Article

Navigating Open Distance Learning for Academic Success: Resilience Amongst Students with Disabilities

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Abstract: To improve their abilities and independence, students with disabilities are enrolling in higher education (HE). However, many students encounter challenges when transitioning to and thriving in new learning environments, particularly in open and distance learning (ODL) where institutional support can be inconsistent. Students with disabilities face several obstacles while working towards graduation. In this study, we explored the academic resilience of students with disabilities in distance education. We employed a phenomenological approach with 'resilience' as the theoretical framework. The personal experiences of ten students with varying disabilities at an open distance learning institution were explored using thematic analysis, and four core themes were identified. The findings revealed that many stressors impact students with disabilities at an ODL institution that can potentially hamper their performance. Students with disabilities acquire personal traits and coping methods to deal with their obstacles, such as social networks and external sources of support, including institutional help, notwithstanding the attitudes of university staff. Distant universities must embrace diversity to fight stigmatisation and discrimination. The study's conclusions will increase understanding and guide the development of a persistence model based on resilience.

1. Introduction

Higher education in Africa is in high demand, and open distance learning institutions are crucial in providing access. ODL caters to many students, regardless of their geographical location (Ngubane-Mokiwa, 2016). Traditionally, ODL universities have designed learning, assessment tools, and student support to ensure students' learning and success. Students with disabilities, like other marginalised students, benefit from specialised support through offices such as the Disability Unit. These offices assist students from application and registration to funding support and ensure that study materials and examinations are provided in accessible formats through offering assistive technologies (Ngubane-Mokiwa, 2013). Despite these accommodations, resilience remains essential for students to succeed, especially in a distance learning environment.

This paper was guided by one central question: What motivates the students with disabilities in one open distance learning institution to be resilient in their learning? Developing resilience skills is crucial for positive adaptation and functioning, especially for students with disabilities. Willems (2012) stated that academic resilience, despite risk factors, played a significant role in student participation, retention, and outcomes in distance higher education. Academic resilience refers to a student's ability to succeed academically despite adversities. A decline in academic resilience can lead to lower retention and graduation rates (Morales, 2008, 2010). Over time, the concept of academic resilience has received limited attention due to diverse perspectives regarding its connection to academic success. Wang *et al.* (1998) defined academic or educational resilience as a student's ability to succeed academically, despite personal adversities. Catterall (1998) described it as the capacity to recover from failure and alienation. A decline in academic resilience can lead to lower retention and graduation rates (Bowen, 2010).

We explored academic resilience using Willems' quadripartite model (Willems 2010, 2012; Willems and Reupert, 2013) by investigating the experiences of students with disabilities in distance learning. This model has been used to promote the shared responsibility of students, educators, institutions, and communities to assess and promote academic resilience and minimize attrition in a specific cohort of distance learners.

2. Resilience

Resilience is "one's capacity to persevere and rebound under adversity and plays a potential role in mitigating psychological distress and academic burnout and student attrition" (Emerson *et al.* 2023, p. 228). Resilience has been researched in positive psychology, social psychology, and psychopathology (Masten, 2018, 2021; Masten & Obradović, 2006). It is widely defined as the ability of the individual to cope with or adapt to risk or adversity (Duma, 2019; Martín & Moriña, 2022; Southwick *et al.* 2014). The concept of resilience includes family dynamics and broader contexts, contributing to positive growth (Duma & Shawa, 2019). Masten (2018) defined resilience as the system's capacity to successfully adapt to challenges that threaten its function, survival, or future development. Adversity and positive adaptation are considered as core concepts in defining resilience (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2019).

Stuntzner *et al.* (2018) and Stuntzner and Hartley (2014) concur with the interactionalist framework that defined resilience as the intricate relationship between an individual and their surroundings, wherein the individual applies both internal and external protective factors for a successful outcome including personal characteristics or circumstances to forecast favorable outcomes in high-risk situations. According to Campbell-Sills, Cohan, and Stein (2006) and Stuntzner and Hartley (2014), resilience is not a single quality or ability but rather the result of a combination of several protective or resilience factors that enable a person to succeed in the face of adversity. These factors include "constitutional variables like temperament and personality, in addition to specific skills (e.g., active problem solving)" (p. 586).

The concept of resilience has evolved (Richardson, 2002). First, resilient qualities refer to protective factors or developmental assets that help individuals overcome adversity. They involve a range of variables, including self-esteem, self-efficacy, subjective well-being, self-determination, locus of control, and the support system. Second, resiliency involves navigating adversity, change, or opportunity under the law of disruption and reintegration (Flach, 1988). Finally, innate resilience represents a multidisciplinary exploration of motivational forces within individuals toward self-actualization and fractured identities (Richardson, 2002).

In higher education, student persistence is often linked to resilience as "successful adaptation to life tasks in the face of social disadvantage or highly adverse conditions" (Martín & Moriña, 2022). Resilience is understood as an adaptive process; it is crucial for effectively navigating the adversities they encounter in higher education (Frisby & Vallade, 2021). Many students with disabilities demonstrate resilience through overcoming barriers throughout their lives. Positive adaptation to disability results from a combination of factors discussed in the following sections.

3. Factors Promoting Resilience

Since resilient students do not consistently demonstrate outstanding abilities, Arrington *et al.* (2000) argued that resilience and ability are not always related. Four factors are associated with resiliency: a sense of purpose, autonomy, goal setting, and time management (Van Vuuren, 2014). The authors argued that even in unfavorable circumstances, those who successfully overcome hardship on their own employ coping mechanisms. The ability to prepare for future challenges is another definition of resilience (Cui *et al.*, 2023; Frisby & Vallade, 2021). Resilience does not imply invulnerability but rather a dynamic process triggered by an individual's response to risk factors. Jaiyeola and Adeyemo (2018) suggested that people with disabilities exhibit lower adaptability to life challenges compared to those without disabilities. Research on resilience indicates that students with disabilities in higher education have individual abilities to promote positive development and overcome academic challenges (Martín & Moriña, 2022). In addition, environmental resources, such as parental support and relationships with other adults and peers, also contribute to their positive development (Mawila, 2023; Sefora & Ngubane, 2023)

There are various results related to socioeconomic position and resilience. While financial resources mitigate the detrimental impact of disabilities on the well-being of the elderly (Smith *et al.* 2005), no significant impact of education, social class, or ownership of assets on resilience has been observed for adverse life events in old age (Szabó *et al.* 2020). Interestingly, income was a protective factor for older native Dutch individuals but not for older immigrants (Klokgieters *et al.*, 2018). More robust effects have been observed with social and personal factors (Darold, 2018). People with severe disabilities attributed their resilience to factors such as maintaining control, social support, faith and spirituality, and the ability to integrate into the community (Scheffers *et al.* 2020; Sefotho, 2019; Stuntzner *et al.*, 2018).

Research on resilience has suggested that individuals effectively counteract the adversities they encounter (Scheffers *et al.* 2020). However, not all individuals develop the ability to overcome these adversities. It is therefore possible to conceptualize resilience as a complex interplay between protective factors, such as family and community support, and individual characteristics. Ungar (2018b) stated that resilience emerges when the individual can use external (family and social support, physical necessities, expert interventions, etc.) and internal (planning, coping skills, and attitude) resources. External resources are culturally significant,

accessible, and pertinent to the individual. Therefore, social context needs to be viewed as encompassing the home environment and the student's cultural background and community (Cui *et al.,* 2023; Sefora & Ngubane, 2023).

4. Theoretical Framework

In this study, we employed the resilience model of Ungar (2005) which was developed based on the social-ecological model proposed by Bronfenbrenner (1979). The social-ecological model emphasizes the development of the individual through interactions between himself or herself and his or her immediate environment (family, peers, broad social community, and culture). Based on this model, Ungar and his collaborators carried out 'The International Resilience Project' study to examine the global, cultural and contextual dimensions of resilience in young populations (Ungar, 2008; Ungar & Liebenberg, 2009.). In the model, resilience demands constructive, bidirectional interactions between students with disabilities and their life-worlds. Student-driven interactions involve students with disabilities seeking the support required to cope well with adversities. Concurrently, social ecologies are responsible for students' positive adjustment (Ungar, 2018a). Their contributions assist students with disabilities to access culturally and contextually meaningful opportunities and resources that mitigate risk and reciprocate students' negotiations for support (Ungar, 2018b). Four principles—cultural relativity, complexity, atypicality, and decentralism—form the basis of an ecological interpretation of the resilience construct (Ungar, 2011). This interpretation contends that resilience should be interpreted in light of an individual's cultural background, taking into account the complex interactions within their environment, acknowledging the variety of paths to positive adaptation, and giving social-ecological factors more weight than just individual traits.

5. Research Method

We employed a qualitative phenomenological research design. We focused on an inductive exploration of 'what', 'how', and 'why' questions to understand the ontology and epistemology of a group or community (Eatough & Smith, 2017). In this research design, we researched the worldview of students with disabilities to uncover the motivations behind their resilience in learning. Data were collected through interviews. The results were analyzed to understand resilience through student support and how social justice is needed in the critical and emancipatory paradigm.

5.1. Data Collection and Analysis

The study was carried out at an ODL institution, encompassing regional learning centers across nine provinces in South Africa. The researchers focused on regional hubs with many students with disabilities. The disability unit provided multi-purpose centres with various assistive technologies to support disabled students efficiently. Regular visits to these centres facilitated access to data collection. Purposive and snowball sampling methods were used to select information-rich participants. Creswell, (2013) highlights that the purposeful sampling method helps researchers understand complex problems by selecting critical cases.

We selected ten students, comprising eight females and two males to explore their personal experiences. Their ages ranged from 26 to 46 years old. Among the participants, three were visually impaired, one had hearing loss, two had epilepsy, and one had multiple fractures, resulting in mobility challenges. Two participants also had mobility challenges, and one was paraplegic. The participants were enrolled in various colleges, including Law, Human Sciences, Education, and Economic and Management Sciences.

Various interviewing strategies are used in qualitative research, including structured, unstructured, and semi-structured/in-depth interviews (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2011). Semi-structured interviews are a qualitative method of inquiry that helps to understand the social worldviews of participants (Adams, 2015). They also allow probing for detailed answers when necessary (Creswell, 2012). According to Adams (2015), such interviews "are best suited for understanding people's perceptions and experiences", which was the researchers' aim. Each interview lasted between 30 and 80 minutes and was digitally recorded for later transcription. Therefore, semi-structured interviews were chosen in this study. In the interviews, the participants openly shared their experiences of academic resilience.

We analyzed the data collected using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) in the following process: (1) coding the data and in each data item; (2) collating the codes in themes; (3) testing internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity of the themes; (4) validating themes; (5) generating thematic mind-maps of themes; (6) defining and naming themes and sub-themes to ensure concision; and (7) ensuring that data were not paraphrased or described.

5.2. Ethical Consideration

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant college's research ethical clearance committee before conducting this research. Each participant was provided with an explanation of the research problem, objectives, and questions in their preferred format. They

were also informed of the voluntary nature of participation and their right to withdraw at any stage. The ethical principles for the research with vulnerable communities were communicated in advance. Informed consent was obtained, and the participants' identities remain confidential. The participants submitted their signed consent forms before the research interviews. The participants knew their identity would be protected when reporting on the research results. Students with visual disabilities were provided consent verbally or via e-mail, while those with hearing impairments communicated via WhatsApp chat to maintain confidentiality. WhatsApp chat was also employed because the researchers could not communicate through sign language and also did not have a budget to hire a Sign Language Interpreter.

6. Results and Discussion

We identified four key themes around positive and negative experiences in higher education. The participants discussed every facet of the student experience, including challenges and strategies for overcoming them. The responses were predominantly negative, though several participants shared positive experiences in overcoming difficulties.

6.1. Theme 1: Improved Communication for Academic Support

The participants reported low mood, anxiety, and feelings of hopelessness associated with both registering at a distance learning university and the subsequent learning process:

"My challenge is that I was never told that visually impaired students get extra time. I didn't know. I came out with a supplementary...I didn't finish my paper. Study material was another challenge. It was a serious hustle to get prescribed books. I got the prescribed book a week before my exam. The way we get the prescribed materials is an inconvenience. It is not an easy process especially for a student who is visually impaired like myself." (P1)

"I thought, as a disabled student, I would be able to get the tuition fee paid and get an assistive device. When I got the funding, they only paid for my fee but not assistive device. When I enquired, they gave me the run-around."

I: "So how did you manage?"

P1: "I used the computer at work to study"

"There was a problem with my study material. I had to convert my study material into Word as the screen reader cannot read Word as the screen reader can't read PDFs. I waited and waited, and when I complained, they said they were understaffed [at the disability unit]." (P1)

"There were challenges here and there. My first challenge was study material. For a blind student like me, we don't use normal material just like any sighted student would use or any book which is being prescribed by the institution. For me, it's a different story; I need to convert it. There are different formats. Some authors would refuse for the study material to be converted and that was a challenge. That means I won't have access to that specific prescribed book. These are some of the things that made students switch from LLB or even institutions". (P2).

Difficulties with the study experience were mainly related to tutorial classes and study material. They expressed preferences for a more inclusive learning environment, particularly tutorial classes and study materials.

"Some of the modules have been challenging, there are diagrams and pictures and for us visually impaired we can't understand what the screen reader is saying about it. Then we must rely on other people to explain. So, I think Unisa needs to put that in mind when they put together study material." (P1)

"When you look at tutoring for instance. When you walk into those classes it's like you are catching them by surprise as a blind student, it's like they have not prepared for an inclusive class. They have prepared for the seeing student and we will be referred to online e-tutoring. Even e-tutoring is hard to maneuver as a blind student. The institution even when they change systems, they don't consider blind students. Most of us blind students have moved away from myUnisa as it is difficult for us to maneuver ."

The participants reported difficulties in planning study schedules and managing conflicting demands due to late study materials and assistive devices. Additionally, several participants described challenges related to unplanned changes in discussion rooms; feelings of isolation during face-to-face tutorials; balancing work and study responsibilities' financial concerns; and the need for self-care while studying were also referred to.

6.2. Theme 2: Inconsistency in Affective Support

The participants discussed the support provided, covering themes such as affective student support practices, gaps in support, and the significance of diagnosis.

Gaps in support often arise from poor communication, unclear guidance, and information being shared within social circles the participants were not part of. Additionally, the participants highlighted the lack of social and family support. Wang and Xu (2017) and Zhang *et al.* (2017) highlighted the role of social or affective support in building resilience and enhancing the quality of the learning experience. Similarly, Hashimoto (2020) underscored the importance of family support in fostering confidence and optimism among individuals with disabilities, which aligns with the participants' experiences of resilience at the university level.

While several participants perceived a lack of academic support for exam preparation and staff availability, others received assistance from both lecturers and family members in preparation for exams.

"I called the lecturer, and she sent the link to my sister. My sister watched a video and explained it to me. I wrote about something that I didn't read first-hand. Some modules need calculations, but I can't do the calculations. But I manage." (P1)

"I for one grew up without both my parents and growing up in a boarding school has always instilled a sense in me that studying is my own responsibility so that's the principle that's also helped me out in the ODL institution." (P2)

Both P1 and P2 demonstrated resilience, but their approaches differed. While P2 relied on external support, P1 drew motivation and resilience from within. The participants discussed financial constraints, impacting available support; feeling overlooked by support services; and lacking confidence in seeking support:

"The disability unit, they are very helpful. I can't generalize to all staff members. They don't understand, you first must explain yourself because they think you want to abuse them or what. You need to say I am blind or visually impaired before they can help you. It's like they want proof, they will say but you don't have a cane or a walking dog. It made me so emotional. I once told a security guard that let us change our eyesight then and see how I feel, I don't want to bother people, but I do need help because of my sight. I felt so discriminated." (P1)

"I gave up on thinking because we are an ODL institution. I thought career counselors were the ones that would be responsible for telling us that once we are done with his module, do this one or even say you have picked the wrong module you supposed to take this one".

6.3. Theme 3: Academic Success through Exerting Oneself

The participants unanimously acknowledged that achieving academic success required hard work, self-sacrifice, and focused effort. They persevered and demonstrated self-determination to attain this hard-earned achievement and they stated the following:

"I always wanted to be something, to be a recognized somebody in life so that's why I studied every opportunity I get. I studied a short course so…I want…I don't know how to put it. I want to see myself in greater height and my family you know. So, what kept me going is that I…and the negativity kept me going, it really did". (P10)

"I slept outside the gate, I was shivering, I was sickly, so I told the lady that was sitting next to me that I'm sick now. They said, "what's wrong with you because you've got a blanket and everything?" I was like "m-m-m muttering you know" and then the following day we managed to get inside, and we registered. So, I saw I think it was ****, was it ****? Yah, I, talk to him, we were talking, and I was complaining, and I was...he said "why are you complaining this much? Why are you limping?" I was limping. Yes, I was uncomfortable."

"You see I grew up in a very financially lacking support. I was raised by a single parent which is my mother. So, it was very hard, it was very hard on paying school fees, buying us uniforms you see. Then I took the decision from there because she was a friend and her friend was a teacher and then she used to point out that you see that one, we were learning together if I continued with my studies I would be there now. Then I worked hard to make sure I passed my modules so I could be successful in my life."

6.4 Theme 4: Self-efficacy to Academic Success

Self-efficacy beliefs play a crucial role in motivating individuals to take control over events that impact their lives (Bandura, 1982). Perceived self-efficacy involves faith in one's abilities to perform necessary actions to achieve desired outcomes. Perceived self-efficacy involves having faith in one's abilities to perform necessary actions to achieve the desired outcomes. Believe in oneself emerged as a significant driver of academic success, encompassing contentment with a disability, positive self-concept and leadership, and self-regulated learning.

"Okay. I have 2 kids 15 and 13. I like studying, I've been studying my whole life, but I haven't had opportunities, you know like since I completed my matric. I did my Diploma in Accounting; I didn't get to finish it because my father was a bit…how can I put it? There was a patriarchal system at home relating something that I shouldn't get a diploma or degree because I'm female. So, I didn't get far with that, I didn't get to finish it. I only did 2 years because I lied to him anyway, but I said I was doing a certificate. I knew I could do that. That's why I am here now studying for a degree in Education."

The participants acknowledged their disabilities, but did not perceive them as obstacles to achieving their goals P11 expressed her acceptance of her disability:

I said, 'Okay, UNISA, it will be best because I strive enough alone in my house' to understand what I didn't understand. So, I can go anywhere to learn what to do if I have something rather than attend some classes because it will confuse me. If I'm going to attend the classes, then the lecturer just says, then after all goes and will be furious, they, you say they teach us years to be furious if they do. "You don't understand, I explain and explain you waste my time, you write your curriculum." So okay, I'll manage it myself. If I fail, I'll say, 'Okay,' I'll try another strategy, but I have in faith in God that I achieve, so that's why I registered here in this institution.

The above results aligned with those of Cedeno, Meza, and Mejia (2018), who reported that family support, peer support, academic support, support provided by the disability unit, and self-efficacy contribute to the success of most tertiary-level students with disabilities. This success involves designing learning and support systems based on inclusive education and universal learning design (UDL). These approaches reduce barriers to education for diverse students, ensuring equitable access to learning, assessment, and support without causing any emotional strain. Additionally, Mawila (2023) associated resilience with the quality of support provided by caregivers (student support practitioners), peers, and intrinsic values developed from contextual factors.

7. Conclusion

While resilience is often viewed positively for its role in ensuring retention and propelling students toward success in learning, researchers argued that if institutions provided sufficient support, students could focus on their studies, engage more, and contribute to the development of cognitive support approaches. Mawila (2023), Lyner-Cleophas (2016), and Rotar (2022) emphasized the importance of smoothly functioning university support systems, facilitating a positive learning experience. They also pointed out the need for accessible initiation across various student support services.

This study proposes using available data on resilience to develop a persistence model. Essentially, persistence is the quality of continuing to try something despite challenges, while resilience is the ability to adapt to change and recover from setbacks. Both are important traits that help students achieve their academic goals. The resilience-based persistence model adopts a multi-faceted approach to address students' needs, provide tailored support, foster a positive self-image, and cultivate a strong coping mechanism to overcome challenges and remain engaged in their education despite their disability. The key elements include individualized disability learning plans, academic counseling, accessible accommodations, strong student-lecturer relationships, peer support, self-advocacy skills, and a focus on building resilience and self-efficacy. This model emphasizes the importance of collaboration between academics, counseling services, and disability services to ensure students reach their full potential.

In this study, regional limitations and sample selection constraints are considered as they could have a potential impact on resilience. It is therefore suggested to include cross-cultural comparisons or adopt mixed-method approaches to increase generalizability. Additionally, quantitative or large-scale studies are necessary to provide more robust empirical evidence.

Students need to spend more time on their studies rather than developing coping strategies due to inadequate support. Additionally, the findings suggest implementing academic support-oriented strategies at both the learning design level and for individual students. While institutions often provide disability-related services, students with disabilities are primarily at the university for academic growth, necessitating robust academic support. This holds true, even in an open distance learning context, so they develop self-regulation and autonomy.

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