

# Agile administrative choreographies for multimode education at the University of Pretoria

Tony John Mays\* and Folake Ruth Aluko

Unit for Distance Education, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

\*Correspondence to: Tony John Mays; Unit for Distance Education, University of Pretoria, Private Bag X21, Pretoria 0028, South Africa. Email: [tony.mays@up.ac.za](mailto:tony.mays@up.ac.za)

## Abstract

This paper responds in part to a special edition of this journal (39/2) on dual-mode provision. We were concerned that contact providers might drift into distance education provision through extending campus-based online learning without first thinking through the underpinning implications of its administrative systems, an issue that was not addressed in the special edition. Proceeding from a pragmatic and constructivist perspective, while adopting a transactional orientation drawing on systems theory and hermeneutics, this paper focuses on the challenge for administrative staff and systems of the changing nature of provision in terms of both the underpinning learning and business models. Based on experience and reflection, we conclude that the move into dual- and multimode provision is inevitable and that this requires agility on the part of both administrative staff and systems that is often overlooked in planning and review processes.

## Keywords

Dual-mode; multimode provision; administration; agility; systems

## Introduction

As coeditors with M. H. A. Combrink of a special edition of this journal (39/2), on dual-mode provision, we observed that none of the papers we received had addressed the challenges for administration of a move from single mode to dual or even multimode provision. As well, we had found little discussion of these challenges in the literature when we were preparing our editorial (Mays, Combrinck, & Aluko, 2017). Thus, this paper responds in part to this gap in the special edition and in the literature.

Distance education has increasingly metamorphosed into fully online courses from the print-based days that were dominant in African provision to the early 2000s. There is unabated demand for access into higher education coupled with the affordances brought by information and communication technologies (ICTs) (Arko-Achemfor, 2017). However, these changes imply that higher education institutions planning to go into distance education provision (irrespective of the mode of delivery) would need new administrators separate from the traditional experts (Caruso, 2004). Some decades ago, Williams, Paprock, and Covington (1999, p. 17) identified some of the problems facing distance education as lack of technology infrastructure, lack of expertise, lack of

strategic planning and coordination, and lack of support during and after implementation. However, relatively little has been written about the ways in which these core issues are enabled by supporting administrative systems and the impact on administrative staff of changes in these systems as institutions move from contact provision into print-based distance provision or directly into online provision in some areas (see Holt, Palmer, Gosper, Sankey, & Allan, 2014; Kupczynski & Mundy, 2015; Vu, Meyer, & Cepero, 2016). Today, the largest distance education provider on the continent, the University of South Africa, offers most programmes with a blend of print and online support (Ngubane-Mokiwa & Letseka, 2016).

It has been suggested that many contact mode institutions in South Africa venture into distance education from a profit motive because they often see this mode as a way of cross-subsidising contact provision (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2014). According to Minnaar (2013), however, financial reasons are the wrong reasons for moving into this mode especially because the cost could in fact be higher than contact provision in view of the ever-changing technology and the need to build and maintain appropriate infrastructure and staff competence. Rather, institutions need to ask themselves why they are interested in distance provision, assure their motive is in line with the institutional and national goals, and put in place supportive systems that will work, among which are administrative services. When attention is not paid to these, providers (unconsciously perhaps) water down the quality of the distance education mode, thus exposing it to ridicule from critics. In agreement with some authors (Daniel & Uvalic-Trumbic, 2011; Woldeyes, 2016), we argue that the iron triangle of access, quality, and cost does not have to hold true for distance education. However, to enhance the success, sustainability, and the eventual quality of distance education, we argue that providers need to take cognisance of the critical role played by effective planning and implementation (Minnaar, 2013).

In this study, we adopted a qualitative research design in which we focused on a pragmatic and constructivist perspective, while adopting a transactional orientation drawing on systems theory and hermeneutics. The study focuses on the challenge for administrative staff and systems of the changing nature of provision in terms of both the underpinning learning and business models. Therefore, the main research question was: What is the role of administration in distance education provision and how is this changing as modalities evolve?

## **Why focus on administration?**

### ***The notion of distance education as a system***

Moore and Kearsley (1996) who, building on the work of Wademeyer, pioneered the formalisation of systems thinking for distance provision, define a distance education system as follows:

A distance education system consists of all the component processes that make up distance education, including learning, teaching, communication, design, and management, and even such less obvious components as history and institutional philosophy. Within each of these broadly named components are subsystems ... While we may choose to study each of these systems separately, we must also try to understand their inter-relationships. (p. 5)

It is noted that administrative support, in the form of both staff and systems, is integral to this systems perspective. In their more recent publication, Moore and Kearsley (2012) focus on a systems view for online (rather than distance) provision, but they follow a similar logic. Modeling distance education and open, distance and e-learning (ODEL) operations from a systems perspective helps staff to understand their contribution to the whole and the ways in which weaknesses in one area can impact negatively on the achievements of the whole system.

Of course, as acknowledged by Moore and Kearsley (1996, 2012) themselves, the various systems and subsystems do not relate to one another in quite the neat and linear way implied by typical process and flowchart diagrams, but are much messier and multilayered. With the advent of Web 2.0 interaction possibilities, the lines of communication can in fact become quite dynamic, as illustrated by den Exter, Rowe, Boyd, and Lloyd (2012, p. 1).

It then seems useful to bear in mind the following caveats:

- The systems and subsystems of ODeL provision interact in a complex and by no means strictly linear way;
- Some subsystems need to be prioritised as being at the heart of the mission of an ODeL institution (e.g., learner support); and
- Some subsystems follow a time-bound, sequential, and often iterative logic by the very nature of their purpose (initial course and materials development and subsequent revision).

For instance, the processes of managing assignment submissions are sequential and iterative: there is a need to check who has submitted and who has not; there is a need to collate physical or digital bundles of like assignments; these bundles must then be assigned physically or online to appropriate markers; deadlines need to be monitored and interventions effected where necessary; returned scripts need to be checked for completeness and accuracy; marks need to be verified and uploaded for the assessment system, and marking claims need to be verified, uploaded, and approved for the human resource system; and then the process starts again for the next submission cycle.

The central role of management and administration in the effective provision of distance education has also been recognised by the distance education community in South Africa. Management and administration is recognised as one of 13 quality criteria in guidelines and case studies developed by members of the National Association for Distance Education and Open Learning in South Africa (Welch & Reed, 2005, p. 37).

Although the impact of a move into distance, online or multimode provision on teachers and students has been debated in the literature (Gregory & Lodge, 2015; Haggerty, 2015; Ntshoe, Higgs, Wolhuter, & Higgs, 2010), much less has been published about the administrative impact.

In fact, we are concerned that institutions seem often to drift into distance and/or online provision without thinking through carefully enough the pedagogic and business model assumptions on which such practices are based, and therefore do not always make appropriate adjustments in the ways in which policy, processes, people, and places are administered. This can result either in low quality or unsustainable provision,

both of which outcomes could be avoided if the kind of discussion pursued in this paper were to take place ahead of provision.

## **Background to the paper and motivation for the example**

### ***Outline of current organisation of distance education at the University of Pretoria, South Africa***

According to one of its historical records (Unit for Distance Education, 2014), the Faculty of Education launched its distance education initiative in April 2002. The initiative is made up of three aspects: the Unit for Distance Education, student administration, and academic departments. This paper focuses on the first two because academic departments are autonomous and independent of the management and administration of distance education programmes.

#### ***The unit for distance education***

The Unit for Distance Education was established to manage the distance education initiative in the faculty. Its structure, functions, and core activities include the following: strategic responsibilities, the management of contracts, contact sessions, decentralised examinations, academic support, and research activities.

A flat matrix management system was put in place. This means that particular business processes for distance education were placed within other established structures and that the staff involved would fall under the line authority of that structure, while the Unit for Distance Education exercised functional authority over the staff involved in each particular business process. The point of departure was that the unit would optimise the existing resources, systems, structures, and processes of the University of Pretoria to the maximum. Where the systems or processes were not adequate, it was established whether they could be adjusted or whether a new system should be developed or whether some aspects should be outsourced (e.g., outsource marketing and the logistical management of examinations and contact sessions) for economic and infrastructure reasons. Student administration for distance education was one of the business processes identified and established by the unit.

#### ***Student administration: distance education***

The purpose of Student Administration: Distance Education, which this paper focuses on, is to deliver high-quality administrative support throughout the academic life of distance education students. It plays an instrumental role in supporting distance education students to complete their studies successfully. Its core functions include student registration, dispatch and enquiry management, the administration of assignments and contact session, call centre operation, communication with students, data management and electronic systems administration, and human resource development.

The authors have chosen this research site because the University of Pretoria was established over a century ago as a full contact institution but has subsequently introduced other modes of provision. The university started distance education in its Faculty of Education in 2002; it then moved with one of its education programmes into

dual-mode delivery; and it currently offers one programme in a blended mode and plans to move some of its programmes fully online in 2019. In addition, policy changes in recent years coupled with slow approval and accreditation processes have seen a dramatic fluctuation in enrolment. Thus, administrative structures and personnel have needed to adapt to changing modes of provision as well as changing student numbers.

### ***What is our theoretical lens?***

Vidal (2012) suggests that all research is grounded within a world view that is primarily scientific, philosophical, or religious. Within this framework, the authors adopt a pragmatic (Hookway, 2016) social science perspective (Babbie, 2017), concerned with finding practical, but not necessarily permanent, solutions to constantly changing educational challenges, in ways that are grounded in empirical evidence and relevant social contexts.

We adopt a communitarian perspective neatly summarised in the Zulu proverb *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*—we are made human through our relationships with other humans (Letseka, 2016; Tschaepe, 2013). This Ubuntu perspective underscores the importance of community, dialogue and consensus, mutual recognition, respect, and understanding (Aluko, 2016).

Within the Ubuntu framework of the self in relation to others, the authors have for many years operated in a space that could be described as transactional—working with teams of people in multiple institutions and countries to develop and/or review learning programmes and supporting systems that meet current needs and which are arrived at through iterative processes of discussion and compromise. Decisions are made in a belief that knowledge (*theoria*), reflective action (*praxis*), and production (*poiesis*) are mutually reinforcing and what works in one educational context and time may not work equally well in another. So there is a need for constant inquiry, experimentation, and change in what is taught and how (Dewey, 1929, n.d.). As noted by Anderson (2017) and Mays (2017), different perspectives on the nature of being, knowing, and educating tend to orientate the researcher to particular forms of enquiry; in the authors' case, ethnographic and other qualitative forms which emphasise a search for understanding and shared meaning-making. Higgs and Smith (2015) observe that within the field of educational enquiry, a number of metatheoretical lenses have emerged over many years, and in this respect the authors draw on several metatheories but most frequently hermeneutics, which emphasises collaborative meaning-making (Danner, 1995; Kinsella, 2006; Mantzavinos, 2016), and systems theory, which emphasises the interrelationship between the parts and the whole (Moore & Kearsley, 1996, 2012; Roberts, Kigotho, & Stagg, 2018).

## **Methodology**

### ***Research design***

For this study, the authors have adopted a qualitative approach that essentially “emphasises words rather than quantification” (Bryman, 2001, p. 264). The study adopted

a qualitative case study design. Our motivation for this choice was to enable us to gain deeper insight into the phenomenon under investigation through the eyes of the actors themselves, together with an emphasis on detailed description and understanding (Babbie, 2017).

### ***Sampling***

The nonprobability, convenience, and purposive sampling method was adopted for the study. The research site was the Faculty of Education, University of Pretoria. The researchers drew a sample of all key members involved in the administration of distance education at the university (administrative heads, the accountant, the learning designer, and examinations, contact sessions, and call centre staff members). The sample included the Assistant Director: Student Administration, the Head: Student Administration of Distance Education, and nine administrative staff members.

### ***Data collection, instruments, and analysis***

The data collection for this study was undertaken from March to April 2018. Methods included the review of relevant literature, documents from the unit of study (self-evaluation and external evaluations 2005 and 2014, operational meeting agendas and minutes), and individual and focus group interviews. During the interviews, the authors kept field notes for reflection. Key questions asked were:

- (1) What was your experience in moving from contact administration to DE administration?
- (2) What was your experience during the high enrolment period?
- (3) What is your experience in the current low enrolment period?
- (4) What is your experience in moving from print-based to blended mode?
- (5) What are your concerns/suggestions regarding a move from blended to fully online mode?

The interviews were recorded and transcribed by the authors, while the analysis involved the development of themes and codes from the data.

### ***Ethical considerations***

The Unit for Distance Education has ethical clearance to collect and use anonymised student and staff information for quality assurance and research purposes related to distance education provision.

### **Findings from the research data**

From the five major interview questions emerged five core themes. Therefore, in this section, we present the findings under the themes, subthemes, and codes that have emerged from the interview data. To ensure anonymity, respondents are identified by codes only, for example, FG3 A means focus group 3, respondent A.

### ***Staff members' previous experience and its implications for practice***

Based on the data from the interviews, staff members' previous experience was mixed. However, one interviewee (FG3 B) had worked in a distance education environment previously, while another one had studied (FG2 A) through distance mode, but with another institution. This gave the two interviewees an idea of what this mode of delivery entails. Comparing the difference between her previous distance education work experience with the current experience, interviewee FG3 B explained that she previously worked:

with only 7000 students [in comparison to] over 20,000 students at the University of Pretoria.

As well, the task of organising contact sessions was separately assigned to others, not an administrative staff as she came to experience at the University of Pretoria. Most of the participants moved from the contact mode of the same university to work in the distance education environment. However, their diverse experiences served as a basis for what they would need to do in the distance education environment.

### ***Moving from contact to distance education***

According to most of the interviewees, moving from contact requires "huge adaptation" (ID 1). One participant asserts that, "university processes are not easy to change." As well, "there was the need to create a new process from the scratch" as there were no institutions to emulate as at the time the university started its distance education programmes, the "UP [University of Pretoria] context was different from that of other universities, e.g., Unisa [University of South Africa]." Another interviewee (FG1 A) highlighted some of the areas that needed adaptation at the university. According to her:

Distance education operated very differently—e.g., whereas contact had 1 registration cycle, DE had 2 per year and there was need to rollover for up to 10 exam sessions for DE before deregistration would happen. Therefore, systems and processes needed to be created for DE to manage assignment submissions and processing, examination registration and writing, postage of study materials, rollover mechanisms since submission of assignments was optional in a particular block; contact session registration, organisation, and monitoring.

Another participant (FG2 A) asserted:

The call centre is a vital part of support. There is the need to budget for student support including the call centre because without support DE will collapse.

Even though some job roles are generic (e.g., financial principles and processes are the same), according to one of the interviewees (FG3 A):

Time management and timeframes are different in terms of what must be completed and when before a contact sessions etc., the processing of claims after and the management of stock.

Another aspect that needed adaptation is instructional design. According to a participant (ID 2):

Typically, an instructional designer (ID) at UP is a training and advisory role in the contact environment. However, at UDE, I take full responsibility for uploading and updating clickUP [the learning management system of the university] modules and also engage with tutors in ways not typical of IDs.

According to the participant, “for this reason, the manager of UDE prefers the term *learning designer*.”

Unfortunately, the key challenge with regard to this adaptation is:

the lack of an automatic integration between clickUP and PeopleSoft [the university’s management information system] data. It is necessary to download clickUp marks in Excel and manually upload them to PeopleSoft, for example. The system also cannot provide useful dashboards or track tutor engagement.

### ***Workload experience***

In this section, we asked the participants to compare their workload experience in times of high and low enrolment.

#### ***High volume***

Regarding their high-volume work experience, most of the participants explained that it took a while for the university to appoint additional staff. ID 1 explained it this way:

Initially dealing with high volume involved long work hours because it takes time to get permission to recruit additional staff, then to recruit them and then to train them. The huge volume of enquiries (for example) necessitated the establishment of a dedicated call centre. The programme was for a different market ... type ... of student, in different locations (including rural). There was initially little suitable technology and most of the work involved manual admin of hard copies, e.g., of assignments. Nothing was automated. Admin was actually underprepared for the unexpectedly high numbers.

According to another participant, during this period, the four key functional areas that emerged were registrations, exams, assignments, and contact sessions, which were linked to “mapped-out activities in a detailed year-planner, divided responsibilities, and ‘student lifecycle’.” Another example was the “development of the bulk SMS system,” which was critical because it allowed administration to track student enquiries and registrations (for contact sessions and exams). According to FG2 A, the “high volume of enquiries motivated the establishment of the call centre ... though SMS was useful but often information is incomplete so there is need to follow up.” It also enabled the university to provide students with a “personal touch” (FG2 A).

At this stage, according to FG3 B, “the large numbers required team work approaches; it was necessary for everybody in the process to meet the deadlines for his/her activity so as not to delay the overall process.”

#### ***Low volume***

According to ID 1, “with lower numbers, the processes are more manageable”; however, to her, “this indicates that the needs in the market are not being addressed.” Also, “the policy change has also reduced enrolment, and this has ultimately impacted on lower



staff numbers" (ID 1), with, for example, "a cut of the call centre budget" (FG2 A). However, according to FG1 A, "for some processes, the workload is not directly related to student numbers: the same process needs to be followed regardless of student numbers (e.g., the finalist programme leading to the award of the qualification)." FG2 A added:

Although there are fewer students, there are just as many calls [that are] often ICT related, e.g., assignment and exam deadlines, forgotten password, uploaded wrong assignment, clickUP closed for assignment submission, etc. For instance, it is not uncommon to have 90/100 calls a day; 200 at peak times.

### *Moving from distance education to a blended mode of delivery*

With the move to a blended mode has come low work volume due to low registrations, and the moving of many processes online; however, according to one of the participants (ID 1), "there is still a great need for student support." According to most of the participants, this has caused administrative staff to "learn new ways of doing things in moving from physical processes to online processes ... Admin staff have become more ICT fluent" (ID 1), and "they have needed to learn new ICT applications skills, e.g., clickUP (FG1 A)." As well, "there has been an increased use of email and SMS, and students expect a more immediate response" (FG1 A). Administrative staff have been involved in "e-library training." Thus, the staff members experience "a different type of student" in terms of age and computer literacy. Though described as challenging ... but a "nice challenge" (FG1 D), it is a "value add[ed]", and "the direct engagement with students has given insight into what it's really about" (FG1 C).

One thing that the staff find frustrating is that "there is currently no relationship between clickUP and PeopleSoft" (FG1 3).

A participant (FG3 A) explained that they are "committed to meeting claims and processing deadlines"—a sentiment echoed by FG3 D. For instance, in the busy paper-based days, FG3 A would often "take boxes of claims home and process them over the weekend."

However, experience of the current blended approach is different for another participant (ID 2), who for each new block needed to "clone and update each module separately and then create discussion and marking groups proportionate to the number of students." Therefore, according to him, "as the number of programmes offered grows, as well as the number of students, it will be necessary to employ an additional staff member to manage the routine work freeing me to focus more on the design issues."

Overall, another participant (ID 2) indicated that "an ICT-supported approach rather than print-based or fully online was the right move."

However, ID 2 stressed that emphasis should rather be on providing access to resources that could be downloaded to flash-drive and studied largely offline. This came out of the concern of most of the participants for students without access to technology or that could not afford data.

### *Moving from blended to fully online mode*

As at the time of writing this paper (between April and June 2018), the university entered into agreement with a third-party organisation that primarily supports public institutions wishing to move online. The university plans to offer one of its education programmes fully online from 2019. We asked the participants their views on this mode, especially given the context of the students and the very different design and support model advocated by the new partner organisation. Two of the participants (FG2 A and FG3 D) described the news as “exciting,” and according to FG3 D, this is “because it is popular” and it “can include students abroad; PG [postgraduate] students do not need to write exams based on one or two books only; it’s more about research and deep learning.” However, FG2 A opined that “academic supporters ... must be more active in support.” However, another participant (FG2 B) added that “there is need for adequate training before the start so we can ensure students will be able to do 1, 2, 3... if they have a problem, they can still call.” In addition, ID 2 was of the opinion that “the call centre model of social engagement on a weekly basis for the first 3 months coupled with the retention team intervention for inactive or at-risk students, should result in improved retention and completion.”

The link between all the above and the administration members of staff was succinctly given by one of the participants (ID 1), who asserted that “Admin has not yet had any engagement with [the new partner].” According to her, “From the start it is necessary to involve and support admin in the change process.” She stressed:

The current UP system does not support the kind of DE online model advocated by [the new partner] with respect to processes like managing the academic calendar. Current systems are adequate from an admin perspective and while the move online should result in improved student support it will require changes to the PS [PeopleSoft management information] system. For instance, rules regarding progression, repeats, rollover etc. which have been clarified for current DE provision will need to be revisited for online provision. Staff will need training in new programme requirements (e.g., continuous registration) or new kinds of programmes (e.g., ACTs [Advanced Certificate in Teaching programmes]). There is need for formal professional development programmes for admin staff.

In response to our request for open comments by the participants, one of the participants (FG 1 A) lamented that “institutional strategy does not often refer to the role of support staff—but rather emphasises research and teaching.”

### *Implications of findings for institutions proposing to go into dual-mode provision*

Based on the above findings, we conclude that there is need for all stakeholders to recognise the dignity and contributions of others (an Ubuntu perspective) and also that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts (a systems perspective). Therefore, we highlight the following, which could also be regarded as recommendations to institutions proposing to go into dual-mode provision or to those who would want to improve on their practice, irrespective of their context.

### ***Matching administrative processes with academic provision***

We feel there is a need to systematically map the administrative processes that underpin academic provision and then identify what can stay the same and what needs to change to support a new mode of provision. For instance, according to some of the participants, one of the reasons for establishing a call centre by the provider involved in this study was to meet the large volume of enquiries. Research findings from the unit showed that there was a great improvement in this area after its establishment (Unit for Distance Education, 2014).

Though some of the processes could be capital-intensive, as in the case of the establishment of a call centre, the investment should be cost-effective eventually by contributing to improved retention and throughput. This is because distance education provision at the institution has a record of good quality—generally, low quality is a continual bone of contention plaguing this mode (Aluko, 2014). However, it is on record that dual-mode institutions often see distance education as a milk cow with management being reluctant to reinvest the money generated from this mode back into improvement of its quality (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2014).

### ***New system requirements, relevant training, and support***

With the above understanding, it is possible then to determine new systems requirements, staff training, and support needs. It is clear that staff members find the lack of harmonisation between systems very frustrating, especially if the process takes longer than expected. In addition, staff members would need relevant training to be able to function in various new capacities.

### ***Work experience, work ethics, and workload***

Staff members interviewed for this study brought to the fore the need for relevant basic experience, passion, and commitment on the job. Appropriate work experience, with a balance between focus and variety (Nicely, 2018), helps employees to fit into the job environment as they learn on the job and learn to trust and work with others (Zeffane, 2018). The commitment and work ethic demonstrated in their willingness to take work into private time is indicative of a high quality of self-organising staff. Attending to students with humanness, interconnectedness, and humanitarian goals are part of the core principles of Ubuntu, a communitarian perspective adopted for this study and distance education in general (Aluko, 2014; Peters, 2010; Tschaepe, 2013). As well, customer satisfaction goes a long way in determining the quality of rendered services (McFarlane, 2013).

### ***Distance education management as a link to administrative tasks***

Although it is a management issue, participants also hinted at the fact that institutions need to appropriately budget for academic provision in a new mode. Such endeavors should also be sustainable and maintain or even enhance quality. Although it is expected of institutions to properly manage their budget, the negative impact of this on, for instance, student support should be seriously weighed. For instance, keeping

only one or two staff members in a call centre means that there are longer wait times for students. This is frustrating for distance education students, who often struggle with loneliness. As well, not responding to market needs early enough could result in very low registration numbers, while marketing a wrong programme also produces the same effect. In addition, there is the need for institutions to take into consideration the issue of social justice, with reference to the clearly important role which ICTs have to play in higher education. This is more so true in societies where there is the prevalence of previously and continuously disadvantaged groups and when data costs and access remain high relative to incomes (Hülsmann, 2016).

### ***The need for dedicated qualifications for distance education***

One of the issues raised in this study is the need for training, support, and dedicated qualifications in the field of distance, and increasingly online distance, education administration (Burnette, 2015). The authors strongly believe that this could help recognise the important role played by distance education administrative staff as key role-players in a three-way team-based approach involving students, academics, and the coordination and technical support staff (Meltem & Hasan, 2016).

## **Conclusion**

The case study of the University of Pretoria suggests that administrative staff members are the backbone of successful distance education provision as indicated by one of the participants in this study. However, it is noted that very little is mentioned in the literature about their important and sensitive role. The impact of changing or additional modes of provision on administrative systems and staff was identified as a gap in the literature. Based on our experience and reflection, we suggest that the move into multimode provision is inevitable and that this requires agility on the part of both administrative staff and systems, which is often overlooked in planning and review processes. We believe there is need for formal training and qualifications for administrative staff involved in distance education provision as well as recognition for a new kind of staff member, one who combines both academic and administrative roles and competences.

This small-scale case study, which focused on distance education provision at a previously contact institution, seeks to make a small contribution to our understanding of the role of administration in supporting quality, sustainable distance provision. It is hoped that the study will provoke a much-needed conversation on this issue. A preconference workshop to explore this issue further with other institutions was held on 5 September 2018 during the Distance Education Association of Southern Africa and the National Association of Distance Education and Open Learning in South Africa conference on open learning. The workshop outcomes already form a part of an ongoing study.

## **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## Notes on contributors

**Tony John Mays** is the Manager of the Unit for Distance Education in the Faculty of Education at the University of Pretoria. He consults and publishes widely on issues related to open and distance learning, including open educational resources.

**Folake Ruth Aluko** is the Researcher of the Unit for Distance Education in the Faculty of Education at the University of Pretoria. She manages the quality of the institution's ODL programmes and publishes on related issues. Ruth facilitates training and workshops and is involved in the institutional evaluation of ODL programmes.

## References

- Aluko, F. R. (2014). From evaluation to reflection-on-action: Lessons learnt from the impact of a distance education programme. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 28, 1497–1512. Retrieved from <http://www.journals.ac.za/index.php/sajhe>
- Aluko, F. R. (2016). Understanding ODL completion rates through Ubuntu. In L. Moeketsi (Ed.), *Open distance learning (ODL) through the philosophy of Ubuntu* (pp. 133–146). New York, NY: Nova Publishers.
- Anderson, T. (2017, March). *Critical review of research and research methods*. Paper presented at the ICDE Doctoral Seminar, Athabasca University, Athabasca, Canada.
- Arko-Achemfor, A. (2017). Student support gaps in an open distance learning context. *Issues in Educational Research*, 27, 658–676. Retrieved from <http://www.iier.org.au/iier27/2017conts.html>
- Babbie, E. (2017). *The basics of social research* (7th ed.). Boston, MA: Cengage Learning.
- Bryman, A. (2001). *Social research methods*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Burnette, D. M. (2015). Negotiating the mine field: Strategies for effective online education administrative leadership in higher education institutions. *Quarterly Review of Distance Education*, 16, 13–25. Retrieved from <https://www.infoagepub.com/quarterly-review-of-distance-education.html>
- Caruso, M. A. (2004). *Examining the role of administrators in distance education (A paper presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements of ED7212—Administration and leadership of distance education programmes)*. Retrieved from <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.536.1677&rep=rep1&type=pdf>
- Daniel, J., & Uvalic-Trumbic, S. (2011, August 8–12). *The impact of new business models for higher education on student financing*. Paper presented to the Financing Higher Education in Developing Countries Think Tank, Las Vegas, NV. Retrieved from [http://dspace.col.org/bitstream/handle/11599/1304/2011\\_DanielUvalicTrumbic\\_ImpactNewBizModels\\_Transcript.pdf](http://dspace.col.org/bitstream/handle/11599/1304/2011_DanielUvalicTrumbic_ImpactNewBizModels_Transcript.pdf)
- Danner, H. (1995). Hermeneutics in educational discourse: Foundations. In P. Higgs (Ed.), *Metatheories in philosophy of education* (pp. 221–244). Isando: Heinemann Higher and Further Education.
- den Exter, K., Rowe, S., Boyd, W., & Lloyd, D. (2012). Using Web 2.0 technologies for collaborative learning in distance education: Case studies from an Australian university. *Future Internet*, 4, 216–237. doi:10.3390/fi4010216
- Department of Higher Education and Training. (2014, July 7). *Policy for the provision of distance education in South African universities in the context of an integrated post-school system* (Government Gazette, No. 37811). Pretoria: Government Printer.
- Dewey, J. (1929). My pedagogic creed. In D. J. Flinders & S. J. Thornton (Eds.), *The curriculum studies reader* (2nd ed.) Kindle edition. New York, NY: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Dewey, J. (n.d.). *The essential John Dewey collection*. Kindle edition.

- Gregory, M. S., & Lodge, J. M. (2015). Academic workload: The silent barrier to the implementation of technology-enhanced learning strategies in higher education. *Distance Education*, 36, 210–230. doi:10.1080/01587919.2015.1055056
- Haggerty, C. E. (2015). Supporting academic workloads in online learning. *Distance Education*, 36, 196–209. doi:10.1080/01587919.2015.1055057
- Higgs, P., & Smith, J. (2015). *Philosophy of education today: An introduction*. Cape Town: Juta.
- Holt, D., Palmer, S., Gosper, M., Sankey, M., & Allan, G. (2014). Framing and enhancing distributed leadership in the quality management of online learning environments in higher education. *Distance Education*, 35, 382–399. doi:10.1080/01587919.2015.955261
- Hookway, C. (2016, Summer). Pragmatism. In *Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy*. (2016 ed.) E. N. Zalta (Ed.), Retrieved from <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/pragmatism/>.
- Hülsmann, T. (2016). *The impact of ICT on the costs and economics of distance education: A review of the literature*. Vancouver: Commonwealth of Learning.
- Kinsella, E. A. (2006). Hermeneutics and critical hermeneutics: Exploring possibilities within the art of interpretation. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 7, 3. doi:10.17169/fqs-7.3.145
- Kupczynski, L., & Mundy, M.-A. (2015). Prevailing attitudes about the role of women in distance learning administration. *Journal of Distance Learning Administration*, 18(2). Retrieved from <https://www.westga.edu/~distance/ojdla/>
- Letseka, M. (Ed.). (2016). *Open distance learning (ODL) through the philosophy of Ubuntu*. New York, NY: Nova Science Publishers, Inc.
- Mantzavinos, C. (2016, Winter). Hermeneutics. In *Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy*. (2016 ed.) E. N. Zalta (Ed.), Retrieved from <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hermeneutics/>.
- Mays, T. (2017). *Utilising open educational resources in support of curriculum transformation at Africa Nazarene University: A participatory action research approach* (Doctoral dissertation). University of South Africa, Pretoria. Retrieved from <http://hdl.handle.net/10500/22619>
- Mays, T. J., Combrinck, M. H. A., & Aluko, F. R. (2017). Deconstructing dual-mode provision in a digital era. *Distance Education*, 39, 135–139. doi:10.1080/01587919.2018.1457943
- McFarlane, D. A. (2013). The strategic importance of customer value. *Atlantic Marketing Journal*, 2 (1), 62–74. Retrieved from <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/amj/>
- Meltem, K., & Hasan, A. (2016). Virtual leadership at distance education teams. *Turkish Online Journal of Distance Education*, 17(3), 136–156. Retrieved from <http://tojde.anadolu.edu.tr/>
- Minnaar, A. (2013). Challenges for successful planning of open and distance learning (ODL): A template analysis. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning*, 14 (3), 81. doi:10.19173/irrodl.v14i3.1387
- Moore, M. G., & Kearsley, G. (1996). *Distance education: A systems view*. Boston, MA: Wadsworth.
- Moore, M. G., & Kearsley, G. (2012). *Distance education: A systems view of online learning* (3rd ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, CENGAGE Learning.
- Ngubane-Mokiwa, S., & Letseka, M. (2016). Shift from open distance learning to open distance e-learning. In M. Letseka (Ed.), *Open distance learning (ODL) in South Africa* (pp. 129–142). New York, NY: Nova Science Publishers, Inc.
- Nicely, A. (2018). Type of work experience important for hotel managers' success: Focus versus variety. *Journal of Quality Assurance in Hospitality and Tourism*, 19(1), 83–90. doi:10.1080/1528008X.2017.1343167
- Ntshoe, I., Higgs, P., Wolhuter, C. C., & Higgs, L. G. (2010). Is quality assurance in higher education contextually relative? *South African Journal of Higher Education (SAJHE)*, 24(1), 111–131. Retrieved from <http://www.journals.ac.za/index.php/sajhe>
- Peters, O. (2010). Concepts and models of open and distance learning. In U. Bernath, D. Garz, A. Hanft, T. Hülsmann, B. Moschner, & O. Zawacki-Richter (Eds.), *Distance education in transition: Developments and issues* (5th ed., pp. 83–92). Oldenburg: BIS-Verlag. doi:10.1080/10.1.1.477.2748
- Roberts, J., Kigotho, M., & Stagg, A. (2018). Expanding horizons in open and distance learning. *Distance Education*, 39, 1–3. doi:10.1080/01587919.2018.1439367
- Tschaepe, M. (2013). A humanistic moral obligation and community. *Essays in the Philosophy of Humanism*, 21, 47–61. doi:10.1558/eph.v21i2.47

- Unit for Distance Education. (2014). *Administrative and managerial structures and processes: Self-evaluation report*. Pretoria: University of Pretoria.
- Vidal, C. (2012). *The beginning and the end: The meaning of life in a cosmological perspective*. Basel: Springer. doi:10.1007/978-3-319-05062-1\_5
- Vu, P., Meyer, R., & Cepero, J. (2016). Models of administration for online learning programmes in the U.S. higher education institutions. *Journal of Applied and Educational and Policy Research*, 2(1), 24–31. Retrieved from <https://journals.uncc.edu/jaepr/index>
- Welch, T., & Reed, Y. (Eds.). (2005). *Designing and delivering distance education: Quality criteria and case studies from South Africa*. Johannesburg: National Association for Distance Education and Open Learning in South Africa. Retrieved from <https://www.nadeosa.org.za/documents/Section1.pdf>
- Williams, M. L., Paprock, K., & Covington, B. (1999). *Distance learning: The essential guide*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Woldeyes, M. M. (2016). Breaking higher education's iron triangle through distance education: The Case of IGNOU in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. *International Journal of Education*, 8(3), 31–49. doi:10.5296/ije.v8i3.9771
- Zeffane, R. (2018). Do age, work experience and gender affect individuals' propensity to trust others? An exploratory study in the United Arab Emirates. *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, 38(3–4), 210–223. doi:10.1108/IJSSP-07-2017-0093