The implementation of open learning in the South African TVET college sector

By Engela Franken

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree in Magister Educationis in the Faculty of Education, University of Pretoria

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DECLARATION

I declare that the dissertation, which I hereby submit for the degree of Magister Educationis at the University of Pretoria, is my own work and has not previously been submitted by me for a degree at this or any other tertiary institution.

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed at determining the factors that significantly impact on the implementation rate of open learning in the South African TVET college sector. Despite government's visionary papers and open learning policy framework, TVET colleges in South Africa have been slow in following international trends. Pre-COVID19, only a handful of the 50 public TVET colleges had even ventured into the idea of multi-modal, or any teaching mode, other than the traditional classroom.

The methodological and analytical lens of the study is two-fold. The Critical Theory in Education (CTE) and the Stakeholder Theory that depicts the interests of the different stakeholder groups within the Higher Education band and their expectations towards the activities of TVET colleges.

Case study, a qualitative research design, was utilized in the study. Semi-structured interviews with top key decision makers in the Department of Higher Education and Training, as well as open learning champions on institutional level, were used as data collection tools. The interview data was analysed using descriptive and content analysis, and themes were obtained. The findings are brought into terms with the theoretical framework and potential catalysts are suggested.

KEY WORDS:

Online learning, Open Learning, Distance Learning, TVET colleges, Stakeholder Theory

LANGUAGE EDITOR'S DISCLAIMER

I do hereby confirm that I have proof-read the dissertation entitled:

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The implementation of online and open learning could potentially increase enrolment and throughput rates of students at Technical & Vocational Education & Training (TVET) colleges, specifically in the Report 191 'Nated' (N1-N6) programmes. There are, however, certain factors that hinder colleges in South Africa from fully implementing and embracing this technology and methodology.

Online learning is one of the most popular forms of distance education. In essence, online learning entails the delivery and submission of content or learning material, including online assessments, through an online i.e. internet or cloud-based platform or learning management system (LMS). A vast number of these platforms are available and are globally used by higher education institutions. Some of the most popular ones used in South Africa are Blackboard, Moodle, Canvas and Sakai. More recently other online platforms that are not typically an LMS e.g. Google Classrooms, have also started gaining in popularity.

In the White Paper for Post-School Education and Training: Building an Expanded, Effective and Integrated Post-School System, released by the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) in 2013, attention is paid to open learning as a means of providing training to the high demand of post-school educational needs (DHET, 2013). In 2017, the Open Learning directorate of DHET issued the Draft Open Learning Policy Framework for the Provision of Open Learning and Distance Education in South Africa Post-school Education and Training (DHET, 2017a). This document suggests that South Africa follows international trends by "looking to distance education, and specifically online learning, as an ultimate cost-effective means to cross-subsidise campus-based programmes" (DHET, 2017a, p. 9). It furthermore states that "the rapid pace of development in ICT is driving innovation in education and training, opening up new ways to make learning more flexible, accessible and in many cases, more effective and more satisfying" (DHET, 2017a, p. 9).

Despite the visionary open learning framework, and in contrast to universities that are almost using an LMS a hundred percent for the purpose of online content delivery, TVET colleges in South Africa have been very slow in following the example of their higher education counterparts. Pre-COVID19, only a handful of the 50 public colleges had even ventured into the idea of any teaching mode other than the traditional classroom.

Known LMS platforms used by some of the TVET colleges are Blackboard, Moodle, Canvas, Schoology and Sakai. Although few TVET colleges invested in the establishment of an eLearning or Open Learning unit and development of an online learning platform, little progress has been made due to policy driven limitations, such as the assessment policy that requires all assessments to be conducted under controlled circumstances.

Pre-COVID-19, the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) - had made small steps in the right direction. Two pilot projects had been undertaken; one from the Curriculum directorate i.e. Lecturer Support System (LSS) and one from the Open Learning directorate i.e. National Open Learning System (NOLS).

As indicated by its name, the LSS aims at the professional development and academic support of lecturers. It consists of a content management system; fairly slow progress has been made however, in feeding the platform with training material, of which the majority is in the form of worksheets and lengthy videos. College participation has been forced down through official circulars from the Deputy Director General's office, instructing compulsory registration of lecturers, compulsory workshops for facilitators and compulsory training sessions for subject experts. At this point in time – June 2020 – it seems to have lost steam since communication and activity around the project has come to a standstill.

The second project, NOLS, is aimed at students' academic support. Its development had first been promised in the 'The Draft Open Learning Policy Framework' (DHET, 2017a). As part of the roll-out plan for NOLS, a consultant was contracted in 2018 to conduct a series of workshops for college employees on open learning. Colleges were invited to participate freely. The aim was firstly to promote

the concept of open learning amongst TVET and Community Education & Training (CET) colleges nationwide, and secondly to collect information, suggestions and proposals from colleagues at ground level, in order to draw a clear picture and report a true reflection of what in actual fact transpire at colleges. This information would then be analyzed and would assist in steering the development in terms of prioritization and implementation processes. In a revised business plan for NOLS (Van Wyk, 2019) the implementation period of the project is indicated as 1 April 2014 – 31 March 2021 "as per the no-cost extension requested in August 2018" (Van Wyk, 2019, p. 1). According to the consultant's website, they are '*currently'* managing the development of curriculum content and open learning materials for NOLS (Butcher, 2020).

1.2 PROBLEM STATEMENT

Despite the DHET's release of visionary documents such as the White Paper and the Draft Open Learning Framework, online and open learning has not gained much ground in South African TVET colleges.

Pre-COVID-19, the majority of colleges had not even started thinking about – let alone plan for – the implementation of online and open learning. In terms of technology driven teaching and learning methodologies and multi-modal delivery, these higher education institutions are far behind international trends.

1.3 RATIONALE

This study aims to determine what the hindering factors are that stand in the way of open learning, and what needs to be done in order to clear the way for large scale implementation of open learning in the South African TVET college sector.

1.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1.4.1 Primary research question:

What are the factors that significantly impact the implementation rate of online and open learning in the South African TVET college sector?

1.4.2 Secondary research questions:

- What factors influence colleges' understanding and perception of open learning?
- How can colleges be motivated to explore open learning opportunities?
- Why is it important that colleges embrace open learning?
- What are the barriers standing in TVET colleges' way with regards to the implementation of open and online learning systems?
- How do national and institutional policies and practices inhibit or encourage the possibilities for online open learning?

1.5 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The aim of this study is to determine the factors that play a significant role in the implementation rate of open learning in the TVET college sector of South Africa.

The study seeks to fulfil the following objectives:

- Identify factors that impact negatively or positively on open learning in colleges.
- Suggest possible interventions to catalyze the slow progress of open learning in colleges.

1.6 CONCLUSION

It has been established that this research project has investigated the following primary question: "What are the factors that significantly impact on the implementation rate of online and open learning in the South African TVET college sector?" Through this study the researcher attempted to determine why open and online learning in TVET colleges isn't the rule but rather the exception, and suggests an intervention strategy to improve it.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Working through the wealth of literature on factors influencing the implementation of all kinds of ICT and different forms of electronic learning in secondary or higher education in almost every country that has an education system, it became clear that South Africa is no exception on this topic. I could not agree more with Kozma (2008)'s statement – referring to Singapore and Finland's implementation of ICT policies: "A country may have made the commitment to move towards knowledge creation, and policy makers may have articulated a vision of an educational system in which students, teachers, and citizens generally would be engaged in continuous, lifelong learning and in the creation and sharing of new ideas. Yet key components of the system may fall far short of this vision" (Kozma, 2008, p. 13). The fact that reality is often far from what policy makers envisage, is also underlined by Voogt and Roblin (2012) referring to schools in the EU member states and OECD countries, saying "… but intentions and practice seemed still far apart, indicating lack of vertical consistency" (Voogt & Roblin, 2012, p. 299). This is unfortunately also the case with open learning in South African TVET colleges as exposed by this study.

2.2 LITERATURE REVIEW

One of the most significant pieces of literature dealing with the research question at hand, is the comment written by Universities South Africa (USAF, 2017) in reaction to the invitation from DHET for comments on the Draft Open Learning Policy Framework (DHET, 2017a). The authors seek clarity on a number of issues expressing particular concern regarding TVET colleges:

- How will the envisaged National Open Learning System (NOLS) integrate and align with current curricula at TVET colleges (USAF, 2017) - especially given the large practical component?

- Referring to TVET colleges as 'key priority training areas', should technological infrastructure and networks not be prioritised above an attempt to provide digital resources to all students (USAF, 2017)?

- Data is expensive in South Africa, thus interventions relying heavily on data could jeopardise the very system which is meant to ease accessibility to rural and economically disabled communities. It concludes that “dependence on data will require capital outlays in infrastructure and a concomitant investment in human resources” (USAF, 2017, p. 2) – the luxury of which the majority of TVET colleges do not have.

Being zoomed in on the South African National Open Distance Learning Policy for TVET colleges and its (lack of) implementation, a couple of components come to the fore. These components can roughly be categorized in two interest areas i.e. Open Distance Learning (ODL) and National Educational Policies. Literature has been reviewed on (1) what it entails (2) frameworks for its evaluation and analysis, and (3) factors that determine success or failure in both these areas. The table presents a schematic layout of the six aspects magnified in the following discussion.

TABLE 1: LITERATURE CATEGORIES

	OPEN DISTANCE LEARNING	NATIONAL EDUCATIONAL POLICIES
WHAT IT ENTAILS	A	B
FRAMEWORKS FOR EVALUATION & ANALYSIS	C	D
FACTORS THAT DETERMINE SUCCESS OR FAILURE	E	F

A. Open Distance Learning is a widely accepted content delivery mode in higher education institutions across the globe, however DHET sub-ordinated ODL – together with distance education, e-learning, online learning and blended learning

fall under the umbrella-term Open Learning (DHET, 2017b). It defines Open Learning as "… an approach which combines the principles of learner-centeredness, lifelong learning, flexibility of learning provision, the removal of barriers to access learning, the recognition for credit of prior learning experience, the provision of learner support, the construction of learning in programmes the expectation that learners can succeed, and the maintenance of rigorous quality assurance over the design of learning materials and support system" (DHET, 2017b, p. 5).

The University of South Africa (UNISA)'s ODL policy corresponds with this definition, describing Open Learning as "… an approach to learning that gives students flexibility and choice over what, when, where, at what pace and how they learn. Open learning is all encompassing and includes distance education, resource-based learning, correspondence learning, flexi-study and self-paced study" (UNISA, 2008, p. 2).

B. To best understand what is defined by national educational policies, one should look at what distinguishes them from other public policies e.g. health policies. What all national policies have in common is that they support reform and development. Successful educational policies will significantly increase the impact of the education system on the economy and society (Kozma, 2008).

C. As a result of reviewing and analysing 31 articles, Basak, Wotto, and Bélanger (2016) designed a conceptual framework on eight groups of critical success factors, with many sub-factors, for the effective implementation of e-learning in higher education. These factors are ethical, technological, institutional, evaluation, pedagogical, managerial, resource and social interaction factors. "The contextual variety of the growing learning demands require E-learning implementation in these emerging missions of higher education in the 21st century context of life long and life large learning" (Basak et al., 2016, p. 2413).

D. In a comparative study to determine the representation of 21st century competencies in school curricula, Voogt and Roblin (2012) analysed eight frameworks and three international studies providing "an overview of the various initiatives adopted in the educational policies, curriculum regulations, and

educational practices of different countries around the world to support the implementation of 21st century competences" (Voogt & Roblin, 2012, p. 305).

Hong Kong has invested largely in their education system, for which certain well-implemented policies laid the foundation to build a strong efficient workforce. Cheong Cheng and Ming Cheung (1995) argue that social scientific perspectives focus mainly on macro level analysis and are not sufficient to evaluate education specific characteristics, so they present 'The four frames' - a specified framework for the analysis of the Hong Kong educational policies. They believe that "it serves to assist policy makers ... to analyse ... the principles underlying policy objective setting, the policy formulation process, the implementation process, the gaps between implementation and planning, and the policy effects" (Cheong Cheng & Ming Cheung, 1995, p. 20) and they express the hope that it will be utilised internationally.

Critical thinking, creativity, problem solving, collaboration, communication and lifelong learning are to name but a few of the skills that 21st century educational systems need to equip students with in order to prepare them to actively participate in, and optimally benefit from growing the economy (Kozma, 2008). The intent of the white paper is "to help national policy makers and educational thought leaders address these global challenges and connect technology and education reform to sustained, equitable economic growth" (Kozma, 2008, p. 4).

In his paper "Towards a framework of education policy analysis", Jie (2016) presents 'The education policy framework' which he developed and applied to the formulation and implementation of the education policy in Southeast Asia, in particular case-studying the education policy landscape in Singapore. He adopts the education policy categories of Tobin, Lietz, Nugroho, Vivekanandan, and Nyamkhuu (2015) i.e. system-level policies, resource allocation policies and teaching & learning policies (Jie, 2016). The paper analyses certain features of the Asian Ministry of Education in implementing policy; it surveys recent education reforms and demonstrates how the education policy framework can be used to analyse proposed policy reforms before they are implemented (Jie, 2016).

Like Kozma (2008), Jie (2016) also rate social and soft skills like critical thinking, creativity and interpersonal skills, as success factors in the life, work and citizenship

of the 21st century student and agree that policy aligned curricula need to shape young citizens for the "constantly evolving technological and social context [where] learning would be less about content, and more about learning how to learn" (Jie, 2016).

According to Meneses, Fàbregues, Jacovkis, and Rodríguez-Gómez (2014) the introduction of ICT policies in the Spanish education system "offers a messy example" (Meneses et al., 2014, p. 1). This is due to the conflict of beliefs in the regional policies of several sovereign communities. In their comparative study, Meneses et al. (2014) analysed two components - strategic rationales and action plans – and found an uneven emphasis on ICT infrastructure on one side, and the customised implementation plans for ICT in an educational setting, on the other (Meneses et al., 2014).

The Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) is doing important work in terms of gathering statistics and doing research on social, economic and environmental issues in countries around the globe (OECD, 2008). "The organisation provides a setting where governments can compare policy experiences, seek answers to common problems, identify good practice and work to co-ordinate domestic and international policies" (OECD, 2008, p. 3). Although South Africa is not one of the 30 members of OECD, a study "Reviews of National Policies for Education in South Africa" has been conducted in collaboration with the Wits Education Policy Unit (EPU) and assistance of the Department of Education. In her preface, Naledi Pandor – Minister of Education at the time – says the report provides "a basis for the ongoing evaluation and monitoring of the degree to which policies have been successful in achieving the intentions of government in a democratic South Africa" (OECD, 2008, p. 17).

In a comparative quantitative study on key elements of South African education policy for the two segments of provision – public and private, Akoojee and McGrath (2007) mention a number of research and policy issues flowing from the analysed data. In their discussion the authors alert public providers that "it is possible that some of the demand for private provision relates to the slowness of curriculum and programme change" (Akoojee & McGrath, 2007, p. 219). Public providers are encouraged to change policies and practices and "reclaim some ground from the

private segment" (Akoojee & McGrath, 2007, p. 219). If these recommendations were valid more than a decade ago and still are, today's researchers have a huge task to make themselves heard.

E. When governing bodies and academic boards sit for strategic planning that involves open and distance learning on a national level, it is surely not a walk in the park, so to speak. A comprehensive study of global trends and best practices would precede the process, not to mention the determining parameters set by budget or funding norms. A very interesting paper that offers such informed foundation for strategic planning, is that of Howell, Williams, and Lindsay (2003). Apart from the prediction of demographic and economic trends, other influential issues are rapid technological advancement, higher education audiences' preferences, changing student profiles, adapting campus cultures and distance learning leaders' beliefs. Although the mere identification of these trends doesn't offer solutions to challenges, it will be beneficial to decision makers to consider, as it affects goals and outcomes (Howell et al., 2003).

In Brigham (1992)'s contribution to the research on factors affecting the development of distance learning courses, interviews with content developers resulted in six contributing factors which satisfied i.e. course definition, faculty perception of student abilities, the selection of textbooks, the extent of faculty conflict and flexibility, and faculty working relationships. In summary, smoothness, timeliness and satisfaction with the end-product were identified as major success factors (Brigham, 1992).

Enhanced professionalism in the insurance industry – that is the goal of the College of Insurance in Kenya (Nyaga, 2013). The institution was established by insurance industry stakeholders to train their employees' technical skills through, amongst others, distance education. As part of their striving to improve employees' results a study was undertaken to investigate factors that negatively or positively influenced the implementation of distance education at the college. Similarly to Brigham's (1992) study, it was established that study materials, technology, flexibility and financial cost, were the primary influencing factors in the successful implementation of distance education at the College of Insurance (Nyaga, 2013).

From Sub Saharan African countries, researchers from Kenya have contributed manifold to available literature on ODL implementation. Investigating factors influencing ODL delivery in public universities in Kenya, Muchanji (2017) reports on a case study of the University of Nairobi that factors having the most significant influence on ODL program delivery, are factors related to infrastructure, instructor characteristics, learning environment and service support (Muchanji, 2017). Lack of ICT infrastructure seems to feature high on the list of ODL inhibiting factors at many an institution in Kenya. According to Richard (2014) that is also the case at the majority of secondary schools. The unavailability of computer labs or limited number of computers, poor power supply, poor internet connectivity and some schools not even having a school e-mail address, are some of the findings of Richard's (2014) study. ICT projects are seen as an unnecessary extra constraint to the school budget (Richard, 2014). This brings to mind the perceived usefulness embedded in the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and reiterates the popularity of TAM as a theoretical framework for many ICT research studies across the globe (Islam, Azad, Mäntymäki, & Islam, 2014).

Another contribution from Kenya is Kibata's (2013) study, amongst six TVET institutions, on the factors that prevent the use of flexible and blended approaches in the teaching and learning practice of TVET colleges. The main factors that were revealed preventing the use of flexible and blended approaches in Kenyan TVET institutions, are lack of computer literacy, poor internet connectivity, lack of ICT policy framework, lack of enough tutors, and inadequate facilities. The study recommend that government take responsibility for developing a policy framework and equipping the institutions with the necessary facilities.

As one would expect, there is a strong relation between developing countries and poor ICT infrastructure. Through my journey of literature review, it became almost predictable that the utilisation of TAM would go hand in hand with research studies from the southern part of Africa. Other examples are found in the work of Salem and Salem (2015) investigating factors that influence the successful implementation – despite poor infrastructure - of a learning management system (LMS) among undergraduate students in Limkokwing, at the University of Creative Technology in Malaysia. The study examined the relationship between students' outcomes

(perceived usefulness), online learning quality and user satisfaction (Salem & Salem, 2015).

True to the pattern, poor infrastructure is also indicated as one of the results in a study undertaken by the University of Venda, one of the rural based universities in South Africa (Patel, Kadyamatimba, & Madzvamuse, 2017). The researchers investigated the factors influencing the implementation of e-learning after introducing the LMS, Blackboard, at the university. They focused on what implications the introduction of the LMS impeded on students as well as lecturers. Contributing factors of its failure were found to be lack of training, poor program awareness and poor infrastructure. Patel et al. (2017) recommend the reshaping of learner and lecturer perceptions for the project to succeed.

Following suit Raihan, Lock, and Han (2013) questions Bangladesh TVET lecturers' perceptions and attitudes towards different delivery modes such as web-based electronic learning and a blended learning approach. From 187 lecturers interviewed, they found a general positivism about moving from straight contact teaching to a hybrid solution, yet the knowledge and skill aspect calls for action, hence their recommendation for lecturers' professional development as departure point for the roll-out of a blended-teaching-learning approach (Raihan et al., 2013).

From the northern hemisphere – Greece - Valsamidis, Kazanidis, Aggelidis, Kontogiannis, and Karakos (2016) reports on another case of LMS implementation, this time – successful. "The critical success factors for the acceptance and use of an LMS" (Valsamidis et al., 2016) had two main objectives: to clarify and categorize the critical success factors (CSF) of education with the use of an LMS from the perspective of students, and secondly, "to investigate the relationships among these factors, suggesting a new causal model" (Valsamidis et al., 2016, p. 1). Their study revealed five factors of significance (in descending order): students' characteristics, intention of use, technology, instructors' characteristics and technical support.

The Commonwealth of Learning (COL) and UNESCO combined efforts to publish a comprehensive report on a series of case studies performed by several leading experts from around the globe (Latchem, 2017). The work showcases how ICT and novel forms of open, flexible and blended learning approaches can be used to

transform TVET institutions. Emphasis is placed on the potential that ICT has on improving access to learning, foster innovation, increase efficiency, make teaching and learning more relevant, and prepare individuals to become lifelong learners.

F. As part of her PhD studies at the University of Pretoria, Sandra Sooklal (2004) investigated "The Structural and Cultural Constraints on Policy Implementation [in] Further Education and Training (FET) Colleges in South Africa". Some of the structural factors that were found to constrain policy implementation, are advocacy, resource, support, capacity, leadership, planning and communication. On the list of cultural constraints are assumptions, beliefs, practices, understanding and values. The study concludes that the restructuring and merging of the previously called Technical Colleges to FET colleges, "resulted in a fragmented, rather than a coordinated, FET system" (Sooklal, 2004, p. iii).

2.3 DEFINITION OF TERMS

a) **COVID-19** is the name given by the World Health Organization (WHO) on 11 February 2020 for the disease caused by the novel coronavirus SARS-CoV-2.
b) **Community Education & Training (CET)** is a programme that provides adult learners the opportunity to develop basic literacy skills such as problem solving, writing and reading. It serves in most cases to replace the previously named Adult Basic Education Training (ABET) program.
c) **Content management system (CMS)** is a software application that is used to manage the creation and modification of digital content.
d) **Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET)** is the South African government department that oversees universities, colleges and other post-school institutions.
e) **Further Education and Training (FET)** refers to the secondary band of basic education, following the intermediate phase. This is typically grades 10-12 in South African schools.
f) **Information Communication Technology (ICT)** is defined as a "diverse set of technological tools and resources used to communicate,

and to create, disseminate, store, and manage information" (Vijayalakshmi, 2016, p. 6).

g) **Learning Management System (LMS)** is "a software application or web-based technology used to plan, implement and assess a specific learning process" (Rouse, 2019, p. 4)

h) **Lecturer Support System (LSS)** is an LMS structured initiative of DHET with the purpose of rendering subject and teaching related support to TVET college lecturers.

i) **National Certificate Vocational (NCV)** levels 2, 3, 4, is a three-year program offered at TVET colleges. The levels correspond with and refer to the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) levels 2, 3, 4.

j) **National Open Learning System (NOLS)** is an LMS structured initiative of DHET with the intention of offering supportive digital, multimedia learning materials to students.

k) **Post School Education and Training (PSET)** includes universities and colleges that have matric as a minimum requirement.

l) **Report 191** refers to the previously called Nated (N1-N6) courses.

m) **Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET)** refers to colleges residing in the post-school band, focusing on skilling youth for the workplace rather than issuing academic qualifications as in universities.

2.4 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The methodological and analytical lens of the study is two-fold: the Critical Theory in Education (CTE) defined by Dell'Angelo, Seaton, and Smith (2014) and the Stakeholder Theory, initially articulated by Freeman (1984) in terms of the corporate environment and adopted by Higher Education Institution (HEI) researchers, Labanauskis and Ginevičius (2017) focussing on the interests of the different stakeholder groups within the Higher Education band and their expectations towards the activities of the HEI.

As Dell'Angelo et al. (2014) explains, "the goal of critical theory is to identify factors that limit human freedom and then to carry out a plan of action to overcome such

factors" (Dell'Angelo et al., 2014, p. 2). Similarly this study aims to identify factors that limit online open learning and then to make recommendations on a plan of action to overcome it. Since Critical Theory demands a well-balanced act between emic and etic perspectives (Dell'Angelo et al., 2014) a qualitative approach has been followed, whereby the power agents in charge of policy making as well as a few pioneers of online and open learning at colleges have been interviewed. Reporting on the analysis of findings serves as "critique of practice [which] has the potential to be the antidote for the problem of reproducing the very structures that are oppressive" (Dell'Angelo et al., 2014, p. 3). The appropriate application of critical theory in the educational technology field is confirmed by Friesen (2008) stating "Critical theory designates a philosophy and a research methodology that focuses on the interrelated issues of technology, politics and social change" (Friesen, 2008, p. 1). Mapping this statement to the research study at hand, online open learning is both a technology issue and depiction of social change in the sense that college students of the 21st century demand and deserve a variety and choice of content delivery modes. It is therefore imminent that all relevant policies which dictate institutional practises be critiqued, reviewed and brought into alignment with governmental vision statements.

The relevance of the stakeholder theory for research studies in the Higher Education sector is validated by Labanauskis and Ginevičius (2017) saying that HEIs should maintain their competitive edge through exceptional attributes that will help attract more students and reduce negative external impact (Labanauskis & Ginevičius, 2017). "Taking a quality management system as an instrument or driver for a progressive HEI strategy, it is obvious that the essence is hidden within the approach of the HEI towards the stakeholders" (Labanauskis & Ginevičius, 2017, p. 64). This study aims to identify those factors that have a negative impact on the attraction of more students, causing - even forcing - public TVET colleges to compromise their competitive edge amongst competitors - private colleges and universities.

Jongbloed, Enders, and Salerno (2008) agree that "the stakeholder approach to management (Freeman, 1984) may be a useful tool to assist organizational actors in dealing with their environments" (Jongbloed et al., 2008, p. 308). In the case of TVET colleges it goes without saying that governmental policy makers form part of

the organizational actors, and dealing with their [ever changing] environments indicate a continuous review of leverages and limitations set by policies, to adapt to the changing needs and learning styles of students. Jongbloed et al. (2008) conclude that "in today's network society, providers of higher education and lifelong learning will have to be in constant dialogue with their many communities/stakeholders, including government agencies, students, business, research sponsors, communities and regional authorities. The linking up with external stakeholders … [should be] strengthened further by state policies aimed at de-regulation and marketization" (Jongbloed et al., 2008, p. 321).

The stakeholder concept has become very popular among managers, media and academics (Fontaine, Haarman, & Schmid, 2006). From all the different perspectives and definitions of stakeholders, academics prefer the one of Freeman (1984) defining stakeholders as "any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization objectives" (Fontaine et al., 2006, p. 6). Another major contribution to the stakeholder theory comes from Mitchell, Agle, and Wood (1997). They propose a model to logically explain relationships between managers and stakeholders. They defined three criteria for organizing hierarchy stakeholders of a firm/institution: "the stakeholders' power to influence the firm, the legitimacy of the stakeholders' relationship with the firm and the urgency of the stakeholders' claim of the firm" (Mitchell et al., 1997, p. 21). Following is a stakeholder typology (Figure 1) as depicted by (Mitchell et al., 1997).

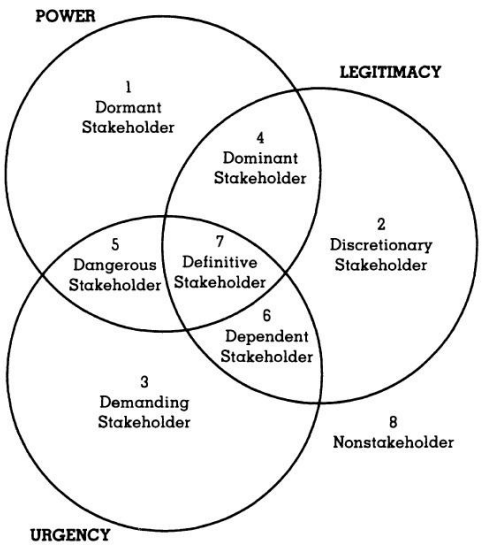

FIGURE 1: THE STAKEHOLDER TYPOLOGY (Mitchell et al., 1997)

Through the research process of this study, it became clear that TVET policy makers belong to the power circle, while TVET students in need of open learning belong to the urgency circle. The importance of a fine-tuned give-and-take relationship amongst these stakeholders, is discussed in the findings section.

2.5 CONCLUSION

A fair range of literature on the concept of open learning has been reviewed, as well as factors impacting on the implementation thereof. The researcher believes that the blame-game between colleges and DHET might come to an end once college management realise that they are responsible for their own destiny and start implementing open learning principles in existing teaching and learning practices to provide students a significantly richer experience. Nevertheless, it cannot be argued that engaging in open learning practices, requiring specialised resources, extended preparation time and dedicated commitment are essential.

CHAPTER 3: RESEACH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

3.1 INTRODUCTION

The study follows a qualitative approach to explore which factors contribute to the seeming fatigue around the implementation of open learning in TVET colleges. In this chapter the paradigms and methodologies applicable to this form of inquiry are being discussed, and it closes with a brief look at some ethical considerations to be kept in mind.

3.2 PARADIGMATIC PERSPECTIVES

3.2.1 Ontology

Ontology – or reality - in a philosophical context, is in its essence the study of what exists, what is being real or what is real. In a non-philosophical context it is the description of what exists specifically within a determined field e.g. every part – and its relationships to each other - that exists within a specific information system (Löfgren, 2013).

In this study the reality is open learning implementation – or rather, the lack thereof - in the TVET sector. The related parts under the magnifier are adjacent policies from the power agents, as well as contradictory perceptions and poorly communicated expectations from all stakeholders.

3.2.2 Epistemological paradigm

There are mainly two ways of knowing what the reality in a specific field is. The researcher could either conduct a quantitative study in an attempt to measure a single reality i.e. positivism, or the researcher believes there is no single truth hence she conducted a qualitative study in which multiple perceptions have been interpreted to construct the truth i.e. constructivism.

Since this study is attempting to analyse, interpret and understand the perceptions, interpretations, expectations and frustrations of key role players and stakeholders – both from the governing body side as well as institutionally – with regards to a thwarted open learning industry, it follows

a constructivist approach. The aim is to encourage participants to use real-world problem-solving to reflect on how their pre-existing perceptions can change and new knowledge can be reconciled with old beliefs (EdOnline, 2004). As for the chosen methodology, “Interpretivism typically relies upon both the researcher and the human subject as the instruments to measure some phenomena” (Cloud, 2016, p. 3). Thanks to interpretivism, qualitative research areas such as the analysis of factors impacting negatively on open learning practices in TVET colleges, can be studied in a great level of depth and can usually be associated with a high level of validity (Dudovskiy, 2018).

3.2.3 Methodological paradigm

In acquiring knowledge, researchers follow either quantitative or qualitative methods or a mix of the two. For the purpose of this study I focussed on qualitative research. In his book “First Steps in Research” Maree (2016, p. 53) quotes Polkinghorne (1989) in saying that qualitative research “relies on linguistic (words) rather than numerical data and employs meaning-based rather than statistical forms of data-analysis”. The main aim and reason why I chose a qualitative approach for this study is to produce in-depth information in my quest to understand the research question under the magnifier. Perspectives of the researcher plays as much a role as those of the participants. As Queirós, Faria, and Almeida (2017) says it so well: “In qualitative research, the researcher is both the subject and the object of his research”. Why would this method be best for this particular study? First the population under investigation is small - and secondly, it is all about people’s attitudes, feelings and perceptions. In this regard Maree (2016) points out that qualitative researchers are able to examine how humans arrange themselves and their settings and how they make sense of their surroundings.

3.3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.3.1 Research Design

3.3.1.1 Types

There are a number of known research design types e.g. experiment, action research, case study, historical study, narrative, ethnography, discourse analysis, etcetera. For its purpose and the setting in which this study has been conducted, the researcher believes that a case study is the most suitable. Rouse (2015, p. 1) explains it in simple terms: “A case study, is a report of an organization's implementation of something, such as a practice, a product, a system or a service. It can be thought of as a real-world test of how the implementation works, and how well it works.” This definition describes exactly why a case study is the perfect design for this study. The DHET drafted and issued several documents e.g. a white paper and policy framework, stipulating their vision and expectation of the implementation of open learning in TVET colleges. My aim is to find out what the actual status of implementation is, and what powers work against it.

3.3.1.2 Purpose of inquiry

Maree (2016) distinguishes between three types of qualitative research designs depending on the purpose of the inquiry: exploratory, descriptive - or explanatory - and philosophically/theoretically grounded. Descriptive studies try to find answers to “what” questions. Theoretically grounded studies “is based on scientific methods of deductive reasoning as a way of verifying or refuting theory” (Maree, 2016, p. 56). The third type, and the one which has been applied here, is the exploratory study. It aims to identify key issues and gain greater understanding of a particular phenomenon. In this study the phenomenon being explored is the research topic “The implementation of open learning in the South African TVET college sector”. Observation by the researcher over the past ten years divulged defective implementation of open learning in this sector. In order to explore possible factors impacting negatively on the situation, semi-structured interviews have been conducted with relevant senior DHET officials who indicated a willingness to participate. Furthermore open/e-learning pioneers at three innovative colleges, have been interviewed to deepen the understanding of hidden and/or human factors involved. Qualitative information has been obtained which has been analysed to draw appropriate conclusions.

3.3.2 Sampling

One of the most popular sampling methods in qualitative studies is convenience sampling, "where members of the target population that meet certain practical criteria, such as easy accessibility, geographical proximity, availability at a given time, or the willingness to participate are included for the purpose of the study" (Etikan, 2016, p. 2). However, convenient as it may be to self-select from my colleagues at the institution where I am working, it holds the danger of subjectivity and selection bias that could cloud a researcher's perspective. As Etikan (2016, p. 2) puts it: "What makes convenience samples so unpredictable is their vulnerability to severe hidden biases."

Another popular method is purposive sampling. In purposive sampling sample-members are chosen with a particular purpose - the purpose is the representation of a particular key criteria. As Maree (2016, p. 85) notes: "A key aspect of purposive sampling lies with the criteria used as a basis for sampling." So purposive sampling is exactly what the name implies and that is then also why it is used in this study. In fact, no other sampling method would be appropriate because members are specifically chosen to be part of the sample – they must comply with the criteria – for which, in this case, there are two legs:

- The first leg is that of four key role players in the policy formulation process. These power agents reside in the top structure of DHET, from where the governing and steering of colleges takes place. The positions of these participants are omitted for confidentiality purposes.
- The second leg represents five institutional managers and open learning pioneers from three colleges – those who are expected to make it happen on ground level. The three colleges have been selected to represent three different provinces.

The potential benefits of purposive sampling as listed by Curtis, Gesler, Smith, and Washburn (2000) are:

- generating rich information on the phenomena being studied.
- considering ethical preconditions e.g. vulnerability.
- enhancing the transferability of the findings.
- producing credible explanations.
- being feasible in terms of money and time.
- being strategized to be relevant to the conceptual framework.

3.3.3 Data collection strategies

From what I gathered from Maree (2016) the semi-structured interview would be most suitable for this particular study, since it is based on a series of inquiries which build up to the interview where deeper exploration and clarification then takes place. Maree (2016) warns that the researcher should be cautious not to get side-tracked by irrelevant issues, but always keep to the focus of the interview. Should the participant veer away from the topic the researcher should apply some probing strategies to ensure she obtains maximal data. 'Who", "where" and "what" questions are considered detail-oriented probing, whereas "tell me more about" aims at some elaboration from the participant. Clarification probes are useful to check that what has been said, has been understood correctly.

For the purpose of data analysis it is very important that the interview be recorded digitally and then be transcribed i.e. putting the digital recording in written format. As Kamprath (2015) puts it in simple terms, reading transcriptions is much faster than listening to all of the interviews. E.g. when you need to search back in your data, although the initial work is time consuming, in the end it is much faster and better for intensive working.

Further documentation that comes in very handy is field notes. "When observing a culture, setting, or social situation, field notes are created by the researcher to remember and record the behaviors, activities, events and other features of the setting being observed" (Cohen, 2006, p. 1). In other words it entails the researcher taking

notes of the facial expressions or body language or home setting of a participant. It is meant to give meaning and understanding of the socio-cultural situation of the phenomenon being studied, over and above what is being recorded in the question-answer session. This helps the researcher to see the phenomenon in the right context when analysing the data.

There are 50 public TVET colleges in South Africa forming part of the post-school education and training (PSET) governed by the DHET. In order to identify the factors that delay the implementation of online open learning in colleges, a purposeful approach with purposive sampling is needed for collecting data through interviews with four key role players - policy makers - at DHET, as well as five eLearning/Open Learning pioneers from three colleges. This contributes to telling the story from both power- and legitimacy circles of stakeholders, complementing each other.

3.3.4 Data analysis

After interviews have been conducted, how did the researcher make sense of all the data she gathered? There is an excellent range of software programmes to help researchers through the analysis process. For this study the computer application MS Excel was used for spreading and comparing data and drawing conclusions.

3.3.5 Methodological norms (Trustworthiness)

It is understandable that there is often so much doubt about the trustworthiness of qualitative studies since it is by its nature dependant on the judgement of the researcher; an individual whose judgement is relative to his/her own beliefs, experience and perceptions (Moser & Korsjens, 2018). Whereas quantitative analysis follows formulae and rules, qualitative analysis depends heavily on the conceptual capabilities, insights and integrity of the researcher and analyst. “Qualitative analysis is driven by the capacity for astute pattern recognition from beginning to end” (Moser & Korsjens, 2018, p. 22). All of these - credibility, transferability, dependability

and confirmability – forms part of the trustworthiness of a qualitative analysis (Moser & Korsjens, 2018).

Credibility deals with questions such as: “How congruent are the findings with reality? How do I ensure that the reader will believe my findings?” (Maree, 2016, p. 123). During interviews I have encouraged participants to support their statements with examples and then asked follow-up questions that produce a thorough description of the phenomenon being researched in order to enhance the credibility of this study.

Transferability has to do with the aspect of applicability (Moser & Korsjens, 2018). It invites the reader to make a connection between the study and his/her own experience. I am aiming at providing the reader with a detailed description, i.e. “a full and purposeful account of the context, participants, and research design” (Maree, 2016, p. 124) so that the reader has a fair opportunity of applying pertinent information to his own setting.

Dependability is concerned with the aspect of consistency (Moser & Korsjens, 2018). To ensure consistency throughout the analysis process, I have continuously asked if the research complies with the accepted standards for this particular research design.

Confirmability refers to the degree of neutrality or researcher bias (Maree, 2016). To ensure this, I grounded my findings and interpretations from the data itself and not from my own viewpoint.

3.4 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Before a researcher can set out and start interviewing anybody, there are certain aspects of respect which need to be addressed. People may never be forced to take part in a research project; it is always voluntary, and they must first agree to take part. “Informed consent is a voluntary agreement to participate in research. It is not merely a form that is signed but is a process, in which the participant has an understanding of the complete research process” (Shahnazarian, 2008, p. 3).

All interviews have been done anonymously. Anonymity means a participant or contributor's name will not be disclosed. However, a combination of other factors like job title, gender, work place, etcetera, could still give away a person's identity, hence the researcher should - and did - take all precautions, such as using pseudonyms, to protect the participant's identity (Talerico, 2012). Pseudonyms are fictional names which can be - and have been - used for participants. Any form of gender identification e.g. referring to a participant as him/her, has been avoided. Confidentiality enjoys high priority in this research study. Identifiable information about participants which was collected during the research process has not and will not be disclosed without their permission.

Even though some of the participants were known to me prior to the commencement of the study – due to my own position in the TVET sector – I have taken great care to omit any form of bias in order to provide the reader with a clean "audit trail" (Maree, 2016, p. 125).

The above discussions adhere to the ethical guidelines of the University of Pretoria.

3.5 CONCLUSION

In this chapter the paradigms and methodologies applicable to qualitative research studies have been discussed. A brief look at some ethical considerations which are to be kept in mind when working with a case study and conducting interviews, conclude the chapter.

CHAPTER 4: DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

4.1 INTRODUCTION

The research title, '*The implementation of open learning in the South African TVET college sector*' raises the question of which factors play a significant role, also whether these factors are delaying or accelerating the process. It is important to understand that the research study was about three-quarters complete - focussing on the delaying factors - when the COVID-19 pandemic hit South Africa and the country's full-scale lockdown brought traditional face-to-face teaching to a standstill. Online learning became the only option. This drastic change of circumstances, inevitably affected the research study, so much so that amendments had to be made to the research title, in order to acknowledge the positive spike in online learning. However, data collection and analysis were done, and findings made, under Pre-COVID-19 conditions, and must be interpreted accordingly.

4.1.1 Participants

The nine participants in this study are all employed by the DHET, of which five are in senior or executive management positions on institutional level, and four in director or chief director positions on national level. The five institution-based participants represent three TVET colleges from three provinces – Gauteng, Mpumalanga and Kwa-Zulu Natal.

TABLE 2: DEMOGRAPHICS OF PARTICIPANTS

PARTICIPANT	OPERATIONAL LEVEL	DEPARTMENT or INSTITUTION	NATIONAL or PROVINCIAL
Participant 1	Directorate	DHET	National
Participant 2	Directorate	DHET	National
Participant 3	Directorate	DHET	National
Participant 4	Directorate	DHET	National
Participant 5	Executive Management	TVET college	Mpumalanga

Participant 6	Senior Management	TVET college	Mpumalanga
Participant 7	Senior Management	TVET college	KwaZulu Natal
Participant 8	Senior Management	TVET college	KwaZulu Natal
Participant 9	Senior Management	TVET college	Gauteng

4.1.2 Analysis Procedure

Intensive analytical reading of the transcribed interviews enabled me to highlight the essence of every response on every question. Participants were listed vertically on an Excel spreadsheet and the questions horizontally. The core, highlighted raw data was transferred and plotted in the relevant cells, coordinating participants and questions. It was then scrutinised for similarities and differences, and through in-depth cognitive processing, themes crystallised and data was organised accordingly.

4.1.3 Visionary Documents

The Open Learning concept was first introduced by the Department of Education in 1995 in the 'White Paper for Education and Training' (DoE, 1995) defining it as "an approach which combines the principles of learner centeredness, lifelong learning, flexibility of learning provision, the removal of barriers to access learning, the recognition for credit of prior learning experience, the provision of learner support, the construction of learning programmes in the expectation that learners can succeed, and the maintenance of rigorous quality assurance over the design of learning materials and support systems" (DoE, 1995, p. 24).

Education White Paper 4 titled 'A Programme for the Transformation of Further Education and Training' (DoE, 1998) outlines a twenty-year development plan for open learning that would be needed in the 21st century. It suggests an open learning philosophy that encourages the "growth of 'virtual' institutions [whereby] learning will take place in learners'

private homes" (DoE, 1998, p. 36). Six years later the White Paper on e-Education (DoE, 2004), states that "At the very least, every GET and FET institution will have access to technology in order to:

- access electronic learning materials
- connect to information sources outside the classroom
- communicate with others in and beyond the institutional boundaries
- collaborate with others in and beyond institutional boundaries" (DoE, 2004, p. 29).

Now, 16 years later, all participants in this study agree that ICT infrastructure is still one of the biggest stumbling blocks in the implementation of open learning. Right now – April 2020 – South Africa is in a stay-at-home lockdown state, due to the world-wide COVID-19 pandemic. The biggest challenge that open learning managers like myself have to deal with during this national state of disaster, is that very little '*virtual*' learning can take place *'in learners' private homes*' since a large number of students do not have devices or data to communicate and collaborate with lecturers and each other, '*beyond the institutional boundaries*' as envisaged 16 years ago.

The White Paper for Post-School Education and Training (PSET) (DHET, 2013) outlines the implementation of open learning in the PSET system. Focussing on the TVET colleges, it states that "NCV subjects should be offered flexibly to learners, including through distance education, in order to increase the opportunities for all South Africans to obtain these certificates" (DHET, 2013, p. 52). The sad reality is that the NCV programmes have such a large practical component that it fails to lend itself well to open learning.

In February 2013 the DHET provided a vision for the delivery of open learning in the PSET system by developing the 'Concept Note: Open Learning in Post-School Education and Training' (DHET, 2013). One of the recommendations in this document reads: "DHET needs to champion open learning through the formulation of an Open Learning Advocacy Strategy which enables key players to understand the value of open learning, how it

will strengthen the existing system and what is required for this shift to take place" (DHET, 2013, p. 3). Yet, seven years later, one of the participants in this study who plays an important role in policy steering, notes:

"Not everybody is very much attuned to the notion of open learning yet … the focus is so much on the full time, face-to-face, traditional kind of student … open learning and so forth are more visionary aspects to any policy."

The 'Draft Open Learning Policy Framework' (DHET, 2017a) paved the way for the final 'Open Learning Policy Framework' (DHET, 2017b) that is, according to one participant:

"a document that has been long in the making ... it just requires sign-off." (interview held January 2020)

The framework aims to, amongst others, "provide a high level strategy for implementing open learning in the PSET system" (DHET, 2017a, p. 3). It promises a National Online Learning System (NOLS) of which Participant 4 in this study says:

"NOLS is not ready. It's not operational. We're still very much in a prototype environment, and we're still doing lots of testing." (interview held January 2020)

Despite all these visionary documents over a period of 25 years, participants in this study all agree that current policies do not address open learning directly and not enough is being done to advocate open learning in the TVET sector. It is therefore my conclusion that the research question is vital. As one participant puts it:

"It is one of the most important questions that I've seen in a study."

4.2 THE OPEN LEARNING PHENOMENON

From the offset of this study it became clear that people – both institution-based and in the DHET itself - have diverse understandings of the term open learning. Only three out of nine participants acknowledged the open learning principles as introduced by DoE (1995) and re-iterated in the White Paper for Post-School Education and Training (DHET, 2013) stating "… an approach which combines the

principles of learner-centeredness, lifelong learning, flexibility of learning provision, the removal of barriers to access learning, the recognition for credit of prior learning experience, the provision of learner support, the construction of learning programmes with the expectation that learners can succeed, and the maintenance of rigorous quality assurance over the design of learning materials and support systems" (DHET, 2013, p. 7). The majority are trapped in an obfuscation of what the 'Open Learning Policy Framework' (DHET, 2017b) describes as '*what open learning is not*': distance education, online learning, e-learning, technology-enhanced and blended learning or combinations thereof. Participant 7 says:

"Open learning is a way of teaching and learning where the educator or the student is not necessarily present at the moment that teaching and learning takes place."

Participant 8 refers to

"those students that are off-campus, studying by themselves",

while Participant 6 perceives UNISA as a typical example of an open learning institution

"whereby those who are working, are able to do an assessment online and submit it."

In contradiction to Participant 1 who is of the opinion that

"it will depend on the infrastructure or whatever equipment you're using",

Participant 3 strongly believes that

"open learning must be understood as a principle-based endeavor, not a technology-based endeavor."

The diversity of explanations is also reflected in the literature and proofs with which a potpourri of elements are associated, and used interchangeably, to refer to the term 'open learning'. It is characterized by "flexibility to choose from a variety of options in relation to the time, place, instructional methods, modes of access, and other factors related to learning processes … [known as] e-learning, flexible learning, and distance learning" (Caliskan, 2012, p. 2). Participant 9's feelings about the matter is expressed in asking:

"Can open learning really work based on the current definition given by DHET? I don't see that happening in our current TVET space."

Participant 3 puts it bluntly:

"… even in national, the understanding of what open learning is, is very basic. It's either eLearning or distance education or the use of technology in the class room … I believe that the term 'open learning' is a barrier to open learning – the term itself is a barrier to itself."

4.2.1 Responsibility

Due to the above-mentioned obfuscation, responsibility blame games within the TVET sector are inevitable. On the part of DHET, Participant 1 refers to the implementation of open learning in policies, saying:

"the department sends out a signal of endorsement but doesn't accommodate it in specific terms in policies"

and then hints that the responsibility lies with the institution to take action since

"colleges still have that prerogative through their academic boards to set the parameters for that space."

DHET official, Participant 3, declares:

"We are responsible for monitoring, for evaluation and for policy. That's it. The colleges must do the implementation."

Not denying this, institution-based personnel are shirking in expectancy of DHET's lead. In the words of Participant 5:

"Once we have the guidelines from the department, I think we'll have a starting point."

As for the self-admitted responsibility for policy of Participant 3, it goes without saying where the actual '*starting point*' should be. Yet, Participant 1 bravely admits that DHET

"haven't really addressed it in a serious way in any of the policies. At best, it just has a mention."

Even between the different branches and different directorates within DHET, the matter is passed like a hot potato. While Participant 2 feels

"we need to do a lot in terms of policy development for open learning … our policies are not quite in place",

Participant 1 holds the opinion that

"the whole issue of open leaning has been lifted as an area of its own in the department … and is intended to be the policy environment for implementation of open learning."

However, Participant 3 sees the Open Learning Directorate

"being more in an advisory capacity in the department than implementing."

4.2.2 Strategy

As much as a well formulated policy has no meaning if it is not being implemented, it is also true of a strategy. 'The Draft Open Learning Policy Framework' (DHET, 2017a) devotes a whole chapter to 'A high level Implementation Strategy for Open Learning in the PSET system' (DHET, 2017a, p. 50). One of the intervention areas stipulated in the strategy is "Developing the National Open Learning System (NOLS) for PSET" (DHET, 2017a, p. 50). Through interviews with college-based participants, this study attempted to establish how much ground has been covered in this area. As to the question whether, and what they know about NOLS, Participant 6 remarked that their college considered implementing an online system but decided to wait and see what the department intends to do. Participant 8 heard about it at a conference but did not have much information about it. Participant 5 also heard about it -

"although we don't have full information from it. We are waiting for it",

while Participant 7 felt strongly that

"DHET should have had this in place long ago … sharing of best practices will be much easier if there's a single platform."

Participant 9 is concerned about what qualifications will be offered through NOLS:

"is it gonna be for NCV or Nated or these Skills programmes … I'm still trying to understand which students they are targeting … but remember, we colleges are just outlets for DHET. Whatever they have available which is approved, we must roll out."

Personally I shared the understanding and expectation of these participants that NOLS would serve to increase access for, and enrich the learning experience of all students in existing TVET programmes - a perception that was formed by several information sharing occasions such as DHET hosted forums, meetings and workshops. It came as quite a surprise when one of the DHET participants in this study, revealed that the department headed in another direction with NOLS. Their focus is on the Centres of Specialisation which only a few colleges have. The Electrician Trade has been developed and piloted in three Centres of Specialisation. The explanation goes:

"It is about the new [Occupational] qualifications – 12 or 13 different trades - we develop these ones and make it self-directed learning through the LMS."

The question that rises here, is '*How much reach will NOLS eventually have*, *when catering only for new trade qualifications?'* Timeframes are another important aspect of any strategy. Participant 4 reckons

"It's not something that is going to happen overnight, you have to do it incrementally."

Increasing Lecturer capacity and infrastructure is further mentioned as some of the elements that need to be put in place first.

"And more than that, … there's the content, there's the system, there's the connectivity, there's the learner devices … so all of the components need to speak together … we're not going to get it all right in one go."

4.3 TVET MODEL AND NATURE

4.3.1 Autonomy and Infrastructure

It can be debated whether the South African Post School Education and Training Sector (PSET) of the 21st century is living up to the expectations of pro-open-learning change agents involved in the writing of the White

Paper (DoE, 1995). What is however rather clear, when it comes to technology enhanced teaching, is the fact that universities have certain aspects which count predominantly in their favour, compared to colleges – in respect of the utilisation of educational technologies and learning management systems. Their funding regime, economy of scale, autonomy and freedom in management regime, are some of the privileges the sub-sector benefit from. It enables these institutions to compensate champion lecturers that contribute towards the growth of open education resources (OER). A conference budget per lecturer, for instance, adds to a culture of more progressive thinking in terms of pedagogical leadership and ICT integrated teaching and learning. Other highlighted aspects are ICT support, ICT budget, ICT infrastructure and connectivity. These elements form the backbone of an institution's ability to offer a variety of teaching and learning modes including eLearning, distance and online learning. Ideally, distance education and face-to-face education is a continuum with blended or mixed mode right in the middle, running on open learning principles.

Participant 4 points out that

"Universities have a long standing research network through their partnership with SANReN[1], which allow for smooth integration of learning management systems."

The lack of autonomy, amongst others, places colleges light-years behind their counterparts. Participant 2 feels:

"There's a huge need for a new model that gives more autonomy to colleges. Those colleges that can prove that they can do it, we should delegate some of the authority to them and stop trying to control everything."

The difference in the two sub-sectors is neatly summarised by Participant 3:

"A college is a public, national institution where a university is an autonomous national institution."

[1] South African National Research Network

4.3.2 Policies

All participants agree that the current TVET policies do not address or support open learning. My question is WHY? Perhaps *priority* is playing a role as suggested in Participant 1's remark:

"We first have to get curricula out there and then say - how do we deal with open learning."

Participant 3 admits

" … the support that you get from national, in terms of policies at the moment, I think it's rather prohibiting colleges to apply open learning in a multiple facetted way."

One of the best examples in this regard is the assessment policy that stipulates that *all* assessments need to be done under controlled circumstances. An online assessment may not count for the Internal Continuous Assessment (ICASS) mark. Imagine all UNISA students having to drive to an exam centre for every assignment they need to do! The assessment policy is one of the most debated policies in the TVET sector, particularly the weight – 80% - that attendance carries towards examination admission. Defending the rationale for this criteria – which by no means carries a shadow of openness whatsoever - Participant 2 explains that it is an attempt to deliberate the abuse of government funds and it is an accounting tool for departmental expenses. This is proof enough of a system-centred system, not a learner-centred system.

On the one hand the policy review is claimed to be driven in order to ensure transparency of the system, while others believe that the lifespan of a policy should be at least three to five years, and caution that frequent changes may cause instability. Participant 3 believes

"Every policy must look through the lens of open learning and say - are we learner-centred, are we giving learners a fair chance of success, are we recognising previous learning experiences, are we removing barriers."

This vision is however not shared by some of the other directorates, resulting in conflicting objectives that hinder cooperation.

A very valid argument is held by Participant 3 with regards to the admission policy:

"There's huge tension between access and success. Should a system be open at the cost of success? Nothing in the world is completely open … there's always a barrier somewhere … in terms of cost or time or age or race … it's rather the extent to which open learning is open."

4.3.3 Examinations

Participant 3 is worried about the closeness of the whole PSET sector and the system being more system focused instead of learner focused:

"If you look at assessment … there's specific times for exams; there's specific demarcation of study materials for exams; you write exams … there's no diverse mechanisms for assessment; assessment is very exam focused … We are more worried about exams, than about the learner having success."

Participant 4 defends the need for such restrictive exam policies, saying:

"The online environment … the verification of the learner becomes a bit of a challenge."

Although open learning principles are important, security may never be compromised. Some of the real-life challenges are '*how to test a practical skill online*' and '*how to verify a person's ID online*'. Facial recognition might be an option but

"We are not there yet", says Participant 4.

Participant 2 is also concerned about examination processes that are '*not well geared*' for open learning.

"The validation of [correspondence students] ICASS marks is a problem. Exam regulating mechanisms are not robust. We already had a number of fraud cases amongst correspondence students."

The purpose of examinations in their current form is further disputed by Participant 3:

"The OL principle is self-directed learning, not self-directed passing. Exams are our biggest barrier – sorry to say! And I don't say throw away exams, but exam is not an evidence that a learner has learnt. Exam is evidence that he has passed."

An alternative is suggested, namely micro-credentialing, which is based on OL principles in that it acknowledges learning as a whole in its small units.

Over and above the examination processes there is the examination directorate. When I requested an interview with them it had been declined with remarks such as '*too busy*' and '*not being an open learning specialist in any case*'. Another participant tried comforting me saying:

"Exams is too busy on a roller coaster to listen to, or support others … there's no time for innovation, for deviation … they only engage when there's a real problem … it's a bit difficult to get responses from them."

4.3.4 Positioning and Relations

Within DHET there are six main branches – (a) Universities, (b) Vocational Education (TVET), (c) Community Education (CET), (d) Planning, Policy & Strategy (PPS), Corporate Services and Skills Development. Based on observations over the past five odd years, it is my personal opinion, that the seating of the Open Learning Directorate inside the 'no-man's-land' i.e. the PPS branch, plays a vital role in weakening its potential impact on sibling directorates, like curriculum, that are sub-sector specific.

Participant 2 agrees that

"It would be better placed in the TVET branch."

And Participant 4 admits

"Here are challenges with OL sitting outside the TVET branch."

Quarterly meetings between the directorates of Examinations, Curriculum and Umalusi are scheduled, but no structured meetings include OL because OL is not the immediate focus. Directorates do not work closely with each other – they are supposed to – they try. Participant 3 strongly feels that the OL Directorate's *positioning* is of little importance compared to the OL *principles* saying:

"The principles should be integrated in all policies, but it's not."

Furthermore, Participant 3 is of the opinion that:

"Our biggest problem is that we are not looking at a learner-centred education and training system, but at a system-centred system! We are so worried about the funding formulas, and so worried about exams and all these things, that we don't think that we have to focus on the learning inside the college."

Non-feasibility and fragmentation are further mentioned as reasons for not having it in college and university branches. Participant 3's vision is that

"OL become a part of SAIVCET[2], because that is where it needs to be hosted. That collaboration, that materials development, that system improvement, that is where it needs to be."

Participant 3 believes that

"The structure of the department, is not a reflection of the working of the department."

As researcher, I strongly believe that it is the other way round - the working of the department is a reflection of the structure of the department.

4.3.5 Funding

Colleges are currently funded by The National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) on the basis of full-time enrolments. NSFAS is the government student bursary and loan scheme, receiving its funding budget from, and reporting to, the Department of Higher Education and Training. As Participant 1 explains:

"Because of the funding, our whole energy is around that [full time students]. Everything we do, everything we decide, is around that. So, open learning does not feature prominently in all of that."

Participant 2 says:

"If open learning is implemented, it has to be funded … but you can't fund it until you know what mechanisms there are to treat open learning as an equal partner to the face-to-face delivery."

Some other challenges mentioned by Participant 2 is about the high development cost of open learning material and the department's lack of human resources to develop it. It will therefore not be feasible for niche

[2] South African Institute for Vocational and Continuing Education and Training (DHET, 2017a, p. 42)

programmes, possibly only for subjects with high volumes. Participant 1 agrees with that, saying:

"… so both sides there has to be that recognition, from the part of the department - that it doesn't come cheap if you want it to be delivered as it should be; on the side of the college – this is not a money making scheme, there's a very clear pedagogical shift that you have to commit to and support and you've got to show that you've got all of this in place; and of cause it's going to call for very sophisticated ICT infrastructure."

4.4 CHANGE MANAGEMENT

4.4.1 Leadership and Advocacy

Change management starts at the leadership. Whether on institutional level or national level, if the leadership is not driving change, chances are good that stagnation will rule. In the department the leadership starts from the minister downwards. The political leadership, goodwill, drive, management and support spirals down to heads of departments and the various directorates. In South Africa's 26 years of democracy, the department has seen five ministers, each with his own leadership style and strengths.

Participant 3 describes the role of the open learning directorate as

" … important for determining strategic direction … advocating … prophets in a very uneducated way … trying to lead people from behind, and evaluating the system, constantly asking - are we open or not?"

All DHET participants in this study agree that not enough is being done to advocate open learning in the TVET college sector. They do however present an array of perspective-moulded perceptions on this deficiency.

As much as the technology might allow it, Participant 1 doubts if the nature of college students allows for the independent study that open learning requires.

"We tend to get students who need that extra support … to be motivated for learning. [Although] the [OL] system is intended to drive quality, intended to drive commitment,

intended to drive motivation because students should be treated as adults … I'm not sure that we, as a [TVET] society, is ready for it."

Participant 4 is hesitant of implementing an OL system without the buy-in of "*the masses*" and prefers to "*take the whole sector with*" when moving, which in turn is delayed because "*changing people's perceptions and methodologies, take time*."

Participant 3 feels that the nature of the task at hand outweighs human nature.

"It's not the hardware, it's not the software, it is the warm-ware … we are still human beings … people think sometimes we are machines."

DHET is very aware that attempting to grow a new cultivar in unprepared land is fatal. They admit that the advocacy of OL needs to be preceded by appropriate policies, processes, platforms and materials that are not yet in order. On top of that, their energy is still concentrated on getting basic things right such as throughput rate and poor reputation.

"So, I think we need to get our house in order and get those policies in place and then we can advocate for it"

is the brave statement of Participant 2.

4.4.2 Role and Profile

If we really want to get to a point where TVET colleges apply open learning principles in their approach, whether it be face-to-face or distance or online or whatever mode, then we need to recognise that it cannot be seen and treated as an add-on, but part of the DNA of good teaching and learning practices. Figuratively speaking, it should not be a hyperlink on the HEI website, it needs to be scripted and embedded in the site.

Similar to the absorption of gender, equity and disability issues in all policies and practices, open learning is supposed to be infiltrated and integrated in the complete student life cycle, in order to increase access, increase success and decrease cost.

Although technology is a vital ingredient of open learning, it is not a technology driven endeavour, but a principle driven endeavour. Some people have the idea that as long as a college is teaching Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) subjects such as robotics, coding and artificial intelligence, they are doing great on their journey of implementing open learning. Doing it through an LMS, well, that will score them even higher points! The truth is, if a college's open learning strategy begins and ends with ICT, the journey has just begun.

Open learning is often equated by distance or eLearning. Hence people tend to measure the progress of open learning in TVET colleges by the number of distance student enrolments. Is it not 25 years since the White Paper (DoE, 1995) introduced open learning? Could we not expect to see a Unisa-type of open distance learning college by now? Participants 2 and 9 support this kind of thinking although they look at it from different angles. One mentions the idea of a distance learning college as the 51st college, the other thinks each college should have a distance learning campus or virtual campus. The one or two colleges that adopted this model, seem to be thriving.

Participant 3 argues that open learning is about acquainting a good teaching and learning system by removing barriers, and huge barriers have in fact been removed over the past years: a) The social barrier 'apartheid' was removed b) An economic barrier was removed through the 'Fees must fall' movement c) Issues of access due to language were removed as a result of the 16th June 1976's youth unrest.

Although these are true examples of transformation, personally I would categorise them as political and societal initiatives rather than departmental accomplishments.

4.5 RESULTS

With regards to the three participating colleges, only one has a fully functional LMS, the other two are in the planning phase of implementing it. Everyone agrees that

open learning has a vital role to play in higher education, yet all agree that the implementation of open learning in the TVET sector is very slow and that too little is being done to advocate and accelerate the process.

Although all three colleges felt that it is the responsibility of DHET to fulfil their promises of implementing a national online learning platform for all colleges, all three have started their own processes of LMS implementation on institutional level. The value that they expect it to add to their colleges' teaching and learning, is along the line of general benefits of an LMS, such as own time, multiple times, own space access of multimedia study material, with a subsequent increased pass rate, and communication of student specific information such as marks, time tables and general announcements. Furthermore, the provisioning of scarce skills and quantitative growth in enrolment figures, are some of the values perceived to come from a fully functional LMS.

One college voiced their need for a functional lecturer management or support system to enable the collaboration and sharing of common papers within subject groups.

All participants including the policy makers at DHET admitted that the current TVET policies do not make provision for open learning and are thus restricting instead of accommodating open learning.

Of the four DHET participants, three agreed that – in terms of stakeholders' communication and cooperation - it would be beneficial to have an OL directorate inside the TVET branch.

Only four of the nine participants acknowledged the White Paper's description of the open learning phenomena. The other five hold a perplexity of ill experienced and false informed perspectives.

TABLE 3: SUMMARY OF RESULTS

QUESTION	YES	NO
College has a fully functional LMS	1	2
It is DHET's responsibility to implement a national online learning platform	5	0
Open learning has a vital role to play in higher education	9	0
The implementation of open learning in colleges is very slow	9	0
Enough is being done to advocate for open learning in colleges	0	9
Acknowledge the White Paper's description of the open learning phenomena	4	5
Current TVET policies make provision for open learning	0	9
The collaboration between relevant directorates are not satisfactory – They are mostly working in silos	4	0
Current funding models accommodate open learning	0	9
Inadequate infrastructure and connectivity hamper open learning	9	0
The nature of college programmes and students do not favour open learning	9	0
The open learning directorate would be better placed inside the TVET branch	2	1

4.6 FINDINGS

This study has been conducted within the parameters of the Critical Theory (Dell'Angelo et al., 2014) and the Stakeholder Theory (Labanauskis & Ginevičius, 2017). The findings of this study fit astonishingly well into both theories.

As pointed out in par. 2.4 Friesen (2008) describes the Critical Theory as "a research methodology that focuses on the interrelated issues of [a] technology [b] politics and [c] social change" (Friesen, 2008, p. 1). These three components are pertinent in the case of DHET's open learning endeavours:

(a) It is technology enabled – infrastructure, hardware, LMS, etc.
(b) It is politically driven – from the minister downward
(c) It is focussed on social change – learner-centeredness, increased student access and success.

Through in-depth interviews with top key role players, these components have been critiqued, and barriers to open learning have been identified. Also the stakeholder theory as discussed in par. 2.4 shows significant pertinence in the TVET sector (Labanauskis & Ginevičius, 2017). The following diagram (Figure 2) illustrates the barriers identified through this study, in terms of root and effected stakeholder segments.

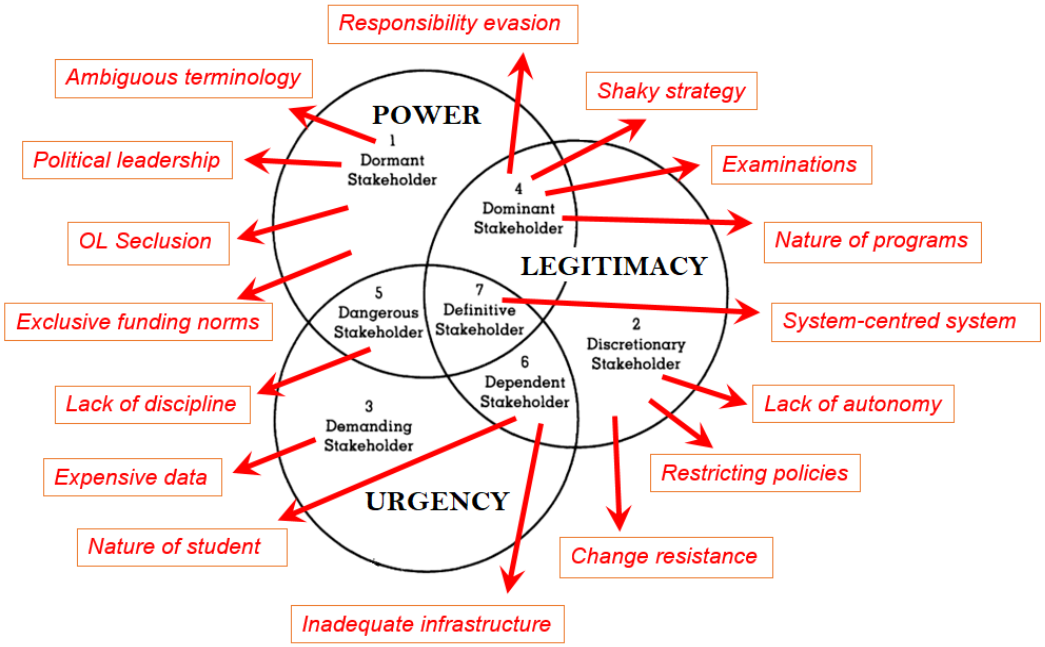

FIGURE 2: IDENTIFIED BARRIERS MAPPED TO STAKEHOLDER TYPOLOGY

In the power circle at the top, the dormant stakeholder (1) depicts the political ministerial leadership. Four barriers are hosted here:

- Political leadership

On my question about what barriers are standing in the way of open learning's progress, Participant 3 emphasised that no effort of an open learning pioneer will ever be enough if the political leadership is absent. Ekpiken (2015) agrees with this, saying: "leaders must strive to embrace the new trends in leadership."

- Ambiguous terminology

It was introduced in the White Paper, yet an obfuscation of peripheral components blur the understanding of open learning. In a participant's words: "… the term itself is a barrier to itself."

- OL Seclusion

Both OL directorate and OL principles are not integrated with TVET branch and TVET policies. As par. 4.2 explains, the OL directorate is isolated in the no-man's-land of DHET. Sibling directorates and policies are not 'talking' to it.

- Exclusive funding norms

Colleges are funded per full time students (FTE) count. No provision is made for distance or online or open learning modes. Alternative teaching and learning modalities have not been part of the operational plan, hence open learning is still seen as an add-on instead of equivalent to fulltime face-to-face teaching and learning. Subsequently there is a complete lack of focus on, and funding for this modality. The self-imposed sentencing of Participant 2, to get their house in order, speaks for itself.

The dominant stakeholder (4) represents the power agents in departmental directive positions, operating on a national level and dictating mainly through policy. This sector is the root of the following barriers:

- Responsibility evasion

The OL ball is passed from one director to another, to NSFAS, to academic boards, to college management and back to DHET. How should colleges

implement OL while policies restrict them? How should policies integrate OL while funding excludes it?

- Shaky strategy

The original intentions of, and expectations from OL projects, including NOLS, as envisaged in the Draft Open Learning Framework (DHET, 2017a) have changed direction. Participant 4 mentioned the development of twelve or thirteen new occupational programmes. However, according to the revised business plan for OL projects (Van Wyk, 2019) extended time was requested from National Treasury in August 2018 for the development of four programmes to be completed in the 2020 – 2021 financial year (Van Wyk, 2019).

- Examinations

Exam processes and procedures are not OL friendly and have no time nor the intention to become OL friendly.

- Nature of programmes

It is a generally accepted characteristic of NCV programmes - due to its large practical component - it does not lend itself well to OL. Practical skills would be best illustrated by animated activities and interactive instruction. However, such material development requires expertise and is expensive, not only in rand and cents, but also in man-hours. According to research by Defelice (2018) the average design time for one hour of training material is as follow:

TABLE 4: AVERAGE DESIGN TIME FOR ONE HOUR OF TRAINING MATERIAL

LEVEL/TYPE	HOURS
Traditional	38
Live Instructor-led training (Virtual)	28
Level1 eLearning (Passive)	42

Level 2 eLearning (Limited)	71
Level 3 eLearning (Complex)	130
Level 4 eLearning (Real-time)	143

The legitimacy circle forms the centre chain with the institutional leadership as the discretionary stakeholder (2). College councils and management teams need to maintain and sustain legitimacy, not only upward and downward, but most importantly internally. The following barriers are grounded in the power circle but put the legitimacy of colleges in discredit:

- Lack of autonomy

Both Participants 2 and 3 elaborated on the lack of autonomy in TVET colleges, as discussed in par. 4.3.1. They admit that more authority should be delegated to colleges; that control of household policy matters should be relieved in order to reduce frustration levels of high performing colleges.

- Restricting policies

As much as colleges would like to implement OL, they are bound by policies. Some of the most obvious ‘closed’ policies are the assessment policy and the attendance policy. An online assessment for an NCV student may at the most be done for informal practice but may not count as formative assessment towards the ICASS mark, due to the restriction of ‘all assessments must be done under controlled circumstances’.

- Change resistance

To open up opportunities of different and multi-modal teaching and learning, everyone has to adapt - from the policy makers down to the way lecturers construct lessons, through to the way students access and deal with that study environment. Although it surely counts in favour of open learning when such adaption is naturally forced down by national COVID-19 lockdown regulations,

it is not sustainable. All stakeholders need to buy-in on the proposed change. As (Scott, 2003) points out: “The strategic development priorities of organizations can be achieved in practice only if the individuals responsible for their implementation are willing and enabled to learn how to do them” (Scott, 2003, p. 73).

In the urgency circle at the bottom, the demanding stakeholder (3) is the student leadership corps operating through infiltrated networks on ground level, driving political and societal urgency. Academically and financially, students are dependant stakeholders (6). But when indoctrinated by political or foreign ideologies, some become dangerous stakeholders (5). The following barriers are relevant to the urgency circle:

- Nature of student

As discussed in par. 4.4.1 the TVET sector tends to attract students that need extra support and motivation for learning. Open learning requires independent study that is usually developed through extended learning experiences at a certain level of maturity which the average college student lacks.

- Lack of discipline

A large number of college students parade campuses with an attitude that says: “I get everything for free, now don’t expect me to work for my certificate!” This is a concern of Participant 1 – the low certification rate – that needs to be rectified before they can focus on open learning. This view implies a serious disbelief in the power of open learning towards rectifying low certification rates; it also highlights the nature of the college student with regards to the immaturity aspect mentioned earlier.

- Inadequate infrastructure

Open learning is enabled through technology. All participants mentioned in one way or another how crucial the infrastructure is and how inadequate networks, systems and IT support are in the TVET sector. As discussed in par. 2.2, USAF (2017) also asks whether technological infrastructure and networks should not be prioritised above an attempt to provide digital resources to all students.

Without the backbone of proper working networks, and students having appropriate devices to access online resources, developing online platforms and digital learning material would be a wasteful exercise.

- Expensive data

Together with devices, students need data for online learning, which is very expensive in South Africa. This is one aspect that has seen tremendous attention and progress since the national COVID-19 lockdown started on 27 March 2020. DHET took the initiative to negotiate zero-rate deals for all HEI domains with all cellular networks. This is a relief for college students as well as lecturers. However, according to Chinembiri (2020) data in South Africa remains antipoor, despite the price drop by dominant operators in April 2020.

The core business of the TVET sector is good teaching and learning. Every lecturer who is serious about his/her job and every student that is serious about his/her studies, is a definitive stakeholder (7). It is right here at the core, where open learning should be nestled, as per the belief of Participant 3 that open learning is none other than good teaching and learning. The only barrier is:

- System-centred system

The closeness of the PSET sector is a concern to Participant 3. The system is more system focused than learner focused. A learner-centred system would be asking what is in the best interest of the learner, but unfortunately decision makers are more concerned about how to protect the system from abuse than how to ensure learner success, e.g. Participant 2 who believes that the minimum requirement of 80% attendance towards exam admission cannot be reduced, since it is an accounting tool for state funds.

4.7 CONCLUSION

In this chapter, data has been collected and analysed, and results have been interpreted. The following chapter brings us to final conclusions and recommendations on how to deal with these findings.

CHAPTER 5: RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

5.1 OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

The study originates from my observation of, and 15 years' experience in the South African TVET college sector. Since open learning's first introduction in the White Paper (DoE, 1995), the establishment of the DHET in 2009, and the transfer of colleges from provincial education departments to DHET in 2015, it has been struggling to become popular. Why has it not been one of the 'wows'? Is it because it is misunderstood? Is it because it is difficult to implement? Is it because of resistance – people prefer their old ways? Despite several visionary documents published by DHET, the open learning concept - the principles and approach – have not yet been adopted as an integral part of operational policies. That causes an extreme hindrance for open learning pioneers at college level. It has therefore become imminent to investigate contributing factors to the dilemma. Through interviews with nine participants from DHET and colleges, this qualitative study aimed to determine which factors impact negatively on the implementation of open learning in colleges.

CHAPTER ONE sets the table for the research questions to be asked and lays out the purpose of the study.

CHAPTER TWO draws a detailed picture and review of existing literature in two integrated interest areas i.e. Open Distance Learning (ODL) and National Educational Policies, more specifically (1) what it entails (2) frameworks for its evaluation and analysis, and (3) factors that determine success or failure in both these areas.

CHAPTER THREE pays attention to the underlying paradigmatic perspectives, research methodology and some ethical considerations.

CHAPTER FOUR presents the analysis of data and interpretation of results.

CHAPTER FIVE reaches conclusions and makes recommendations emerging from the findings.

5.2 RECOMMENDATIONS

From the results of this study a number of possible catalysts emerge.

5.2.1 Phenomenon

The open learning phenomenon should be made very clear. It is not just about ICT or an LMS and it is not just good teaching and learning principles – it is both. I believe that the open learning principles as defined in the White Paper should be integrated - through policy - in the national system, of which NOLS forms part and plays its part, as promised in the Open Learning Framework and be available to the whole TVET community.

5.2.2 Learner-centred system

The current TVET model is system-centred, not a learner-centred system. The funding and the policies should be reviewed and amended to take an open learning approach. Students are currently funded and motivated to attend classes and write exams, not to learn. As long as a student is being spoon-fed, he will never go hungry for knowledge. True learning only takes place when knowledge is discovered. If not hungry he/she will not seek. If not seeking he/she will not discover. If not discovered, it has not been learnt.

5.2.3 The norm

As much as all delivery modes should be seen and treated equally, all directorates should be seen and treated equally. Open learning should not be the exception – it should be the norm. It should not be an unknown add-on, ‘maybe one day’ option. It should be the departure point. The open learning directorate should play a leading role in policy reform. Clear perspectives on higher education and training can only be gained by looking through the clear lens of open learning principles. I believe that part of getting the open learning directorate to play that leading role is to position it within the TVET and university campuses respectively.

5.2.4 COVID-19

The ultimate catalyst has a natural cause – one that no human being has control of. That is what has hit South Africa right now, as I am writing (March – July 2020), the Corona virus, COVID-19 pandemic, which led to a complete lockdown of all industry and education. For the first time in the history of South Africa, online learning is the only possible mode of education delivery. Right now we see a sharp spike in all kinds of online teaching, e.g. radio lessons, television lessons, WhatsApp lessons, video recordings and podcasts on YouTube and LMSs, webinars on Zoom, MS Teams, Google classrooms, and so on and so forth. Many a teacher and a lecturer are, for the first time ever, setting an online quiz or doing a Google hangout. As much as it has barricaded humanity in so many ways, it has eradicated barriers for open learning at the same time.

On 23 May 2020 the minister of DHET, Dr Blade Nzimande, held a media briefing in which he announced, “Remote multi-modal teaching and learning during the period of the current lockdown, is being encouraged.” This is a first ever.

Due to the significance of it for this study, I am placing a full extract of the minister’s media briefing:

“We acknowledge that the cost of connectivity remains a huge barrier for students who want to use the digital learning mode as part of our multi-modal and remote learning.

The shift to provide for learning material for NSFAS students to include digital devices will not only address technology enabled pedagogy over the lockdown period but will truly move South African education into the modern era offering access to wider resources and teaching materials. This bold step will also be extended to TVET students for whom access to technology will improve their skills fit for a modern economy. We already have zero-rated educational content sites at our public universities, TVET and CET Colleges. The next step is to make ‘Educational Data Bundles’ available to all NSFAS students in universities and TVET Colleges. We have also made free digital content available specifically to our TVET College students

through our DHET website, the National Open Learning System (NOLS) of our Department, institutional websites and other sites, where students can find digital materials which will assist them in their learning and preparation for exams.

I therefore call upon all our TVET students to visit these sites and see for themselves the myriad of content available to assist them while we try to find better ways to implement effective multi modal, augmented remote learning systems. We are considering the use of Space Science and Earth Observation technologies and platforms in support of our plans to reach vulnerable students. Government is committed to ensuring that all NSFAS students have access to an appropriate device to support their online learning" (Nzimande, 2020b).

As a result of the online learning being the only possible learning mode during the COVID-19 lockdown, new online learning platforms, digital resources and webinars on how to teach online, sprung up like mushrooms. Even NOLS rose from the dead and published a number of previous examination papers on their website (15 April 2020). Publishers that usually have a price tag on every single piece of media, made electronic copies of learning guides available for free.

5.2.5 Blended TVET model

One must consider what the status of open learning would have been if it had not been for COVID-19. Even in its present form, will it keep its momentum after everything has gone back to normal? Chances are good that it will not last without pertinent change activators. The model that I believe will bring about significant acceleration in this process, is one of a 'forced' blended approach. Less face-2-face contact time and more responsibility to the student in the form of self-directed online learning, could be the first step towards sustainable open learning efforts. In his opening speech at SACPO's virtual national general council held 2 July 2020, Minister Blade Nzimande addressed the principals of TVET colleges, referring to - what he calls - a hybrid model for open learning. "By working with universities, you will ensure that you create a single integrated, but

differentiated national TVET cyber-infrastructure to support hybrid (digital-physical) and open-learning programmes for those unable to study full-time at TVET Colleges" (Nzimande, 2020a). I believe such hybrid models should not only be for part-time students, but a blended approach should also be implemented for full time students – not by choice as is the case at the moment, but by default - as the blended TVET model.

In a very recent online article titled "Strategies for blended TVET in response to COVID-19", the Commonwealth Of Learning (COL, 2020) discussed how a well-designed blended approach in TVET colleges can improve inclusiveness and quality, increase access and reduce costs. "COVID-19 provides the catalyst for countries to understand and act on this potential" (COL, 2020, p. 11). The document's definition of 'blended TVET' describes what I believe to be the solution for South African TVET colleges: "… the practice of building competence in knowledge, and practical and soft skills through a combination of face-to-face and technology enabled learning experiences [as well as] distance learning … where the blend allows learners to develop competence online or in their workplace or community and does not require them to attend a physical campus" (COL, 2020, p. 1). Employers value the lifelong learning skills such as self-direction, self-efficacy and critical engagement that are developed through online learning (COL, 2020) and will therefore increase TVET students' employability. To embed such new blended TVET requires new policies and new funding norms.

If Minister Blade Nzimande's vision for, and appeal to TVET colleges are taken seriously by the dominant stakeholders – the power agents, a new blended TVET model should be developed and implemented, or else the lessons learnt through COVID-19 will be null and void.

5.3 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study concentrated on the identification of barriers through the lens of dominant stakeholders. Further research is needed for a panoramic view, e.g. including students' perspectives.

All data collection has been done pre-COVID-19. The effect that the pandemic has had on the implementation of open learning in the TVET sector, is a developing story and surely needs to be reported on once the globe has normalized.

5.4 FINAL CONCLUSION

To lay the foundation for a new blended TVET model, DHET needs to embed the visionary open learning policy framework into all operational policies, starting with the funding norms. Preparation, support and capacity building of lecturers and students for and through online learning, together with continued investment in national education technology solutions and OER development, will place the South African TVET sector in a much better position to accelerate the upskilling of the country's 7.1 million unemployed people.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: RESEARCH APPROVAL LETTER

higher education & training
Department:
Higher Education and Training
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

Private Bag X174, PRETORIA, 0001, 123 Francis Baard Street, PRETORIA, 0002, South Africa
Tel: (012) 312 5911, Fax: (012) 321 6770
Private Bag X9192, CAPE TOWN, 8000, 103 Plein Street, CAPE TOWN, 8001, South Africa
Tel: (021) 469 5175, Fax: (021) 461 4761

Enquiries: Nompumelelo Hlatshwayo *Email: Hlatshwayo.N@dhet.gov.za* *Telephone: 012 312 5337*

Mrs Engela Franken
Postnet Suite 220
Private Bag X9013
ERMELO
2350

By e-mail:efranken@gscollege.co.za

Dear Mrs Franken

REQUEST FOR PERMISSION TO UNDERTAKE RESEARCH IN THE DEPARTMENT OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND TRAINING: FACTORS THAT DELAY THE IMPLEMENTATION OF OPEN LEARNING IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN TVET COLLEGE SECTOR

I acknowledge receipt of your request for permission to undertake research in the Department of Higher Education and Training (the Department) on the topic: *"Factors that delay the implementation of Open Learning in the South African TVET sector"*.

The Department has evaluated your request and it is my pleasure to inform you that your request for permission to undertake the above research has been granted. As part of your research, it is noted that you will collect data by participating in one-on-one interviews with the selected staff members:

a) The Deputy Director-General: Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) Branch;
b) Three Chief Directors:
    i. Systems Planning and Support: TVET Branch;
    ii. Curriculum Innovation: TVET Branch; and

iii. Social Inclusion, Access, Quality and Equity: Planning, Policy and Strategy Branch (Branch P).

c) Four Directors:
   i. Open Learning: Branch P;
   ii. Programme and Curriculum: TVET Branch;
   iii. Lecturer Development: TVET Branch; and
   iv. Monitoring and Evaluation: TVET Branch.

You are advised to obtain further permission from the participants before commencing with your study.

You are also requested to attach the following documents when communicating with the participants.

1) Copy of this letter from the Department.
2) Copy of the "completed application form" to undertake research.
3) Ethical clearance certificate from the University of Pretoria.

The topic of your research is of great interest to the Department. It will therefore be appreciated if you could share the findings of your research with the Department upon completion of your research.

I wish you all of the best in your research study.

Yours sincerely

Dr Hersheela Narsee
Acting Deputy Director-General: Planning, Policy and Strategy
Date: 30/10/2019

APPENDIX B: INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE

UNIVERSITEIT VAN PRETORIA
UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA
YUNIBESITHI YA PRETORIA

Faculty of Education

Dear Madam/Sir,

INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH PROJECT:
Factors that delay the implementation of open learning
in the South African TVET college sector

I am currently enrolled for a Master's degree at the University of Pretoria. Part of the requirements for the awarding of this degree is the successful completion of a significant research project in the field of education.

The title of my approved research study is**: Factors that delay the implementation of open learning in the South African TVET college sector**

This research seeks to investigate what are the factors that inhibit the TVET sector from - and what need to be done in order to clear the way for - full implementation of open learning in the South African TVET college sector.

I am therefore asking your consent to interview educators in this research project investigating what factors are hindering public TVET colleges from embracing open learning.

The purpose of this study is to:

1) Investigate how far the TVET colleges have come with the implementation of open learning.
2) Determine what the status of LMS implementation/utilisation is at colleges

3) Determine what the challenges are for lecturers in online teaching and learning,
4) Determine what external factors are supporting or limiting the implementation of the institutional LMS
5) Determine why the external factors support or limit the implementation of the institutional LMS

In order to gather the necessary information, I am requesting permission to approach educators to arrange interviews. Educators will receive an individual invitation to participate and if they choose to participate, they will attend a scheduled 30 minute interview. Please see the schedule of interview questions included (Appendix A).

I understand that the decision of the DHET to participate is completely voluntary and that permission for your participation will also be protected by the University of Pretoria. Each individual's participation will be voluntary and will in no way benefit or disadvantage them. Each participant will be free, at any stage during the process, up to and including the stage at which they authenticate the transcript of their interview, to withdraw their consent to participate; in which case their participation will end immediately without any consequences. Any data collected from them up to that point in the study will then be destroyed.

All the information obtained during the research study will be treated confidentially and at no time will the university or any of the individual participants be mentioned by name or be identified by any means in the research report. The Department of Higher Education and Training will not have access to the raw data obtained from the interviews.

In my data collection process, I undertake the following:

- Data collection will take place at a place and time convenient for the official.
- No incentives of any kind will be offered to the participants.

At the end of the study, you will be provided with a copy of the research report containing both the findings and recommendations of the study. The study presents an opportunity for the Department to reflect on one of its most important aspects of teaching and learning. As a confirmation of acceptance to permit participation, kindly complete the consent form at the end of this letter.

Thanking you in anticipation.

Engela Franken
Student Researcher
University of Pretoria
U78158673@tuks.co.za
(071) 6091396

Dr M Mihai
Supervisor
University of Pretoria
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(082) 430 2928

APPENDIX C: CONCENT LETTERS

LETTER of CONSENT

COLLEGE AS PARTICIPANT

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION IN THE RESEARCH PROJECT ENTITLED:

Factors that delay the implementation of open learning in the South African TVET college sector

I, _____, the principal of _____ college , hereby voluntarily and willingly agree to allow my educators to participate in the above-mentioned study introduced and explained to me by Engela Franken, currently a student enrolled for a Master's degree at the University of Pretoria.

I further declare that I understand, as explained to me by the researcher, the aim, scope, and purpose of collecting information proposed by the researcher, as well as the means by which the researcher will attempt to ensure the confidentiality and integrity of the information she collects.

_____ _____

Full name Signature

_____

Date

Official stamp

LETTER of CONSENT

DEPARTMENT AS PARTICIPANT

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION IN THE RESEARCH PROJECT ENTITLED:

Factors that delay the implementation of open learning in the South African TVET college sector

I, _____, the head of _____ Department / Directorate, hereby voluntarily and willingly agree to allow my staff members to participate in the above-mentioned study introduced and explained to me by Engela Franken, currently a student enrolled for a Master's degree at the University of Pretoria.

I further declare that I understand, as explained to me by the researcher, the aim, scope, and purpose of collecting information proposed by the researcher, as well as the means by which the researcher will attempt to ensure the confidentiality and integrity of the information she collects.

_____ _____

Full name Signature

_____

Date

Official stamp

LETTER of CONSENT

INDIVIDUAL PARTICIPANT

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION IN THE RESEARCH PROJECT ENTITLED:
Factors that delay the implementation of open learning in the South African TVET college sector.

I, _____, hereby voluntarily and willingly agree to participate as an individual in the above-mentioned study introduced and explained to me by Engela Franken, currently a student enrolled for a Masters degree at the University of Pretoria.

The researcher has explained the aim of this study, its scope and purpose. Data collection methods proposed by the researcher have been outlined and clearly explained as well as the means by which she will ensure confidentiality and the authenticity and integrity of the information.

_____ _____

Full name Signature

_____

Date

APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interview Questions (DHET -A)

1. If we look at the imbalance of open learning practices at universities on the one hand vs TVET college on the other hand – both from PSET sector - what are your sentiments regarding the huge difference?
2. Any specific aspects that count predominantly in favour of universities – or – in favour of colleges when it comes to the use of a LMS?
3. If you could wave a magic wand today to remove obstacles in the way of open learning at colleges – you have three chances – which ones would you go for?
4. The Open Learning Directorate is positioned inside the Planning & Policies branch, not inside the TVET / university branches. Would you describe it as an advantage or as a disadvantage to either universities and/or colleges? Why?
5. The draft open learning framework clearly stipulates what DHET intend to establish with regards to an open learning policy. What other policies interlink with the open learning policy? Do these policies serve to strengthen the open learning policy or not?
6. The different directorates, e.g. Examinations, Curriculum and Open Learning,
    a. how would you describe their relation or interaction, do they mostly operate in silos or as a team?
    b. do they meet regularly? How often?
7. Do you believe DHET is doing enough to advocate Open Learning in colleges?

Interview Questions (DHET -B)

1. What is your role / involvement in the writing of policies for TVET colleges?
2. Do you think that the current policies e.g. assessment policy, accommodate open learning? Yes / No? Why?
3. Do you - DHET - have a plan for the revision of these policies?
4. If not, why not? If yes, how and when?
5. In your view, is the current syllabi of the Nated programs still relevant, e.g. Computer Practice N5?
6. Do you - DHET - have a plan for the revision of these syllabi?
7. If not, why not? If yes, how and when?
8. The different directorates, e.g. Examinations, Curriculum and Open Learning,
    a. how would you describe their relation or interaction, do they mostly operate in silos or as a team?
    b. do they meet regularly? How often?
9. Do you believe that Open Learning has a role to play in the TVET colleges? Yes / No? Why?
10. Do you believe DHET is doing enough to advocate Open Learning in colleges? Yes / No? Why?

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS (College)

1. What do you understand of the terminology: Open Learning?
2. Does your college do online learning, e-learning or open learning?
3. If yes, what Learning Management System (LMS) - or student portal - does your college currently use?
    a) Is the system fully functional? If not, why? What needs to be done for it to work 100%?
    b) Do you think the LMS is adding value to your institution? How?
    c) How do your students benefit from the LMS?
    d) How do you as a lecturer make use of the LMS for students?
    e) What tools on the LMS do you find most helpful?
    f) If you don't really use it, what are the factors preventing you?
4. If your college doesn't have a LMS for students,
    a) Do you think there is a need for it?
    b) Do you have an intention to use it?
    c) If yes, do you think your college should implement it themselves or should DHET implement a LMS for all college students?