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EXPLORING THE POTENTIAL OF OPEN DISTANCE ELEARNING (ODEL) IN PROMOTING LIFELONG LEARNING FOR ADULT LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to assess the capacity of Open Distance e-learning (ODeL) to provide opportunities for lifelong learning among adult learners, especially those from underprivileged backgrounds. This research examines how online distance learning (ODeL) promotes equality, accessibility, and flexibility while also finding scenarios when ODeL surpasses conventional face-to-face learning methods. We gathered data via comprehensive interviews with ODeL practitioners employing qualitative approaches; thereafter, we analyzed the data thematically to emphasize recurring trends. Research indicates that although Open and Distance e-learning (ODeL) improves flexibility and accessibility for learners with restricted time and resources, persistent systemic obstacles, including digital disparities, elevated dropout rates, and financial limitations, continue to pose substantial hurdles. The paper provides evidence-based recommendations, including targeted interventions to address these barriers and strategies to enhance ODeL's impact on marginalized populations. The study critically evaluates ODeL's strengths and limitations and contributes to ongoing discussions on equity and inclusion in lifelong education.

KEYWORDS: Open Distance Elearning, Lifelong Learning, Adult Learners, Policies, Effectiveness.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Lifelong learning refers to continuously acquiring information, skills, and abilities throughout one's life. Its purpose is to effectively adapt to evolving circumstances and fulfil the requirements of a dynamic labour market. It entails autonomous learning, emphasising individual growth and advancement in both personal and professional domains. So, the EU Skills Agenda 2020–2025 seeks to advance lifelong learning by advocating for strategic investment in training and upskilling, enhancing the significance of skills, and aligning individuals' aspirations with employment prospects (Annette & Stafford, 2023).In addition, lifelong learning is essential for personal and professional growth, and open and distance learning (ODL) platforms are the most suitable for this purpose, where ODL is considered the best way to allow learners to participate in education at their preferred time and location, ensuring accessibility and flexibility in their educational endeavours, and thus enhancing lifelong learning prospects (Halttunen et al., 2014). Notably, during the COVID-19 epidemic, open distance eLearning (ODeL) became an important strategy for lifelong learning in higher education institutions. ODeL delivers vital materials and skill development on online venues, increasing access to education and training. It also encourages adult informal learning, which helps to improve student equity and social inclusion and reduce socioeconomic inequities (Oladipo et al., 2022).

Distance education, a concept encompassing both traditional and e-learning methods, has evolved. ODL, which focuses on providing access to education without time and place constraints, uses various media for instruction. On the other hand, ODeL integrates digital technologies to enhance the learning experience, emphasizing e-pedagogies and learner-centered approaches; ODeL employs digital instruments and online platforms, including MOOCs and Open Educational Resources (OER), to enable interactive and collaborative learning experiences, Whereas ODL depends on fundamental technology, ODeL utilizes sophisticated technologies such as online learning management systems and analytics. Despite advancements, obstacles persist, particularly for students in remote regions who may be deprived of essential technology (Alfonso & Garcia, 2015; Rammutloa, 2013; Ghosh et al., 2012; Karoulis & Pombortsis, 2005).

Open-distance eLearning (ODeL) platforms are becoming more accessible, but there is still a lack of comprehension of their capacity to successfully facilitate lifetime learning (Maphoto & Suliman, 2024). Although ODeL has the potential to be a versatile and easily available form of education, its effects on the engagement and development of lifelong skills in adult learners have not been thoroughly investigated (Burns, 2020; Maphoto & Suliman, 2024). Furthermore, obstacles such as restricted technological access, insufficient knowledge, and reluctance towards conventional classroom environments may impede the acceptance of ODeL among adult learners. Furthermore, it is imperative to examine how ODeL projects effectively cater to the varied learning requirements and preferences of adult learners, including those belonging to underrepresented communities. Gaining a comprehensive understanding of these difficulties and possibilities is crucial to optimizing the efficiency of open and distance learning (ODeL) in advancing continuous education and enabling mature learners to flourish in a swiftly evolving society (Burns, 2020; Dede & Richards, 2020; Rocha Trindade et al., 2000).

Open and Distance e-Learning (ODeL) is an innovative approach that combines lifelong learning with adult education. Lifelong learning is a continuous process of personal and professional development that surpasses conventional education, promoting diverse experiences and interactions in several situations. Adult education is a structured method of learning intended for adults, usually administered by accredited educational institutions. ODeL systems, including MOOCs and e-learning tools, improve accessibility and personalization in adult education, facilitating lifelong learning through varied and flexible educational options. These platforms can utilize artificial intelligence to customize learning experiences according to individual requirements, fostering self-directed learning and enhancing educational results. The connection between continuous learning and adult education is crucial for effective educational practices, notwithstanding their differences. ODeL provides flexible and inclusive frameworks for adult education, enabling individuals to engage in lifetime learning at their own pace. Adult education may be influenced by institutional frameworks that might limit the flexibility advocated by supporters of lifelong learning (Billett, 2022; Charungkaittikul & Henschke, 2024; Fan, 2024; Iskakova, 2024; Ji, 2024).

Lifelong learning using open educational resources (OERs) has become crucial in meeting the changing demands of the job market (Bordoloi et al., 2020). During the COVID-19 pandemic, Open Distance eLearning (ODeL) emerged as a strategy for promoting lifelong learning because of the lockdown

measures implemented in many countries, and it is necessary to adopt ODeL in higher education institutions, allowing students to continue their education remotely (Durodolu et al., 2023; Inegbedion, 2022). ODeL has provided vital resources and online learning platforms to facilitate learning and skill development and enhance access to education and training without constraints of time and place, benefiting individuals and communities, particularly in socio-economically disadvantaged contexts (Choudhary et al., 2021).The use of OERs during the COVID-19 crisis has highlighted the importance of informal learning among adults, both for professional and personal development. By leveraging ODeL and OERs, institutions can promote student equity and social inclusion and reduce socioeconomic disparities.

1.1. Rationale/Justification

The realisation that opens distance e-learning (ODeL) has the potential to change access to education is the impetus for the current investigation into the advantages of ODL in fostering lifelong learning for adult learners. Online Distance Learning (ODeL) is a cutting-edge approach to higher education that provides learners with chances for both adaptable and simple learning. This approach is particularly relevant in Africa. ODeL has promise in solving the various issues that adult learners experience, such as restricted time and various learning styles. By delivering individualised solutions, ODeL has the potential to address these challenges. Furthermore, educational institutions increasingly acknowledge the significance of lifelong learning as a core component of education. This is because it is vital for personal development and adaptation in the fast-changing modern world. While simultaneously encouraging a culture of lifelong learning, incorporating online distance learning (ODeL) into adult education programs offers the potential to improve problem-solving, analytical thinking, and digital literacy skills. This research aims to contribute to improving adult education and empowering learners in a dynamic global landscape by investigating the efficacy of Open Distance eLearning (ODeL) in fostering lifelong learning. This research aims to inform policy development and educational practices.

1.2. Research Questions

- How can ODeL be used to provide flexible, accessible, and affordable learning opportunities for adult learners?
- How effective is ODeL in promoting lifelong learning in terms of improving adult learners' knowledge, skills, and competencies?
- What are the challenges of Open and Distance e-learning (ODeL) in promoting lifelong learning for adult learners?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. The Use of Odel to Provide Flexible, Accessible, And Affordable Learning Opportunities for Adult Learners

The Open Distance and eLearning (ODeL) programme provide adult learners with flexible, easily accessible, and cost-effective learning options. It offers pragmatic knowledge and expertise that may be directly utilized in present or prospective employment, enhancing the availability of lifelong learning and bridging the gap in opportunities between rural and urban communities. Open Distance eLearning (ODeL) is a cost-effective approach that eliminates the need for traditional educational infrastructure building. It also has the advantage of reaching a larger number of learners, independent of their location or the time they are available to study. In general, open and distance learning (ODeL) offers a versatile, easily reachable, and cost-effective method for lifelong learning in adult education (Lemoine, Garretson, et al., 2021; Nguyen, 2022; Pretorius et al., 2021).

During the Nguyen (2022) study aimed to enhance online learning design for employed adult learners using a mixed-method approach, Key indicators identified included investing in learning materials and increasing online interaction, which increased learners' engagement and course completion. The study also highlighted the need to fortify learner engagement through online interaction and effective learning materials, by addressing these indicators, online learning design can be more effective and adaptable to employed adult learners' circumstances, enhancing their learning experience and course completion rates. Pretorius et al. (2021) during his research, he highlighted the significant impact of integrating real-world interactions into open, distance, and e-learning (ODeL) environments, especially in the Global South, and emphasized the efficacy of combining both online and fully virtual learning methods in promoting such interactions and addressing constraints in accessing information and communication technologies (ICTs) by utilizing mobile technologies and open software applications. Although recognizing the constraints of using case studies and qualitative approaches, the paper

highlights the profound understanding obtained and the practicality of the recommendations outside of the specific situation. Mcelveen, et al. (2021) explained that the COVID-19 pandemic has expedited the prevalence of open distance education, particularly in higher education, where adult learners constitute a substantial demography. Contrary to conventional teaching methods, online adult learning requires emphasising practical, task-oriented, and flexible techniques that actively involve learners. These learners frequently prioritize obtaining abilities that are immediately applicable to their present or future profession. This emphasizes the significance of offering tangible, practical information that encourages creativity and adaptation. Given the ongoing development of online learning, it is crucial to prioritize meeting adult learners' distinct requirements and desires. This is necessary to guarantee valuable educational experiences and achieve favorable results in the ever-changing job market of today.

ODeL is an innovative approach to lifetime learning, especially for adult learners seeking flexible, accessible, and economical education. Future research should improve quantitative analyses, investigate innovative methods to address technological challenges, evaluate diverse learner needs, and examine scalability and sustainability in resource-constrained environments. This will emphasize the significance of ODeL in contemporary educational settings.

2.2. Effectiveness Of Odel in Promoting Lifelong Learning for Adult Learners

Open and Distance e-Learning (ODeL) has become a potent means of fostering lifelong learning among adult learners. It provides them with chances to improve their knowledge, skills, and competencies while managing their work obligations. Studies reveal that open and distance learning (ODeL) not only enables individuals to engage in self-directed learning and develop a lifelong learning mindset but also motivates adult learners to actively pursue initiatives aimed at improving their abilities. Furthermore, the incorporation of environmental education into formal structures by ODeL aids in the cultivation of ecologically knowledgeable adults, hence addressing pressing societal demands. Utilising open educational resources (OER) boosts the efficiency of open and distance learning (ODeL) in disciplines by offering easily available learning materials. In summary, ODeL is a flexible method that successfully aids adult learners in their ongoing quest for acquiring new knowledge, developing skills, and enhancing their competencies throughout their lives. This approach is in line with the changing requirements of the contemporary workforce and society (Abd Latif et al., 2020; Demir & Özdaş, 2020; Mbagwu et al., 2020; Nguyen, 2022) During (Nguyen, 2022) study aims to improve the experience of employed adult learners in online education by examining a course through the utilization of a mixed-methods methodology. The identification of two pivotal aspects, namely investment in educational resources and promotion of increased online interaction, is imperative for augmenting student engagement and elevating course completion rates. The research emphasizes the necessity of addressing these factors to enhance learner engagement and exposes the shortcomings in the existing learning design. By implementing these guidelines, one can enhance the quality of the learning experience and increase the rates at which courses are completed.

Mbagwu et al. (2020) study investigated the utilisation of self-directed learning abilities to enhance the inclination and intention for lifetime learning among adult and vocational undergraduates. It indicates that interventions that target these skills might greatly improve students' inclination to engage in lifetime learning and their plans to pursue further skill development after graduation. The study highlights the significance of information literacy self-efficacy as a mediator.

According to (Demir & Özdaş, 2020) paper underlines the significance of lifelong learning and adult education in a rapidly worsening global environment. It emphasizes the International Evaluation of Adult Competencies Program's findings that most adults lack the necessary abilities and that the effectiveness of education levels in Turkey is inadequate. The research also emphasizes the huge talent difference between men and women. Most graduates from lifelong learning and continuous training facilities linked with the Ministry of National Education work as engineers, operators, or in other sectors. The study demonstrates the contribution of educational administration graduates to the system through a qualitative research technique and document analysis method.

Abd Latif et al. (2020) mentioned that the Open University Malaysia (OUM) has included an environmental component in its "Environment and Us" course to raise environmental awareness among adult students. Research discovered that students have a high degree of awareness about environmental issues, showing that the course

helped improve their environmental literacy. The study also discovered a strong link between the course's learning experience and students' attitudes and willingness to participate in environmental projects, which reflects the effectiveness of the ODeL in promoting lifelong learning in terms of improving adult learners' knowledge, skills, and competencies.

Open and Distance e-learning (ODeL) is a valuable tool for adult learners, offering flexible, accessible, and cost-effective learning opportunities. However, research has limitations, including focusing on self-directed learning, environmental education, improved learning design, workforce alignment, gender equity, and cultural specificity. Future research should address equity and inclusion, digital divide, gender equity, scalable solutions, workforce integration, and empirical and cross-cultural studies to transform ODeL into a transformative force for lifelong learning.

2.3. The Challenges and Barriers That Adult Learners Face in Accessing Odel

Adult learners face numerous challenges while attempting to obtain online distance education. These problems can be classified as internal, external, or program-related, and they are influenced by elements such as age, gender, knowledge, skills, and learning environment. Additionally, adult learners may have difficulties with their learning styles, psychological consequences, poor academic achievement, and unequal access to digital resources. These limitations can make it difficult for individuals to participate in education and reduce their chances of lifelong learning. To address these problems, distance education professionals like administrators, instructors, instructional designers, and lawmakers must consider the various demands of adult learners. This includes providing flexible learning options, prioritizing mental health, encouraging digital literacy, and guaranteeing equitable access to educational resources and opportunities (Kara et al., 2019; Kulal et al., 2024; Manoharan et al., 2022).

Malhotra (2021) research focuses on the systemic barriers that adult learners experience when pursuing higher education opportunities. It emphasizes the gap in access generated by the rigidity of the higher education system, which frequently fails to meet the specific demands and circumstances of adult students. By focusing light on both personal and institutional barriers to participation, the article underlines the significance of recognizing the core causes of inaccessibility to successfully address these issues. Decision-makers in the education system must prioritize recognizing and removing these perceived hurdles to create a more inclusive and supportive environment for adult learners looking to further their education and advance their professional careers. Institutions can promote equity and accessibility in higher education by implementing proactive initiatives that address structural concerns and build a better awareness of the different requirements of adult learners.

Manoharan et al. (2022) investigated the difficulties encountered by adolescent and adult learners in English as a Second Language (ESL) classes during the COVID-19 pandemic. And he emphasized the distinct difficulties encountered by each group, encompassing variations in learning modalities, psychological ramifications, and subpar academic achievement. and he mentioned that the results indicate the necessity of tailored approaches to assist each specific group. and educational institutions must acknowledge these disparities and implement customized strategies to sustain engagement and drive online education. and explain that this technique has the potential to create an online learning environment that is both inclusive and successful.

Kulal et al. (2024) raised concern about lifelong learning programmes and activities revealing a disturbing trend of ignoring the unique requirements and preferences of older people from various populations and explains that the discrimination against this group is widespread, evident in both local communities and institutions that provide lifelong learning opportunities, and it includes ageism, sexism, classism, and racism. and showed the participants views shed light on the social justice and equity challenges confronting older persons, emphasizing the discrimination they suffer in accessing lifelong learning opportunities. Furthermore, the COVID-19 epidemic has exacerbated existing hurdles, particularly those related to digital inequality, limiting older adults' engagement in lifelong learning activities to those who have the means, capacities, and knowledge to interact with digital society (Kulal et al., (2024). To address these systemic inequities and promote inclusion in lifelong learning, we must work together to recognize and mitigate discrimination, as well as assure equitable access to educational opportunities for older adults from all backgrounds and circumstances.

Kara et al. (2019)presented a comprehensive literature review on adult learners in online distance education, emphasizes the numerous problems they confront due to internal, external, and program-related issues. Internal problems include time

management, learning methodologies, and technical skills, whereas external challenges include job and household duties. Program-related challenges, such as tutoring and institutional concerns, exacerbate the complexity. To properly address these problems, instructional technologists must understand personal characteristics and contextual circumstances, promote effective tutor-student contact, and provide feedback and assistance.

Adult learners face challenges in accessing Online Distance Learning (ODeL) due to internal, external, and program-related issues. Internal challenges include learning styles, psychological factors, and time management. External barriers include systemic barriers and structural inequities. Program-related challenges include poor course design and limited resources. Addressing these challenges requires personalized learning support, mental health initiatives, technology equity, and inclusive policies.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Approach

The methodological research approach that will be taken in this study is qualitative to obtain direct information from the participants with the use of in-depth interviews. Denzin (2017)ascribe qualitative research as an activity that is situated to locate the observer in the world. Qualitative research consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world and turn into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings and memos to the self. The researchers will make use of an in-depth interview and observation to collect qualitative data from the pre-service teachers. Qualitative data tends to be open-ended without any predetermined responses. By employing qualitative modes of enquiry, the researchers aim to explore the potential of open distance e-learning (ODeL) in promoting lifelong learning among adult learners. In other words, qualitative research involves the study of things in their natural settings.

3.2. Research Paradigm

The interpretive paradigm will underpin the study to interpret the experiences of these ODeL practitioners on the potential of open distance e-learning in promoting lifelong learning. Creswell (2013) affirms that the qualitative research approach begins with assumptions and an interpretive paradigm that informs the study of the research problem and objectives addressing the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. Denzin (2017)stress that qualitative research employs this interpretive approach, it presents the approach to the world in its natural form.

3.3. Sampling Procedure

The study will target the ODeL practitioners at the Center for Lifelong Learning of the University of South Africa who will participate. Simple random sampling will be used to select the participants in this study. According to Gravetter and Forzano (2012), simple random sampling is a method which attempts to give equal chances to each member of the population who can be selected as part of the sample for the study. Individual participants will be selected, particularly on the criteria of chance, availability and willingness and each representative of the population has an equal opportunity to be selected for the study. The researchers intend to use this sampling technique to obtain data from the selected ODeL practitioners.

3.4. Population

The study will investigate the effectiveness of the ODeL institution in promoting lifelong learning by examining its impact on adult learners' knowledge, skills, competencies, challenges and barriers that adult learners face in accessing ODeL. In this light, the participants will be members of the center of lifelong learning in the ODeL institution.

3.5. Research Instrument

The study will use interviews as a data collection instrument. According to Decarlo (2018), interviews within the study seek to develop stronger relationships with participants enabling them to disclose and receive a sense of trust. It further states that when choosing a setting for the interview to take place, it is an environment of the participants' choosing. In this case, using the familiar and natural setting of the staff members where they spend their time and share their lived experiences. The interviews are intended to take an average of 35 to 45 minutes for each participant.

3.6. Data Analysis

The data collected for this study will be transcribed and analysed with the use of thematic analysis where themes will be generated from the coding, of similar responses or observed features based on the research objectives. Thematic analysis has been introduced as a qualitative descriptive method that provides core skills to researchers for conducting qualitative analysis (Vaismoradi et al.,

2013).Thematic analysis as an independent qualitative descriptive is mainly described as a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data (Clarke & Braun, 2017).In particular, Denzin and Lincoln (2011) alluded to the fact that thematic analysis attempts to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings individuals bring to them. However, data analysed from the study will be presented under discussion of findings.

3.7. Ethical Considerations

The researchers will ensure that the participant's data will be treated with maximum confidentiality and that the outcome of the findings will not reveal the identity of the participants but for research purposes only. The researchers will not disclose participant information. Similarly, to ensure that the participants feel safe, the researchers will take into account the protection of the anonymity of the participants, such as their names, addresses, and cell phone numbers on the questionnaires for the study. Also, the reports of the findings will not disclose to trace the identities of the participants. Furthermore, the university will receive permission through the college ethics committee to engage the participants voluntarily and make informed consent forms available. To have access to the staff member of the center for lifelong learning, permission was also sought through the college ethics committee and Research Permission Sub-Committee application form, as a standard operating procedure for conducting research involving Unisa employees, was obtained respectively 2024/03/13/90474988/33/AM and 2024_RPC_032

3.8. Data Presentation and Analysis

Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step process.

1) *Familiarisation with the Data:* This step involved the researcher familiarising themselves with the data by reading and re-reading transcripts of student responses. Initial reflections were noted, with a focus on identifying recurring themes.
2) *Generating Initial Codes:* Data was systematically coded to identify key patterns.
3) *Searching for Themes:* Codes were then grouped into broader themes.
4) *Reviewing Themes:* The themes were refined by ensuring they accurately represented the data and had clear distinctions. Some overlapping themes were merged, and sub-themes were identified.
5) *Defining and Naming Themes:* Each theme was clearly defined.
6) *Collating the Findings:* The data was collated and studied; the results of which will be discussed in the following section.

The thematic analysis process was used in both the online questionnaires as well as the transcripts of the semi-structured interviews.

In achieving the study's research questions, it adopted the use of thematic analysis for data collection. The themes were generated from the coded materials. This was done after the information from the interview was transcribed from the audio recording to the text with permission from the respondents. The researchers performed a thematic analysis to identify the recurring themes in the interviews, which they then used to establish and address the research objectives. Thematic analysis is a technique that can be used to examine data from "conventional" face-to-face data-gathering techniques like focus groups, interviews, and various types of qualitative surveys that use text data and diaries, among others. This is because of its adaptability to a wide range of data types (Clarke & Braun, 2017; Terry et al., 2017; Terry & Hayfield, 2021). For the purpose of findings and discussions, a systematic thematic analysis of the data that was gathered was conducted. This study strictly complied with all ethical guidelines, and participant excerpts have been anonymized by using assumed names (Kumar, 2018). As a result, participants were listed in Table 1 below under pseudonyms. It is important to note that one of the participants completed "NO" as it required each participant to consent before being involved in the interview.

The following are the conclusions and themes that were discussed:

Table 1: Number of Participants.

S/N	Participants	Gender	Qualification	Years of Experience
1	Isivivane	Male	Master's Degree	8 years
2	Sikhumbuto	Female	PhD	6 years
3	Moshate	Female	Master's Degree	10 years
4	Mveledzo	Male	Master's Degree	7 years
5	Uitspanplek	Female	Master's Degree	10 years
6	Tiva	Female	PhD	9 years

7	Hapo	Male	Master's Degree	5 years
8	Sentlhaga	Female	Master's Degree	15 years

Data was generated through the interview with the respondents. The interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed orthographically, reproducing all spoken words and sounds including hesitations and the interviewer's giggles ('mm', 'ah-ha', 'Yes'). In presenting this data, the original voices of the research participants are quoted in verbatim throughout the presentation and discussion to authenticate the research findings.

The following data is provided and discussed in terms of themes that evolved from the transcription. Thematic analysis is used to examine the findings.

Theme 1: Odel Vs Traditional

This theme discusses the findings of the study in response to the study research question 1, which reads: How can ODeL be used to provide flexible, accessible, and affordable learning opportunities for adult learners? This theme consists of three sub-themes as discussed below:

Sub-Theme 1: Flexible

The concept of flexibility is one of the core components of open distance learning. The theme explained how flexibility is more acceptable and useful for adult learners in open-distance learning than in contact-based higher institutions. The participants revealed that it is very important that an ideal ODeL be flexible in any of its approaches, as adult learners require this in their teaching and learning. One of the participants had this to say:

"Of course! Adult learners required flexibility, as it will help in their learning process. It will be more effective if their learning is flexible compare to contact-based university because they are adult learners. So, it can be more effective". (Hapo)

Another participant articulated as follows:

The flexibility is key. Learners are at a distance. This flexibility helps them to carry on with their studies, its more effective. In a contact-based (traditional) university the learners have the whole time to engage their teacher physically. (Isivivane)

Another participant expressed:

Learning in a traditional university give rooms for learners to concentrate on his/her students without necessarily involving in other activities. However, ODeL learners which are most adult learners engaged in varied activities. This required them to have a flexible programme and it makes it effective". (Uitspanplek)

It is a consensus views among the member of the center as they believe that the flexibility of the ODeL programme cannot be compare to the traditional university. This participant supported the view of the previous participants.

I will say for example in our center unlike we design short learning programme that are involving for learners across board with it, flexibility at the core heart of the designer(s)". (Sikhumbuto)

In the above responses, the participants attested to the fact that in promoting lifelong learning, curriculum development must consider the flexibility of adult learners in an ODeL environment, not compared to the traditional university.

Sub Theme 2: Accessible

Accessibility is also one of the cores of an open-distance learning institution. In this sub-theme of accessibility, the majority of the participants believe that learning materials must be more effective when accessed for ODeL students compared to the students attending a traditional university. One of the participants highlighted in his view that accessibility of ODeL for adult learners has to be equally effective:

"Yes, accessing learning through ODeL must equally effective as it will assist the adult learners' opportunities to do a lot of things and get the learning qualification no matter the distance or space. By providing reliable connectivity". (Moshate)

Another participant also revealed that:

"As a staff that work in the center for lifelong learning, I believe learning should be more accessible to adult learners through ODeL as this will assist to help achieve their learning objectives. We put that so important as a center. More effective for lifelong learning". (Mveledzo)

Similarly, Hapo echoed the same sentiment:

"The appropriateness of making ODeL more accessible must be effective as it helps the learners must especially the adult learners. It can be used to acquire the necessary skills required in order to move departments within an organization or leave the organization". (Hapo)

Contrastingly, one of the participants added that the concept is not well known to some of the staff in the university and some of the staff in the center:

"Because some of the staff that are required to understand the accessibility of the ODeL institution still struggle with the concept hence it affects the learners who are at the receiving end" (Uitspanplek)

Sub Theme 3: Reliable App and Funding

Two of the participants own different opinions as to how ODeL can be used to provide flexibility, accessibility and affordability for adult learners.

The first noted that:

"Reliable apps such as the "moodle" learning management been use by the university" (Tiva)

The other participants have a different opinion saying:

More funding required to support the learning of the adult learners on ODeL space most especially those with special needs, as it stands some of the learners do drop out which increases the throughput rate in the university. (Moshate)

Theme 2: Lifelong Learning

Open Distance learning previously as a mode of learning now field of study is specifically designed for learners who are preoccupied with work or who by chance missed out on the formal school system. This theme addressed the effectiveness of ODeL in promoting lifelong learning to improve adult learners' knowledge, skills and competencies.

This theme has one su theme as follow:

Sub Theme 1: Lifelong Learner

This sub-theme stressed the fact that ODel bring about the lifelong learner in every individual (adult learners) as it assists to continue studying to attained once endeavour.

Thus, one of the participants revealed that ODeL improves individual learners:

ODeL encourages every learner to learn, it is very effective because one has to do reading daily to support (Sentlhaga)

Participant "Isivivane" in his opinion explained further on the issue:

"It is very much effective as learners are able to acquire new knowledge and skills for personal and professional development. This gives learners to put in application for the job of their choice or they dream of attaining". (Isivivane)

Other expressions by the participant asserted that:

"Very effective. Individuals can learn while working as it gives room for other engagement. This assist adult leaner to combine work and learning together". (Tiva)

This participant was so brief by saying:

"Yes, it does encourage adult learners, improve their will to learn and acquire skill. It very effective". (Mveledzo)

Theme 3: Identification Of Challenges

Some participants identified the positive roles the ODeL environment had given to adult learners in promoting lifelong learning. However, during the course of the interview, some challenges that hindered adult learners in accessing the ODeL environment were stated by the participants. This theme generated two sub-themes:

Sub theme 1: Technical Know-how

The participant expressed:

"The online exam method seems to be a challenge to some adult learners, however, this can be address by providing exam orientation towards the examination period." (*Sikhumbuto)*

While another participant advocated for the availability of digital devices that will access the ODeL study materials:

"The learners need to obtain devices and get the right skill on computer literacy". (*Mveledzo)*

This participant was very brief about her comment:

"The challenge is technical issues and ICT unit must be on the lookout". (Sentlhaga)

Sub Theme 2: Responsibility

This subtheme speaks to responsibility as this participant believes that adult leaner has a lot to catch up with. This theme was very short as only one participant raised this challenge for adult learners.

"Adult learners involve in different activities such as Multiple responsibilities - juggling family and work" (*Moshate)*

4. DISCUSSION

The concept of lifelong learning is synonymous with the teaching and learning of adult learners in an Open Distance eLearning environment. Issues of lifelong learning and learning through ODeL remain one of the major discussions and it has been evolving over the years (Lemoine, Mcelveen, et al., 2021; Nguyen, 2022; Pretorius et al., 2021). Concerns about meeting the gap, integration and social inclusion of adult learners in yielding their desired results with many currently acquiring the needed content knowledge through the ODeL and other adult community centers (Akintolu & Letseka, 2021). However, the majority of the participants interviewed in this study revealed that adult learners required flexibility, accessibility and affordability from any ODeL institution. The participants agreed that flexibility, accessibility and affordability in an open-distance eLearning cannot be compared to the traditional university. Letseka and Pitsoe (2013)established that different adjectives like open, accessible, flexible, supporting, and affordable have been used to market ODL. They contend that these descriptors are predicated on the notion that adult learners who learn remotely are responsible and capable of self-regulating their education, and that knowledge and necessary skills can be acquired simply by providing learning resources such as tutorial letters, audio-visual materials, and

continuous self-evaluation (Ngubane-Mokiwa & Letseka, 2015).

There is a consensus among members of the center regarding the flexibility of the Open and Distance e-Learning (ODeL) program, which they believe surpasses that of traditional universities. This perspective is consistently supported by participants, who highlight the unique advantages offered by ODeL. Supporting this view Lemoine, Mcelveen, et al. (2021)Contrary to conventional teaching methods, ODeL for adult learning requires emphasizing practical, task-oriented, and flexible techniques that actively involve learners.

It is worthy of note that most of the participants never stressed that most adult learners have the experience but just require the skill that will assist them in their immediate task or employment as lifelong learners. However, during the interview, one of the participants mentioned that "*It is very much effective as learners are able to acquire new knowledge and skills for personal and professional development*". However, scholars like Mcelveen, et al. (2021) and Akintolu and Letseka (2021) have confidently expressed that learners frequently prioritize obtaining abilities that are immediately applicable to their present or future profession.

Another sub-theme that emerged from the participant's interview is that adult learning through ODeL assists with the opportunities to do many things and get the learning qualification no matter the distance. Grooms (2015) cited Moore and Kearsley (1996) claims that ODeL is an organized learning activity that is purposefully created to give everyone access to learning opportunities regardless of location. The students would be required to study and complete their degrees without physically attending classes.

Alluding to the theme of lifelong learners in promoting and improving adult learners' competencies. Abd Latif et al. (2020) , in their study, also discovered a strong link between the course's learning experience and students' attitudes and willingness to participate in environmental projects, reflecting the ODeL's effectiveness in promoting lifelong learning in improving adult learners' knowledge, skills, and competencies.

In the view expressed by the participants under the theme of challenges, the major sub-theme generated are lack of technical know-how and responsibility. Kara et al. (2019) also agreed in their study by categorising lack of technical skill to be internal and engagement of adult learners with job and household duties to be external. However, the study of Kulal et al. (2024) raises concerns on the issue of discrimination of adult learners, emphasizing the social justice and equity challenges confronting older persons in accessing lifelong learning opportunities. It is noteworthy that the participants of this study never pointed to this challenge. At the same time Benavot et al. (2022) assert that the principle of lifelong learning does not require discrimination between culturally distinct traditions in education.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Given the ongoing development of ODeL, it is crucial to prioritize meeting the distinct requirements and desires of adult learners. This is necessary to guarantee valuable educational experiences and achieve favorable results in the ever-changing job market of today.

The study also discovered a strong link between what the ODeL institution is delivering, and the adult learners' needs, which reflects the effectiveness of the ODeL in promoting lifelong learning in terms of improving adult learners' knowledge, skills, and competencies.

Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive and inclusive approach, involving measures such as providing financial assistance, offering digital literacy training, enhancing support services, and recognizing diverse learning experiences. Institutions and policymakers play a pivotal role in mitigating these barriers and creating a more accessible and supportive ODeL environment for adult learners as well as ensuring equitable access to educational opportunities for older adults from all backgrounds and circumstances.

It is also the opinion of the researchers that to properly address the needs of adult learners in the ODeL environment as a lifelong learner, instructional technologists must understand personal characteristics and contextual circumstances and promote effective learning platforms and tools that will provide feedback and assistance.

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