

Editorial

Significant trends in ODL research, as reflected in *Progressio*¹

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The recent accreditation of *Progressio: South African Journal for Open and Distance Learning Practice* brings to the fore the importance of research in the field of open and distance learning (ODL) in South Africa. As distance education has continued to evolve from correspondence teaching to distance education to ODL, research has also evolved. But has ODL on the southern tip of Africa kept abreast of international developments? Were the nature of ODL, the use of technologies, academic productivity, staff development and student matters reflected in the research published in the journal since it first appeared in 1979? From our research findings and the present edition it is clear that *Progressio* has done all this, and more.

In 1995, Gerrit Kamper² analysed several of the articles that appeared in the journal's first 15 years, and later, in 2007, we³ published a thematic analysis. In this editorial we continue the conversation. While we have discovered certain changes in the types and focus of research, we are surprised at the 'sameness' of many of the themes. We expected to find significant differences between the research pre- and post-1994, however, this is not necessarily so.

As would be expected, the nature of distance education is very evident. Many researchers chose to investigate major European and American distance education institutions in relation to Unisa. The focus of much of the research was to see how Unisa matched up against these other institutions. However, other ODL institutions – such as the Chinese Radio and Television University, as well

as the Zimbabwe Open University (amongst others) – were also investigated in terms of delivery models and success rates.

A significant trend can be seen in the move away from the theoretical discussion on teaching theories in the 1980s where the nature of distance education and the DE student were generally ignored, towards a more practical approach to the teaching of university subjects. It is evident that researchers have developed a need to understand the nature of ODL and the rigors of teaching and learning through mass education. The evolution of the delivery of learning material, from being content driven to becoming more student centred, is also evident. Quality assurance and work-integrated learning – previously lacking in the research – is more evident in later editions.

The question of institutional management or how to run a distance education institution was on the agenda of researchers (and especially commentators) from early on. Issues of the rationalisation of departments and faculties were mooted as early as 1994. Questions on the validity of the ‘academic year’ for distance education were investigated in 1979, thus showing the beginnings of ideas on openness of access. This was accompanied by recommendations on the part of various writers, on how to make it easier for students to enrol and write examinations ‘anytime, anyplace’. Amongst these recommendations was the call for a modular system to be introduced at Unisa. However, the matter of modularisation and its effect on the workload of both academics and students, has since become a cause of much debate.

In the mid-1980s there was a discussion on how the institution could promote academic productivity within the university. The arguments raised centred around how the institution could ease the workload of academics, put mechanisms in place to promote research output, and improve the general wellbeing of academic staff. In 1990 there was a satisfaction survey of university academic staff, and then in 1997 the stress of working in an academic environment was investigated. Nothing more has been published on this theme in *Progressio*, so one wonders whether academic productivity and staff satisfaction are so good that it is no longer an issue.

As can be expected from a journal such as this, curriculum development has been widely researched and commented on. Many of the writers reported on curriculum development in their own teaching disciplines. However, various models and philosophies were also discussed. Prevalent amongst these are theories and perspectives on adult education, a move towards Outcomes Based Education (OBE), reflective practices, and the Africanisation of the curriculum. The latter might seem to be a more modern theme, yet it emerged in this journal in 1996. However, this topic has not received much attention since then.

One of the backbones of ODL is materials development. As distance education has changed from correspondence to openness, so the development of learning materials has changed. This is reflected in the publication as well. We found that over the years the concept has changed from instructional design to learning development. The same change of focus from content to student-centeredness is apparent in this theme, as well as those mentioned before. From the early 1990s there were calls for the creation of integrated student packages, excellence in the design and production of materials, as well as the use of a team approach to materials design. The introduction of scaffolding of learning by means of visual elements and multimedia is indicative of international trends towards the use of technologies in ODL.

As this edition attests, technologies have been the driving force of ODL since the first correspondence lessons were delivered by mail. The evolution of the use of technologies, and experimentation with 'small media', mass media and multimedia, have been recurrent themes of research. In the 1980s, the reporting of the use of 'audiovisual aids' indicated a 'gadget approach' to the use of technologies. The use of technologies such as Beltel (the precursor of the Internet), the radio, slide-sound programmes and so on were investigated. The terms 'primary' and 'secondary' media were used to differentiate between the important paper-based study materials and the less important, add-on tricks that added a bit of variation to the guides. Over the years there has been a significant move towards integrating media into the learning experiences to enrich learning materials. Of course the introduction of the Internet and e-learning has become more of a subject for research, as has the value of video conferencing to student support. While M-learning is becoming important internationally, and the use of SMSes and podcasts forms part of the present acceptable educational landscape, nothing has been published on these topics in this journal.

Assessment and research methodologies have been critically evaluated in relation to their impact on student success. At the same time there is evidence of a move towards self-reflection, as researchers have considered their roles in the university and the types of continuous professional learning they require.

One of the most noteworthy changes has been the way in which students have figured in research outputs. A growing concern for the student is noticeable, as can be seen from themes related to student performance, development, opinions, counselling and so on. There is evidence of student opinions being asked and taken into account in the creation of learning materials. The different learning styles and ways of coping with new media have also been investigated. The loneliness and alienation of the distance learner in rural as well as metropolitan areas have not gone unnoticed. This trend towards student-centeredness reflects international tendencies towards a more constructivist approach to ODL delivery.

We have just touched on the research trends published in *Progressio*. When we compare the topics addressed to international publications on ODL, like *The International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning* (IRRODOL), *American Journal for Distance Education*, the Open University of the United Kingdom's *Open Learning*, we see that what we have uncovered is a reflection of the trends in distance education worldwide. As ODL continues to develop, we hope that the research published in *Progressio* will continue to reflect the changes being made in the field.

This first accredited edition of the journal continues to address many of the issues mentioned above. Heydenrych and Prinsloo revisit the idea of the five generations of ODL, while Louw considers the work of learning developers in fostering Africanised curricula. Ntshoe highlights some problems that can arise in the quest to use ODL to expand access to tertiary education. Technology is the focus of many of the contributors to this edition. The discussions of Cant and Bothma, Beyers, Kok and Blignaut, as well as Evans and Blignaut, range from reasons for students' non-participation in technology-driven presentations, to the use of sophisticated systems to bring quality education to underdeveloped schools. The issues of student experience and the student support offered at ODL institutions are again debated from various points of view. Pretorius, Prinsloo and Uys discuss the impact of raising students' risk awareness, Gatsha and Evans, as well as Oosthuizen, Loedolff and Hamman, describe research on student perceptions of support offered, while Mbatha and Naidoo examine e-learning as a transformational educational tool that can be used to eliminate the transactional distance experienced by distance education students. Finally, in this edition Du Plessis takes a novel look at teaching practice as a form of work-integrated learning.

NOTES

1. This editorial is based on a paper presented by the editors at the NADEOSA conference held at the University of South Africa, Sunnyside Campus, Pretoria, 17–18 August 2009.
2. Kamper, G. 1995. Vyftien jaar *Progressio*. *Progressio* 17 (1): 6–17.
3. Le Roux, A. I. and J. E. Mitchell. 2007. Thematic list of articles in *Progressio* 1979–2006. *Progressio: South African Journal for Open and Distance Learning Practice* 29 (1&2): 1–115.