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Regular Article

Student feedback as an institutional analytic lens: Learning support and retention in an open distance e-learning university

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ABSTRACT

Student retention in Open Distance e-Learning (ODeL) institutions remains a persistent global and South African challenge, particularly among students navigating structural, technological, and pedagogical constraints. While student feedback is frequently collected, it is seldom analysed as a systematic source of institutional intelligence capable of informing learning support and retention strategies. This study examines student feedback as an analytic lens through which institutional learning support practices and retention-related challenges can be understood within a South African ODeL university. Drawing on survey data from more than 800 honours students, the study adopts a quantitative descriptive case study design. The analysis focuses on feedback related to learning support services, assessment practices, communication, and contextual disruptions such as load shedding. Findings indicate that while students value flexible learning modalities, inconsistent feedback, delayed responses, limited academic support, and infrastructural disruptions undermine meaningful engagement and persistence. Using a quantitative descriptive case study design, survey data were collected from 866 honours students across multiple disciplines within the College of Human Sciences. The findings reveal that while students value the flexibility of OdeL provision, inconsistent academic feedback, limited access to learning resources, poor communication, and infrastructural disruptions such as load shedding significantly undermine engagement and persistence. Interpreted through Tinto's Theory of Student Integration and Constructivist Learning theory, the study demonstrates that retention in ODeL contexts is shaped more by individual motivation than by institutional responsiveness, positioning student feedback as a critical source of institutional analytic intelligence.

1. Introduction

In higher education, student feedback has emerged as a vital tool for assessing institutional effectiveness and enhancing student support systems. Universities globally are increasingly reliant on feedback mechanisms to gauge student satisfaction, identify areas of improvement, and refine academic services and resources (Wong & Chapman, 2023). One of the largest distance learning institutions in South Africa faces unique challenges in supporting a diverse and geographically dispersed student body (Mouton & Subban, 2023). Given the prominence of distance learning within ODeL, the institution has placed growing emphasis on understanding the factors that influence student success and retention (Ngubane-Mokiwa, 2017; Sefora & Ngubane, 2025). In this context, the College of Human Sciences (CHS) has prioritised gathering comprehensive feedback from its honours students to better understand their experiences and to inform improvements in learning and support systems. The flexibility that characterizes ODeL provision often coexists with challenges related to isolation, limited academic interaction, and uneven access to institutional support. In the South African context, these challenges are intensified by structural inequalities, digital divides, and recurring infrastructural disruptions such as load shedding.

A growing body of scholarship recognises that retention cannot be explained solely through individual student characteristics or preparedness. Instead, institutional practices, particularly those related to academic support, assessment feedback, and communication play a critical role in shaping student engagement and persistence. Student feedback has therefore emerged as a potentially valuable but underutilized source of institutional knowledge. While feedback is routinely collected for quality assurance purposes, it is often treated as evaluative commentary rather than as data capable of informing systemic improvements.

This study responds to this gap by examining how student feedback can be analytically mobilized to understand learning support and

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retention-related challenges in an ODeL institution. The study is guided by the following research questions: (1) What do honours students' feedback reveal about the adequacy of learning support in an ODeL context? and (2) How do these feedback patterns illuminate institutional factors influencing student retention? By addressing these questions, the study seeks to contribute empirically and conceptually to debates on retention, feedback, and institutional responsibility in distance higher education.

2. Literature review

2.1. Student retention in higher education

Student retention remains a critical issue for higher education institutions globally, particularly in distance learning environments (Mashile et al., 2020). Retention is influenced by a multitude of factors, including academic preparedness, financial constraints, access to resources, and institutional support mechanisms (Haverila et al., 2020). Tinto's (1993) theory of student integration emphasises the importance of academic and social engagement in ensuring that students persist through to graduation. In traditional universities, integration into the academic community often occurs through face-to-face interactions, but distance education presents unique challenges, requiring institutions to develop alternative strategies for fostering student engagement (Hollister et al., 2022). In South Africa, student retention is of particular concern due to the socio-economic disparities that many students face (Chiramba & Ndofirepi, 2023). Financial instability, lack of access to technological resources, and the ongoing national issue of load shedding exacerbate these challenges, as highlighted in the CHS feedback survey.

In ODeL institutions, where the majority of students are part-time and balancing work and family responsibilities, retention efforts must consider these unique pressures (Khabo, 2021). As the feedback survey indicates, module cancellations are often linked to financial difficulties and workload pressures. This aligns with the broader literature, which highlights the importance of addressing external factors that hinder student persistence, such as financial aid availability and flexible learning schedules (Li & Wong, 2019; Shaikh & Asif, 2022). Studies have shown that students' perceptions of institutional support, clarity of communication, and quality of feedback are critical determinants of persistence. Retention in ODeL settings must therefore be understood as a relational and institutional phenomenon rather than as an individual deficit.

2.2. Feedback mechanisms in higher education

Student feedback mechanisms are increasingly recognised as essential tools for institutional development in higher education. Feedback serves not only as a mechanism for improving the student experience but also as a gauge of institutional effectiveness (Kanwar & Sanjeeva, 2022). Gan et al. (2021) argues that student feedback allows institutions to make data-driven decisions that lead to targeted improvements in teaching, learning, and support services. However, the extent to which feedback leads to meaningful change varies across institutions and depends on the mechanisms in place for collecting, analysing, and acting on the data.

In the context of ODeL, the CHS survey provided students with an opportunity to reflect on their experiences, from access to resources to communication with lecturers. The high percentage of students who plan to continue their studies highlights the positive impact that certain aspects of ODeL's support structures have had. However, the survey also revealed critical gaps, particularly in access to physical library resources and the negative impact of load shedding, which aligns with the literature indicating that effective feedback mechanisms must account for both academic and non-academic factors affecting student performance (Brew et al., 2021).

Globally, higher education institutions are increasingly integrating technology into feedback systems, using platforms such as Learning Management Systems (LMS) to gather student feedback in real-time (Haleem et al., 2022). Recent studies have strengthened the understanding of feedback practices in online and distance learning environments, particularly in relation to student engagement and satisfaction (Williams, 2024; Zahid & AlManiam, 2025). However, much of this work remains limited by its narrow pedagogical focus, offering light insight into how feedback can inform institutional decision-making beyond individual courses. While these studies demonstrate the importance of timely and dialogic feedback, they rarely interrogate how systemic constraints such as resource availability, staffing capacity, and infrastructural instability shape feedback experiences at scale. This limitation shows the need for research that connects student feedback to broader institutional processes and retention outcomes, particularly in Global South OdeL contexts.

2.3. Higher education policies in South Africa and globally

Higher education policies around the world increasingly emphasise the importance of access, equity, and student support, particularly in developing regions like South Africa (Mzangwa, 2019; Baleni, 2025). South Africa's higher education system has undergone significant reforms aimed at expanding access to previously marginalised populations, yet challenges persist, particularly in the areas of financial aid, infrastructure, and student support services (Wolhuter, 2023). The National Development Plan (NDP) 2030 stresses the need for increased student support to enhance throughput rates and ensure that more students, especially from disadvantaged backgrounds, complete their qualifications (National Planning Commission, 2012).

In line with global trends, South African higher education institutions have been tasked with developing policies that not only increase access but also address the factors that contribute to student attrition (Ayuk & Koma, 2019; Masenya, 2023). ODeL, as a distance learning institution, operates under a set of unique challenges and policies. The institution's ODeL model requires specific interventions to ensure that students receive adequate support (Mouton & Subban, 2023). As reflected in the feedback survey, issues such as resource accessibility and communication with lecturers remain key areas for policy development and reform. These issues are further compounded by national challenges such as load shedding, which has a direct impact on students' ability to study and complete assignments on time (Yende, 2024).

Internationally, many countries have implemented policies aimed at improving higher education access and retention. For instance, countries like the United Kingdom and Australia have developed comprehensive frameworks for student support, including financial aid, mental health services, and academic advising (Martorosyan, Bustamante, & Saxon, 2019; Hitches et al., 2025). South Africa can draw lessons from these models, adapting international best practices to fit the unique socio-economic context of the country. The CHS survey data highlights the need for ODeL and other South African institutions to strengthen support structures, ensuring that students not only enrol in higher education but also have the resources necessary to succeed.

The existing body of literature highlights the critical role that feedback mechanisms, institutional support, and responsive policies play in enhancing student retention and success in higher education (Banihashen, Noroozi, Ginkel, Macfadyen, & Biemans, 2022). For distance learning institutions, the challenges are magnified by external factors such as financial instability, limited access to resources, and infrastructural issues like load shedding (Yende, 2024). While existing scholarship has examined student feedback primarily as a mechanism for evaluating teaching quality, far less attention has been given to its potential as a source of institutional analytic intelligence. Much of the literature treats feedback as an endpoint of quality assurance processes rather than as evidence capable of revealing systemic patterns related to learning support, communication, and institutional responsiveness.

Moreover, studies on retention in distance education frequently prioritise individual-level factors such as motivation or preparedness, often underplaying the role of institutional structures that shape students' capacity to persist. This study addresses this gap by analytically repositioning student feedback as data through which institutional conditions affecting learning support and retention in OdeL contexts can be systemically examined.

2.4. Theoretical alignment

This study is theoretically anchored in Tinto's Theory of Student Integration and constructivist learning theory. Tinto's model provides a framework for understanding how academic integration, mediated through assessment practices, feedback, and support structures, shapes persistence. Constructivist theory complements this perspective by foregrounding feedback as a learning process rather than a unidirectional transmission of information. Together, these frameworks inform the analytic interpretation of student feedback as an indicator of institutional integration and learning support quality. These theoretical frameworks provide a lens through which the findings of the survey can be interpreted and understood, helping to explain the factors that influence student success and engagement in a distance learning environment (Lenong & Holtzhausen, 2023), like the College of Human Sciences (CHS). The frameworks used in this article include Tinto's Theory of Student Retention, Constructivist Learning Theory, and Equity and Access in Higher Education.

2.4.1. Tinto's Theory of Student Retention

Tinto's (1993) Theory of Student Retention remains one of the most widely used models for understanding why students persist or drop out of higher education. Tinto argues that student retention is influenced by both academic and social integration, with students more likely to persist if they are meaningfully engaged in their academic communities and feel supported both inside and outside of the classroom (Tinto, 2023). This model is particularly relevant to the findings of the CHS survey, which identified financial difficulties, workload pressures, and resource accessibility as primary challenges faced by students.

According to Tinto, institutional support systems, such as academic advising, financial aid, and accessible learning resources, are essential in helping students overcome external pressures that may lead to withdrawal (Engel, 2022). The survey findings, particularly regarding module cancellations due to financial strain and workload, support Tinto's argument that institutions must provide comprehensive support structures to facilitate student retention (Samoila & Vrabie, 2023). In the context of distance education, where students often lack the social interactions typical of traditional on-campus environments, institutional support becomes even more critical (Kamraju et al., 2024). ODeL's focus on digital learning platforms like myODeL addresses the need for academic integration, but the findings suggest that more is needed in terms of financial and personal support to prevent students from dropping out due to external pressures.

2.4.2. Constructivist Learning Theory

The Constructivist Learning Theory, derived from the work of scholars like Piaget and Vygotsky, posits that learners actively construct their own understanding and knowledge of the world through experience and reflection (Chand, 1995). In the context of higher education, this theory underscores the importance of student-centered learning environments where students are empowered to take control of their educational journeys. Feedback mechanisms play a central role in this process, as they provide students with the necessary guidance to reflect on their learning and make informed decisions about their academic progress (Damşa & de Lange, 2019; Zahid & AlManiam, 2025).

In the CHS survey, students provided feedback on various aspects of their learning experience, including resource accessibility, communication with lecturers, and overall programme satisfaction. The feedback collected can be seen as part of the constructivist process, where students engage in self-reflection to identify barriers to their success and provide input on how these barriers can be addressed (Kerimbayev et al., 2023). For example, the survey results highlighting students' difficulties in accessing library resources or managing workload due to employment align with the constructivist notion that learning is shaped by external contexts and individual experiences (Damşa & de Lange, 2019; Fisher, 2021). By integrating student feedback into institutional decision-making, ODeL can foster a more responsive and supportive learning environment that aligns with constructivist principles.

Furthermore, Constructivist Learning Theory emphasises collaboration and social learning, where interaction between peers and lecturers enhances the learning process (Saleem et al., 2021). The survey's findings that many students struggle with communication with lecturers and lack interaction with peers outside of formal academic spaces point to a need for ODeL to strengthen opportunities for collaborative learning. Creating spaces for meaningful interaction, through virtual group discussions, peer support networks, and enhanced lecturer-student engagement could help ODeL address these gaps, promoting deeper learning and academic success.

2.4.3. Equity and Access in Higher Education

The concept of equity in higher education has become increasingly important as institutions seek to address the socio-economic disparities that affect student access and success. Equity refers to the fair and just provision of educational opportunities, ensuring that all students, regardless of their background, have the resources and support needed to succeed (Levinson et al., 2022). This theoretical framework is particularly relevant to the South African context, where historical inequalities continue to affect access to higher education, especially for students from disadvantaged communities (Chiramba & Ndofirepi, 2023).

The findings of the CHS survey reveal significant challenges related to equity, particularly in terms of financial support and resource accessibility. The fact that financial difficulties were the leading cause of module cancellations suggests that ODeL's current financial aid systems may not be sufficient to support students from lower-income backgrounds (Mngomezulu et al., 2017; Dube, 2024, pp. 11–27). Equity theory would argue that institutions have a responsibility to level the playing field by providing targeted financial support to those who need it most (Levinson et al., 2022). This could involve expanding access to bursaries, offering flexible payment options, or providing emergency financial aid to prevent students from withdrawing due to economic hardship.

In addition to financial equity, the survey's findings on access to library resources, particularly hard copy materials, highlight disparities in students' ability to engage with academic content (Timotheou et al., 2023). While some students could access digital resources with ease, others, particularly those affected by load shedding or limited internet connectivity, struggle to obtain the materials they need to succeed. Equity and access theory would suggest that ODeL needs to implement policies that address these infrastructural challenges, ensuring that all students have equal access to the resources necessary for academic success, regardless of their socio-economic status or geographical location.

2.4.4. Integration of theoretical frameworks

By integrating these three theoretical perspectives, this study provides a comprehensive understanding of the factors that influence student success and retention in a distance learning environment. Tinto's Theory of Student Retention emphasises the importance of academic and social integration, which is particularly relevant in the context of distan Constructivist ce learning, where students often face isolation (Samoila & Vrabie, 2023). Learning Theory highlights the importance of student-centered feedback mechanisms, where students play an active role in shaping their learning experience through reflection and input

(Bhardwaj et al., 2025; Shah, 2019). Finally, the Equity and Access framework underscores the importance of addressing socio-economic barriers to ensure that all students, regardless of background, have the opportunity to succeed (Eden et al., 2024).

Together, these frameworks suggest that institutions like ODeL must adopt a holistic approach to student support, addressing both academic and non-academic factors that influence student outcomes. Financial aid, resource accessibility, and effective communication between students and lecturers are all critical components of this support system (Qi et al., 2022). By drawing on these theories, ODeL can better understand the challenges faced by its students and implement targeted interventions that promote equity, engagement, and success in higher education.

This theoretical framework provides a foundation for understanding the key findings of the CHS General Honours Feedback Survey and offers insights into how ODeL can enhance its student support systems. By applying these theories, the institution can better address the financial, academic, and infrastructural challenges faced by its students, ultimately leading to improved retention rates and more equitable educational outcomes.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

The study adopts a quantitative descriptive case study design, focusing on a single South African ODeL university. This design is appropriate for examining institutional practices and student experiences within a specific organisational context while generating analytically meaningful insights. The survey was structured to assess key areas that affect student engagement, satisfaction, and retention, with the aim of informing institutional improvements. The survey was divided into seven core themes: reasons for studying, programme visibility, module cancellations, resource accessibility, study outcomes, student interaction outside the academic environment, and programme recommendations. These themes were selected based on their relevance to student success and feedback literature, as well as the specific challenges faced by distance learning students at an ODeL institution. In this study, the ‘case’ is defined as the College of Human Sciences within a single South African OdeL university, examined as a bounded institutional unit to generate contextually grounded, non-generalisable insights into learning support and retention.

The survey design incorporated a mix of closed-ended questions using a 5- to 6-point Likert scale and open-ended questions to provide a balance between quantitative data and qualitative insights. Likert scale questions were employed to measure student satisfaction and perceptions across a range of institutional services, allowing for nuanced responses. Open-ended questions allowed students to elaborate on their experiences, particularly regarding module cancellations and the challenges they faced with resource accessibility (Gueta & Janer, 2021). The use of a Likert scale provided quantifiable measures of satisfaction, which are critical for institutional benchmarking and improvements.

The rationale behind this mixed-methods approach was to capture a holistic view of the student experience, ensuring that the survey was comprehensive enough to identify both specific and general challenges. The survey was administered through Microsoft Forms, chosen for its ease of access and ability to ensure anonymity, which may have contributed to a higher response rate by minimising respondent hesitation.

3.1.1. Participants and sampling

The study population comprised honours students registered during the 2023 academic year. An online survey was distributed via institutional communication channels. A total of 866 valid responses were received from an estimated honours student population of approximately 5,000, representing a response rate of roughly 17%. While this constitutes a substantial dataset for institutional analysis, response rates varied across departments, with some programmes underrepresented or not represented at all. These variations limit the generalisability of the findings across the entire College of Human Sciences but remain appropriate for the descriptive and diagnostic aims of the study.

The survey targeted all registered honours students across 19 departments within the College of Human Sciences. A non-probability, convenience sampling method was used, allowing all students to voluntarily participate in the survey. The survey link was distributed to students via their official myLife email addresses and through Short Message Service (SMS), ensuring a wide reach. The data collection period ran from December to early February, giving students approximately two months to complete the survey at their convenience.

A total of 866 responses were collected, which represents a significant proportion of the plus 5000 total honours student population within CHS. The largest response group came from students in the Bachelor of Arts Honours in Psychology programme, making up 511 responses, followed by students in International Organisational Communication and Social Behavioural Studies in HIV/AIDS. While the response rate from other departments was lower, the diversity of responses reflects the varied experiences across the institution. However, it is important to note that no responses were received from students enrolled in certain departments, such as Christian Leadership and Musicology, which presents a limitation in terms of generalisability across all CHS honours programmes.

3.1.2. Survey instrument development and Validation

The survey instrument was developed through a review of existing literature on learning support, feedback, and retention in ODeL contexts. The instrument consisted of closed-ended items organised into thematic sections addressing academic support, assessment feedback, communication, and contextual challenges such as load shedding. Content validity was established through expert review by academic staff familiar with ODeL pedagogy, and the instrument was piloted with a small group of students prior to administration. The instrument was designed primarily as an institutional diagnostic instrument rather than as a psychometric scale intended for construct measurement. As such, reliability statistics, such as Cronbach's alpha, were not calculated for aggregated scales. Instead, emphasis was placed on content validity, clarity, and relevance to institutional learning support processes, ensuring that the instrument could capture actionable feedback aligned with the study's descriptive and analytic objectives.

3.1.3. Data analysis

The survey data were analysed using both quantitative and qualitative methods. For the closed-ended Likert scale questions, descriptive statistics were employed to calculate the percentage of respondents for each response category (e.g., agree, strongly agree, neutral, disagree, strongly disagree) (Hutchinson, 2021). This approach provided an overview of general trends in student satisfaction and perceptions. Frequency distributions were used to summarise responses to each theme, allowing for easy comparison between categories (Bakker, 2023) such as access to resources, programme visibility, and reasons for module cancellations.

Where applicable, cross-tabulation was used to explore relationships between different variables, such as part-time vs. full-time student status and access to resources. For example, cross-tabulation helped reveal that part-time students were more likely to cite financial and workload challenges as reasons for module cancellations, aligning with broader studies on distance learning and working students.

The open-ended responses were analysed qualitatively through thematic analysis, identifying key patterns and recurring themes (Peel, 2020). Responses were coded based on categories such as “financial difficulties,” “workload pressures,” and “resource accessibility,” which allowed for deeper insight into the specific challenges students faced. Thematic analysis provided a richer understanding of student

experiences that could not be captured through quantitative measures alone.

The analysis prioritised descriptive statistics and thematic interpretation rather than inferential testing. This approach aligns with the study's aim of identifying institutional patterns and support-related challenges rather than testing hypotheses or making population-level generalisations. While comparative statistical tests such as chi-square analyses can be valuable in explanatory designs, their use was not methodologically appropriate for the present study's diagnostic and context-specific focus.

3.1.4. Ethical considerations

This study was reviewed and approved by Unisa Professional Research Committee with the approval number: 2020_PRC_Rew_007_Ex, dated November 14, 2022. Participation was voluntary, and written informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in this study.

3.1.5. Limitations

Several limitations must be acknowledged in the design and execution of this study. First, the use of a convenience sampling method means that the findings may not be fully representative of the entire honours student population within CHS. While the survey attracted a large number of responses, certain departments had little or no representation, which limits the generalisability of the findings across all honours programmes.

Second, the reliance on self-reported data introduces the potential for response bias, where students may have underreported or overreported certain experiences, particularly regarding satisfaction or dissatisfaction with institutional support. Anonymity was maintained to mitigate this, but the issue remains inherent in survey-based research.

Third, while the survey captured valuable data on the challenges students faced, it did not account for the possible cumulative effects of these challenges over the duration of their studies. For instance, the survey was conducted over a two-month period, and students' circumstances may have changed over time, particularly in relation to external factors such as load shedding or family responsibilities.

Finally, the analysis of qualitative data through thematic coding, while insightful, remains subjective to some degree. The interpretation of open-ended responses may have introduced researcher bias, although efforts were made to minimise this by maintaining consistency in coding and ensuring that multiple coders reviewed the data.

Despite these limitations, the survey provides a comprehensive snapshot of the honours student experience at the College of Human Sciences. The mixed-methods approach allows for both breadth and depth of analysis, offering valuable insights that can inform institutional improvements. The data collected serve as a critical tool for guiding policy changes and addressing the challenges faced by honours students in a distance learning environment.

4. Results

This section presents a descriptive analysis of student feedback to identify institutional patterns related to learning support, communication, and programme experiences within the College of Human Sciences. Rather than reporting survey items in isolation, the findings are organised thematically to highlight recurring challenges and enabling conditions that shape student engagement and persistence in an open and distance e-learning context. This thematic organisation allows student feedback to be interpreted as institutional evidence, revealing systemic strengths and constraints that influence retention. The findings are organised around six interrelated themes: reasons for study, programme visibility, module cancellations, resource accessibility, communication and support, and overall programme satisfaction. Together, these themes illuminate patterns relevant to student persistence, engagement, and institutional support. Where relevant, differences between part-time and full-time students and variations across programmes are discussed narratively to highlight institutional patterns, consistent with the study's descriptive analytic approach.

4.1. Reasons for studying

The majority of participating honours students (61.66%) reported that they were enrolled with the intention of progressing to a master's degree, while 25.48% indicated that their primary motivation was to strengthen their credentials for future employment. Smaller proportions cited improving credentials for their current employment (7.62%) or other reasons not specified (6.24%).

These findings indicate that most students view the honours qualification as a transitional academic pathway rather than a terminal credential. However, intentions to continue studying do not automatically translate into institutional retention. among students planning to pursue a master's degree, only 57% indicated that they intended to apply at an ODeL institution, while 25% remained unsure. This uncertainty suggests that students may perceive gaps in the academic or support services offered at an ODeL institution, prompting them to consider other institutions. Retention theories, such as Tinto's (1993) model of institutional commitment, stress the importance of institutional support in retaining students for subsequent degrees. ODeL should therefore consider strengthening its support systems and enhancing its postgraduate offerings to retain these students.

4.2. Programme visibility

The survey found that 73.09% of students discovered their honours programme through the institution's website, while only 9.24% learned about the programme through departmental information, and 5.20% heard about it through word of mouth from friends or family. This heavy reliance on the institutional website as the primary source of information suggests that while ODeL 's online presence is effective, other marketing and communication channels may be underutilized.

The limited role of social media (3.81%) in programme visibility is particularly noteworthy, given the widespread use of these platforms for communication and marketing in the higher education sector globally. Institutions that effectively engage students through social media have been shown to increase enrolment and retention, as these platforms facilitate timely communication and foster a sense of community among students (Lottering, 2020). ODeL institutions may benefit from enhancing its digital engagement strategies by leveraging social media and other interactive platforms to increase programme visibility and provide timely, relevant information to prospective students.

4.3. Module cancellations

Financial difficulties were the most frequently cited reason for module cancellations, with 297 students (34.30%) indicating that they withdrew from modules due to personal or familial financial struggles. Other significant factors included workload due to employment or family responsibilities (20.57%) and academic workload (18%). The fact that financial difficulties were the leading cause of module cancellations is consistent with broader trends in South African higher education, where socio-economic challenges continue to act as a barrier to student progression. The link between financial instability and academic performance is well-documented in the literature, with studies showing that students from lower-income backgrounds are more likely to experience interruptions in their studies (Vadivel et al., 2023).

The high number of cancellations due to employment and family responsibilities highlights the dual pressures many part-time students face at ODeL institutions. The flexibility of distance learning is intended to accommodate students with external responsibilities; however, the data indicate that these pressures remain significant enough to negatively impact student success (Turan et al., 2022). Tinto's (1993) theory

emphasises that external obligations can detract from students' academic integration and persistence, particularly for non-traditional students. To address this, ODeL institutions could explore more flexible scheduling options and additional support services aimed at helping students balance their work, family, and academic commitments.

4.4. Resource accessibility

A critical finding of the survey was the mixed responses regarding access to resources. While over 70% of students reported being able to access the institutions online learning platform, myODeL, with ease, there were significant concerns about access to library resources. Only 50% of students agreed that they were able to access online library resources, and less than 30% agreed that they could access hard copy materials. This disparity suggests that while ODeL's digital platforms are relatively robust, access to academic materials, particularly physical resources, remains a significant challenge for students. The challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to the closure of physical library spaces, likely exacerbated this issue.

Furthermore, load shedding has had a pronounced impact on student performance, with more than 50% of students reporting that their studies were negatively affected by power outages. This highlights the importance of ensuring that students have reliable access to electricity and internet connectivity, which are essential for distance learning. The growing reliance on digital resources necessitates a focus on bridging the digital divide, a challenge that has been well-documented in South Africa's higher education landscape (Faloye & Ajayi, 2021). The institution's provision of data to students has helped mitigate some of these issues, but as the survey results show, infrastructural challenges like load shedding continue to impede student progress.

4.5. Communication with lecturers and support

Just over 50% of students agreed that they were able to communicate effectively with their lecturers, while 23.44% remained neutral, and over 20% disagreed. This finding points to a gap in student-lecturer engagement, which is critical for academic success in distance education environments. Research indicates that frequent and meaningful communication with lecturers is one of the most important factors contributing to student retention in online learning (Rotar, 2022). The relatively low percentage of students who reported satisfaction with lecturer communication implies that more needs to be done to ensure that students have regular and effective access to academic support.

4.6. Programme satisfaction and recommendations

More than 50% of students expressed satisfaction with their ability to achieve programme outcomes, and 61.48% indicated that they would recommend their honours programme to others. However, 22.72% of students responded with “maybe,” while 15.8% said they would not recommend the programme. This pattern reflects qualified satisfaction rather than unequivocal endorsement, suggesting that positive learning experiences are tempered by persistent challenges related to resources, communication, and external pressures.

4.7. Implications and recommendations

The findings of this survey reveal that the institution's honours students face a complex mix of challenges related to financial stability, resource accessibility, and workload management. Addressing these issues is essential for improving student retention and satisfaction. Financial support systems must be enhanced, particularly for part-time students who are most vulnerable to socio-economic pressures. Furthermore, instituions should focus on improving access to both digital and physical resources, taking into account the persistent impact of load shedding on students' ability to complete their studies.

Greater emphasis on student-lecturer communication and digital engagement through platforms like social media could also improve the overall student experience. Strengthening these areas would align ODeL's offerings with global best practices in online and distance education, where student engagement and support are key determinants of success.

The data from the CHS General Honours Feedback Survey provides valuable insights into the student experience at ODeL. While the institution has made strides in areas such as digital accessibility and programme visibility, significant challenges remain in ensuring that all students, particularly those facing financial or infrastructural difficulties, can succeed. Addressing these gaps will require targeted institutional interventions, including enhanced financial aid, improved access to resources, and better communication between students and lecturers.

Taken together, the findings reveal a consistent pattern across domains of academic support, resource accessibility, and institutional communication. While students express strong motivation to complete their studies, this commitment is frequently undermined by delayed or insufficient feedback, limited access to learning resources, and infrastructural disruptions such as load shedding. These patterns suggest that challenges to persistence are not primarily attributable to individual student disengagement but are embedded with institutional support systems that mediate students’ learning experiences.

5. Discussion

This study makes a conceptual contribution by repositioning student feedback as a form of institutional analytic intelligence rather than as evaluative commentary on teaching alone. By analysing feedback as evidence of systemic conditions shaping learning support and communication, the study extends retention research beyond individual-level explanations and foregrounds the role of institutional responsiveness in shaping student persistence within open and distance e-learning contexts.

5.1. Academic aspirations, institutional commitment, and retention

The strong orientation of honours students towards postgraduate study reflects high levels of academic aspiration, a finding consistent with prior research on transitional cohorts in higher education (Shange, 2018; Yu et al., 2024). However, the uncertainty expressed by a substantial proportion of students regarding continued enrolment at the same institution suggests that aspiration alone is insufficient to ensure retention. According to Tinto's (1993) model, persistence depends on sustained academic integration and institutional commitment. Where students perceive gaps in support, communication, or resource provision, their likelihood of continuing within the same institutional environment diminishes.

This finding aligns with Chirambe's (2023) argument that retention in South African higher education is shaped less by students' willingness to persist and more by the extent to which institutions actively support their academic trajectories. In this sense, student feedback in the present study reveals early signals of disengagement that may precede formal dropout, positioning feedback as a critical diagnostic tool for institutional planning.

5.2. External pressures, financial constraints, and academic integration

Financial instability emerged as the dominant factor influencing module cancellations, reinforcing long-standing evidence that socio-economic disadvantage remains a central barrier to student success in South Africa (Shange, 2018; Vadivel et al., 2023). For many honours students, particularly those studying part-time, academic participation is negotiated alongside employment and family responsibilities. While ODeL models are designed to accommodate such complexity, the

findings suggest that flexibility alone does not neutralise the cumulative impact of external pressures.

Tinto (1993) emphasises that competing external obligations weaken students' capacity for academic integration, particularly among non-traditional students. This observation is echoed by Turan et al. (2022), who note that workload conflicts in distance education environments often result in delayed progression or withdrawal. The present findings therefore underscore the need for institutional strategies that go beyond access and flexibility, incorporating targeted financial and academic support mechanisms for students most vulnerable to attrition.

Interpreted through Tinto's Theory of Student Integration, the findings demonstrate that academic integration in ODeL contexts is not solely dependent on students' motivation or preparedness but is significantly shaped by institutional practices such as feedback timeliness, access to learning resources, and clarity of communication. In this regard, student feedback functions as an empirical lens through which the effectiveness of institutional integration mechanisms can be assessed, particularly within resource-constrained environments.

5.3. Feedback, communication, and constructivist learning

From a constructivist perspective, learning is understood as an interactive and dialogic process mediated through feedback and engagement with knowledgeable others. The reported limitations in student–lecturer communication suggest that opportunities for meaningful interaction remain uneven within the ODeL environment. This finding is consistent with Gherghel et al. (2023), who argue that frequent and responsive communication is a critical determinant of engagement and persistence in online learning contexts.

Where feedback is delayed or limited, students' ability to reflect, adjust learning strategies, and construct understanding is constrained. As constructivist learning theory suggests, feedback is not merely evaluative but formative; it functions as a mechanism through which students make sense of academic expectations. Inadequate communication, therefore, represents not only a pedagogical weakness but a structural barrier to academic integration, with implications for retention.

From a constructivist perspective, learning is understood as an active process of meaning-making supported through interaction, guidance, and feedback. The findings indicate that when institutional feedback systems are fragmented or inconsistent, students' capacity to construct understanding and sustain engagement is compromised. This extends constructivist learning theory beyond the classroom by illustrating how institutional-level feedback structures shape students' learning trajectories and persistence.

5.4. Infrastructure, digital access, and contextual inequality

One of the most significant contributions of this study lies in foregrounding load shedding as a major impediment to student engagement. While much of the literature on distance education emphasises internet connectivity as the primary access challenge, the findings demonstrate that in the South African context, access is also contingent on stable electricity supply. This supports Lumadi's (2024) contention that infrastructural inequality remains a defining feature of higher education participation in the Global South.

The impact of load shedding complicates assumptions that digital platforms alone can ensure equitable access to learning. As Reddy-Moonasamy and Naidoo (2022) argues, the effectiveness of online learning systems is inseparable from the broader material conditions in which students live. Although the institution's provision of data mitigates some challenges, the findings indicate that infrastructural disruptions continue to undermine consistent participation, assessment completion, and academic confidence.

5.5. Programme visibility and institutional engagement

The limited role of social media in programme discovery suggests missed opportunities for institutional engagement. As Masele and Rwehikiza (2021) note, social media platforms play an increasingly important role in shaping students' perceptions of institutional accessibility and responsiveness. In an ODeL context, where physical presence is absent, digital engagement strategies may serve as a proxy for institutional visibility and belonging. Strengthening these channels may therefore contribute indirectly to improved retention by fostering early and sustained engagement.

The findings reinforce the argument that student retention in OdeL institutions is shaped by the interaction between academic integration, external pressures, and structural conditions. Consistent with Tinto's (1993) framework, students are more likely to persist when institutional systems actively support their engagement, mitigate external constraints, and provide meaningful opportunities for interaction. By analysis student feedback as institutional data, this study demonstrates how feedback can inform targeted interventions aimed at strengthening learning support, improving communication practices, and addressing contextual barriers to success.

The principal contribution of this study lies in its conceptual repositioning of student feedback as institutional analytic intelligence rather than as evaluative commentary. By demonstrating how feedback reveals systemic weaknesses in learning support, communication, and infrastructural responsiveness, the study offers actionable insights for institutional planning in ODeL contexts. For policymakers and institutional leaders, the findings show the need for coordinated support strategies that integrate academic feedback practices, financial assistance, and infrastructural mitigation. Retention, in this framing, emerges not as a function of student resilience alone but as an outcome of institutional design and responsiveness.

5.6. Implications for institutional policy and learning support in ODeL

The findings of this study have direct implications for institutional policy, learning support design, and retention strategies with open and distance e-learning environments. By treating student feedback as institutional analytic intelligence, higher education institutions can move beyond reactive quality assurance processes towards proactive, evidence-informed interventions that address systemic barriers to student persistence.

At the policy level, the findings show the need for integrated support frameworks that align academic feedback practices with financial aid processes and infrastructural planning. Persistent financial difficulties reported by students suggest that retention strategies must incorporate more responsive funding mechanisms, while infrastructural disruptions such as load shedding require institutional policies that allow for flexible assessment deadlines and alternative modes of content access.

In terms of learning support design, institutions should prioritise timely, clear, and dialogic feedback practices across modules, supported by targeted lecturer development in online pedagogies. Improved access to digital and physical library resources, clearer communication regarding module availability, and coordinated use of learning management systems and supplementary communication platforms are essential for strengthening students' academic integration.

From a retention perspective, the findings suggest that student persistence is best supported through coordinated institutional action rather than isolated interventions. Peer support initiatives, early identification of disengagement through feedback patterns, and cross-departmental collaboration can enhance students' sense of belonging and reduce attrition in ODeL contexts.

6. Implications for educational practice

The findings from the CHS General Honours Feedback Survey

highlight several areas where institutional practices can be improved to enhance student experience and support. The survey data provides valuable insights into the challenges students face, particularly in terms of financial stability, workload management, resource accessibility, and communication with lecturers. These challenges have direct implications for student retention, satisfaction, and success, particularly in a distance learning context like ODeL.

6.1. Practical recommendations

1. Enhance Financial Support Systems: Given that financial difficulties are the leading cause of module cancellations, ODeLs and similar institutions should expand financial aid options, particularly for part-time students who are balancing work and study. This could include:
   - Increasing the availability of scholarships and bursaries for part-time and lower-income students.
   - Offering flexible tuition payment plans to reduce the financial burden.
   - Providing emergency financial aid to prevent students from dropping out due to sudden financial crises.
2. Improve Resource Accessibility: Access to academic resources, especially physical library materials, remains a challenge. To mitigate this, institutions could:
   - Strengthen their digital library offerings by expanding access to e-books, journal databases, and other online resources.
   - Improve courier services for hard copy materials, ensuring timely delivery to students in remote locations.
   - Consider offering alternative resources, such as offline content and study materials, for students affected by load shedding or limited internet access.
3. Address the Impact of Load Shedding: Load shedding emerged as a significant barrier to student progress. ODeLs can help mitigate this by:
   - Providing more flexible assignment deadlines during periods of national power outages.
   - Offering alternative formats for exams and coursework that can be completed offline.
   - Partnering with government or private companies to explore sustainable solutions, such as portable solar-powered devices or data subsidies.
4. Enhance Student-Lecturer Communication: The survey results show that communication with lecturers is a critical area for improvement. Practical steps include:
   - Increasing virtual office hours to give students more opportunities to engage with lecturers.
   - Encouraging lecturers to use platforms such as WhatsApp, Telegram, or other real-time messaging tools for quicker communication with students.
   - Providing additional training for lecturers on effective communication strategies in an online learning environment.
5. Promote Peer Support and Collaborative Learning: The data suggest that many students do not engage with their peers outside formal academic settings, which can negatively impact retention and success. Institutions should:
   - Facilitate the formation of peer support groups through platforms like WhatsApp or Telegram, allowing students to collaborate and share resources.
   - Encourage student-led study groups or mentorship programs that foster social and academic interaction.
   - Develop online communities or forums where students can engage with one another and share advice, resources, and experiences.

7. Areas for future research

1. Longitudinal Studies on Student Retention: Future research should track student retention rates over time to assess the long-term impact of financial, academic, and infrastructural support on student success. Longitudinal studies can provide deeper insights into how institutional interventions influence student outcomes over multiple semesters or academic years.
2. Impact of Load Shedding on Distance Learning: Given the significant impact of load shedding on students, more focused research is needed to explore how power outages affect the academic performance of distance learners in South Africa. This research could inform the development of more resilient educational technologies and practices.
3. Effectiveness of Digital Engagement Strategies: Further research could explore the effectiveness of digital engagement strategies, such as the use of social media and real-time communication platforms, in enhancing programme visibility and student-lecturer interactions. Understanding how these platforms can be leveraged for student support could inform new models of online teaching and learning.
4. Equity and Access in Distance Learning: Future research should examine how socio-economic disparities affect access to distance learning resources, particularly in underprivileged areas. Investigating the digital divide in greater detail could help institutions develop targeted interventions to bridge these gaps.

8. Conclusion

The findings from the CHS General Honours Feedback Survey provide a roadmap for improving student support systems in distance learning environments. By foregrounding students' lived experiences, the study demonstrates that feedback can function as a critical form of institutional intelligence, revealing how academic, administrative, and structural conditions shape engagement and persistence. Rather than reflecting isolated student dissatisfaction, the feedback highlights systemic patterns that point to institutional practices requiring strategic intervention.

The results indicate that financial constraints, limited accessibility of learning resources, and inconsistent communication between students and lecturers collectively undermine students' capacity to engage meaningfully with their studies. In ODeL contexts, where face-to-face interaction is minimal, timely and constructive feedback, clear communication, and responsive academic support play a central role in fostering academic integration. When these elements are weak or unevenly implemented, students' sense of belonging and academic confidence is compromised, increasing the risk of disengagement and attrition.

Interpreted through Tinto's Theory of Student Integration, the findings highlight that retention is not solely a function of individual motivation or preparedness but is deeply shaped by institutional structures and practices. From a constructivist learning perspective, feedback emerges as a pedagogical mechanism through which students actively construct understanding and align their learning with institutional expectations. Inadequate feedback and limited academic interaction therefore represent not only pedagogical shortcomings but structural barriers to learning in distance education environments.

The study further highlights the importance of contextualising student support within the realities of the South African higher education landscape. Persistent infrastructural challenges, including load shedding, were shown to disrupt access to online platforms, assessment submission, and communication channels. These structural constraints intersect with institutional design to exacerbate existing inequalities, reinforcing the need for ODeL institutions to adopt flexible, context-sensitive support strategies. Retention initiatives that overlook these realities risk shifting responsibility onto students while obscuring systemic constraints beyond their control.

Overall, the study contributes to scholarship on distance education by repositioning student feedback as a strategic resource for institutional learning and improvement. It argues for a shift from viewing feedback as a quality assurance endpoint to recognising it as an ongoing diagnostic tool that can inform policy, pedagogy, and support system design. For ODeL institutions, this implies investing in coordinated academic support structures, strengthening feedback practices, improving communication responsiveness, and developing mitigation strategies for infrastructural disruption.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that student feedback offers a valuable institutional lens for understanding the conditions that shape learning support and retention in open and distance e-learning environments. By repositioning feedback as institutional analytic intelligence, the study contributes conceptually to retention theory and practically to institutional policy and practice. Addressing retention in ODeL contexts, therefore, requires not only student-level interventions but sustained institutional responsiveness to the systemic challenges revealed through student feedback.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author.

Ethical approval

This study was reviewed and approved by Unisa Professional Research Committee with the approval number: 2020_PRC_Rew_007_Ex, dated November 14, 2022. Participation was voluntary, and written informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in this study.

Declaration of use of AI

The authors declare that no AI assisted technologies were used during any stage in the preparation of this article.

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