely to succeed when institutions recognise their dual identity as workers and students. Officials do not enter ODeL as blank academic subjects. They enter with uniforms, shifts, departmental responsibilities, family obligations and professional identities. Their learning is shaped by the rhythm of employment.

Success is supported when learning materials are available early, deadlines are clearly communicated, online classes are recorded, assessment instructions are practical, and lecturers understand that officials may not always attend live sessions. Flexibility does not mean lowering standards. It means designing learning in a way that allows serious working students to participate meaningfully.

This finding speaks directly to the Capability Approach. The official may have the resources for registration, but success depends on whether that official can convert registration into learning. Time, support, and flexibility become conversion factors.

2. *Failure is often produced by time poverty*

Time poverty is one of the most significant barriers facing officials in ODeL. Many officials work long hours, shifts, weekends and overtime. Even where official working hours appear manageable on paper, the reality of public service work is often unpredictable. A correctional official may be held back by security incidents. A police officer may be called to attend to urgent cases. A nurse may work extended shifts. A municipal official may deal with community protests, service delivery pressure or administrative backlogs.

The problem is not that officials do not value education. The problem is that study time competes with work time, family time, rest time and survival time. ODeL assumes that students can create their own study time. Yet for many officials, time is not freely available; it must be negotiated from exhaustion.

Failure may therefore appear as non-submission or poor performance, but behind it may be fatigue, shift work, overtime, bereavement, household pressure or lack of rest. Institutions that interpret non-submission only as negligence risk

misunderstanding the lived reality of working students.

3. *Digital inequality remains a central barrier to ODeL success*

The third finding is that digital inequality continues to shape student success and failure. While South Africa has expanded internet access, fixed home internet remains limited for many households, and mobile connectivity remains the dominant form of access. Stats SA (2025) reports that only 17.4% of households had fixed internet access at home in 2024, while 75.6% accessed the internet through mobile devices. This has serious implications for ODeL. A student who accesses learning through a smartphone is not in the same position as a student with a laptop, fibre connection, private study room and uninterrupted power.

Digital inequality must be understood broadly. It includes lack of laptops, reliance on smartphones, expensive mobile data, poor network coverage, limited digital literacy, unstable electricity, shared household devices, lack of quiet study space and difficulty navigating online platforms. Badaru (2026), Mphuthi et al. (2025) and Ajani (2025) confirm that technology access, digital literacy and institutional support are central to meaningful participation in ODeL.

Officials may be employed, but employment does not automatically provide digital readiness. Some officials are stationed in workplaces where internet use is monitored or restricted. Others may not have permission to use departmental computers for studies. Therefore, the assumption that employed students have better resources than unemployed students is not always correct.

4. *Socio-economic hardship follows officials into the online classroom*

The fourth finding is that socio-economic hardship remains a powerful influence on ODeL participation. In South Africa, a salary does not always mean financial security. Many officials are breadwinners in extended families affected by unemployment. They may pay for food, transport, school fees, rent, loans, burial societies, family emergencies and debt. Academic costs become part of this already stretched household economy.

The cost of ODeL is often underestimated. Even where tuition is paid, students still need data, devices, stationery, electricity, printing, transport and sometimes childcare. For officials in lower salary bands, these costs compete with food, transport and family obligations. The result is that academic

participation becomes financially negotiated. A student may choose between buying data and buying groceries. Another may miss an online class because electricity has run out or because the household needs the phone.

This finding challenges the idea that ODeL is automatically cheaper for students. It may be cheaper than full-time contact study, but it is not cost-free. For officials in lower-income brackets, the economic burden remains real.

5. *Lecturer responsiveness can determine whether students remain or withdraw*

The fifth finding is that lecturer engagement plays a decisive role in student success. In distance education, the lecturer is often experienced through written announcements, feedback, online classes, emails, discussion forums, and assessment comments. Where the lecturer's presence is strong, students feel guided. Where it is weak, students feel abandoned.

Officials studying after work need clear and human communication. They need lecturers who explain assessment expectations, provide examples, respond to queries, record classes, and offer constructive feedback. In ODeL, silence can be damaging. A delayed response may cause a student to submit an incorrect answer. A vague announcement may confuse students who are already tired. A lack of feedback may prevent improvement.

Lecturer responsiveness does not mean being available at all hours. It means building predictable, structured and compassionate academic communication. Such responsiveness can reduce anxiety and improve student confidence.

6. *Workplace support can turn ODeL into professional development rather than private struggle*

The sixth finding is that workplace support is a major success factor. Officials succeed more easily where supervisors and departments recognise study as professional development. Support may include study leave, flexible scheduling during examinations, access to workplace internet, moral encouragement and recognition of academic progress.

In some cases, however, officials study privately, almost secretly, because the workplace does not meaningfully support them. They may fear being seen as distracted from work. They may be denied time off for examinations or forced to use annual leave. This turns education into a private burden

rather than a shared investment in public service development.

Government departments benefit when officials improve their qualifications. A better-educated official may bring stronger writing, policy interpretation, ethical reasoning, management ability and professional confidence into the workplace. For this reason, workplace-study support should be treated as part of human resource development.

7. *Emotional fatigue is an invisible cause of failure*

The seventh finding is that emotional fatigue remains under-discussed in ODeL research. Officials often work in environments marked by stress, public pressure, trauma, conflict or bureaucracy. After such work, they are expected to engage with academic theory, legal texts, research methods and assessments. The emotional transition from workplace pressure to academic concentration is not simple.

For correctional officials, policing officials, health workers and social service officials, emotional fatigue may be severe. They may deal with violence, illness, death, complaints, overcrowding, conflict or institutional shortages. ODeL systems that ignore this reality risk treating students as machines who can simply log in and perform.

Emotional fatigue affects reading, memory, writing, motivation, and confidence. It can lead to procrastination, poor performance, and withdrawal. Institutions need to recognize that student support must include academic and psychosocial dimensions.

8. *Student success is strengthened by motivation, identity, and purpose*

Despite the barriers, many officials succeed because they attach deep meaning to their studies. Their motivation is often linked to promotion, professional recognition, family pride, personal healing, and the desire to be role models. For some, studying is a way of proving that poverty, age, work pressure, or past educational exclusion did not defeat them.

This internal motivation is a major success factor. However, motivation alone is not enough. The Capability Approach reminds us that motivated students still need enabling conditions. A committed official can fail in a system that is poorly designed, digitally exclusionary or academically silent. Therefore, institutions must not exploit student resilience. Resilience should be supported, not romanticized.

4. CONCLUSION

ODEL has opened the doors of higher education to many officials in South Africa. It has enabled working adults to study without leaving their jobs and has created opportunities for professional advancement and personal transformation. However, this paper has argued that access alone is not success. For officials studying through ODeL, success depends on their actual ability to participate, learn, and complete their studies.

The findings show that officials' success is shaped by time, technology, lecturer engagement, workplace support, socio-economic conditions, emotional resilience, and institutional responsiveness. Failure is not simply the result of laziness or poor discipline. It is often produced by the collision between work, poverty, family responsibility, digital inequality, and weak academic support.

Recent South African literature and public data confirm that digital access remains uneven, that LMS participation depends on institutional support, and that mobile internet access does not necessarily translate into meaningful academic connectivity. A truly transformative ODeL system must therefore move beyond admission numbers and digital platforms. It must ask harder questions: Who is able to study after access has been granted? Who has data, electricity, time, and support? Who is silently falling behind? Who is present in the system but absent from meaningful learning?

For ODeL to serve officials in South Africa, it must become more than a mode of delivery. It must become a caring, responsive, and justice-oriented system that understands the lives of the students it claims to serve.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study show that officials studying through ODeL do not fail only because of poor motivation, weak discipline or lack of academic ability. Their success or failure is shaped by the conditions around them: the workplace, the household, the university, the digital environment and the broader South African socio-economic context. The recommendations are therefore presented as a layered support model that recognises officials as working adult learners whose academic lives are located between employment, family responsibility and institutional expectation.

- **Student-Level Support: Building the Capability to Study:** The first layer of support should focus on strengthening the official's practical capability to study. Universities should provide structured orientation programs for officials and

other employed students at the beginning of each academic year. These programs should not only explain how to use online platforms, but should also cover academic reading, assignment writing, time management, digital literacy, examination preparation, and study planning for working adults. Such support should be practical rather than ceremonial. Officials need downloadable study calendars, low-data academic writing guides, recorded orientation sessions, short videos on navigating learning management systems, and examples of well-written assignments. This would help reduce the anxiety experienced by adult learners returning to formal study after many years away from university.

- **Lecturer-Level Support: Making Academic Presence Visible:** The second layer concerns lecturer responsiveness. In ODeL, the lecturer is often the closest human connection between the student and the university. For this reason, lecturer presence should be intentional, visible, and predictable. Lecturers should communicate regularly through announcements, discussion forums, online classes, feedback notes, and consultation opportunities. This does not mean that lecturers must be available at all hours. Rather, it means that every module should have a clear communication rhythm. Students should know when announcements will be posted, when feedback can be expected, where to ask questions, and how to access academic support. Recorded classes, assessment explanation sessions, and frequently asked questions documents should become standard practice. For officials who cannot always attend live sessions because of shifts, patrols, lock-up duties, overtime, or emergency workplace demands, recorded academic support is not a convenience; it is an inclusion mechanism.

- **Institutional-Level Support: Designing ODeL for Working Adults:** Universities should move beyond the assumption that all ODeL students are available, digitally prepared and emotionally ready to study independently. Institutional systems should be designed with the realities of working students in mind. This includes early release of assessment dates, flexible submission windows where possible, mobile-friendly platforms, low-data learning material and clear module navigation. Institutions should also develop early-warning systems that identify students who are not logging in, not submitting assessments or repeatedly failing early tasks. However, such systems should not be punitive. They should trigger supportive intervention. A student who has disappeared from the platform should not only receive an automated warning, but

also a human invitation to re-engage. Student support units should also create specialised support streams for employed students. These may include evening academic writing workshops, weekend revision sessions, peer-support groups for working students and online consultation spaces outside normal office hours. ODeL institutions must recognise that the working student's learning day often begins when the university's administrative day ends.

- **Digital Inclusion: Moving from Access to Meaningful Connectivity:** The fourth layer concerns digital inclusion. The study has shown that being connected does not always mean being meaningfully connected. Many students rely on mobile data, shared devices, unstable electricity, and weak network coverage. Universities should therefore design ODeL in ways that do not punish students for living in digitally unequal environments. Learning platforms should be mobile-friendly, low-data, and easy to navigate. Heavy files, unnecessary video size, complicated upload processes, and data-intensive teaching practices should be reduced. Study material should be available in multiple formats, including downloadable PDFs, audio summaries, recorded sessions, and printable guides. Universities should continue to negotiate zero-rated access to academic platforms and explore device-support schemes for students without laptops. Digital literacy should also be treated as an academic support issue, not as a private student problem. Students should be taught how to upload assignments, use online libraries, participate in forums, attend virtual classes, reference properly and troubleshoot common platform difficulties.

- **Workplace-Level Support: Recognizing Study as Professional Development:** The fifth layer requires stronger cooperation between universities and employers. Government departments and public institutions should recognize that officials who study are not only advancing their own careers; they are also improving the capacity of the public service. A correctional official who studies corrections management, a police official who studies criminology, a municipal official who studies public administration, or a nurse who advances professionally contributes to institutional development. Workplaces should therefore provide reasonable support for studying officials. This may include study leave, examination leave, flexible scheduling during assessment periods, access to computers where appropriate, permission to attend important online academic sessions, and recognition of qualifications in career development plans.

Supervisors should be sensitized to the reality that officials studying are not neglecting their work; they are investing in professional growth. A formal workplace-study support framework should be considered in government departments. Such a framework could outline how officials may apply for study support, how examination periods should be managed, and how completed qualifications may be linked to human resource development.

- **Psychosocial Support: Responding to Fatigue, Pressure, and Silent Struggle:** The sixth layer concerns emotional and psychosocial support. Officials often study while carrying the emotional weight of demanding work environments. Correctional officials, police officers, nurses, social workers, and municipal officials may deal daily with conflict, trauma, overcrowding, public anger, violence, sickness, or administrative pressure. When they enter the ODeL space, they do not leave these experiences behind. Universities should therefore strengthen psychosocial support for working students. Counselling services, wellness webinars, peer-support circles, and referral systems should be made visible and accessible. Academic staff should also be trained to recognize that late submission, silence, or poor performance may sometimes indicate distress rather than indifference. A humane ODeL system should ask not only "Why did the student fail?" but also "What conditions made learning difficult?"

- **Family and Community-Level Support** The seventh layer recognizes that many officials' study from home rather than on campus. The household, therefore, becomes part of the learning environment. Universities should develop simple, family-awareness materials for adult learners that explain the importance of study time, quiet space, and emotional support. This may seem small, but for officials who live in busy households, family understanding can make a meaningful difference. Officials should also be encouraged to negotiate study routines with their families. The home does not have to be perfect, but it can become more supportive when family members understand assessment periods, examination dates, and the pressure of academic work. In the South African context, where family responsibility is often collective and demanding, student success must be understood as socially located.

- **Aligning Higher Education, ICT and Public Service Development:** The final layer requires policy alignment. ODeL success is not only a university matter. It is also linked to ICT policy, electricity stability, public-service training, digital inclusion,

and socio-economic development. The Department of Higher Education and Training, universities, ICASA, public-sector employers, and telecommunications providers should work together to strengthen the conditions under which distance students learn. National higher education planning should treat working adult students as a specific

category requiring targeted support. Public-service departments should also view ODeL as part of professionalization and lifelong learning. Where officials are encouraged to study, support should not end at admission. It should extend to digital access, study leave, academic progression, and workplace recognition.

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