



Students' Perceptions of the Digital Access Centres at the University of South Africa

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ABSTRACT

This paper sought to investigate the accessibility of Digital Access Centres as a resource for Unisa Students needing to access services away from campus. The Digital Access Centres are available in open-distance e-learning institutions like Unisa in a quest to reach students. Unisa regional computer labs are always fully packed with students queuing to access the computers to access online platforms to write and submit assignments. Students are also expected to use Digital Access Centres to access support services instead of travelling long distances to regional offices or campuses. This study investigated UNISA students' perceptions and knowledge of Digital Access Centres. A qualitative research methodology was used. Data was generated through semi-structured interviews with thirteen students. The sample was drawn from a population of students who visit computer labs at the Gauteng Regional Service Centre. The data collected revealed that students do not know about Digital Access Centres despite information being available on myUnisa and myChoice brochures. The findings also revealed that few students are accessing Digital Access Centres, and those who visited the centres, indicated that the centres are not fully operational and struggle with connectivity.

KEYWORDS

Telecentre; open distance learning; digital access centres; student support.

INTRODUCTION

As a Regional Academic Coordinator supervising the computer lab, the researcher observed many students waiting in long queues to use computers. As a result, some students become impatient and leave the campus without assistance. Students use computers to access the myUnisa learning management system (LMS). The LMS assists students to access the study material through their MyLife email address, upload their assignments and engage in discussion forums with lecturers and other students (Naidoo, 2012; Davis, 2011).

Students who do not have access to computers and internet connections struggle with doing the work as expected by the university. As such, the University of South Africa (Unisa) collaborates with privately owned internet cafés to reach students who live in remote and rural areas (Naidoo, 2012). According to the Department of Tuition and Facilitation of Learning (2023), Digital Access Centers (DAC) are ICT infrastructures with computers, reliable internet and sometimes printers and photocopiers in remote rural locations. The university pays for six (6) hours of internet access per week for registered students to use these Digital Access Centres. Due to a lack of knowledge, students do not use the Digital Access Centers, although they exist to close the communication gap between students, lecturers and the institution. In partnership with the university, service providers give students access to computers and internet connectivity. Unisa also provides connectivity to students through the Digital Access Centres. One of the principles mentioned in Unisa's (2013–2015:6) policy on Open Distance Learning (ODL) is 'Student Support'. The principle indicates that student support should consider the diverse needs of students. It also includes enhancing communication between students and lecturers, students and students, students and coursework, students and administration support, and students and the institution. Most of this communication is geared towards using an online mode.

Unisa's 2016–2030 strategic plan provides the basis for the continued establishment of Telecentres, now known as Digital Access Centres, as a viable mechanism to address challenges in accessing ICTs, particularly for students in far-flung locations. Digital Access Centres enable students to engage in academic activities such as signature courses and e-tutoring, over and above the conventional activities of submitting assignments and downloading study material. The 2015 Institutional Risk Register indicates that the university fails to achieve optimal success, with low throughput rates. The identification and contracting of telecentres across the country is an effort to contribute to a positive student experience by providing accessible tools for students to access ICTs (Unisa et al. 2017:3).

Mogashoa (2022) states that, as a CODEL institution, digital access for Unisa's students is critically important. "We need to support students in areas characterised by a lack of technological access and poor connectivity". The author further states, "Our Digital Access Centres (DACs) cater to students in remote and rural areas where access to most resources is a challenge". Unisa currently has twenty-five (25) DAC partnerships and is in the process of securing more such partnerships. However, this initiative does not seem to be successfully

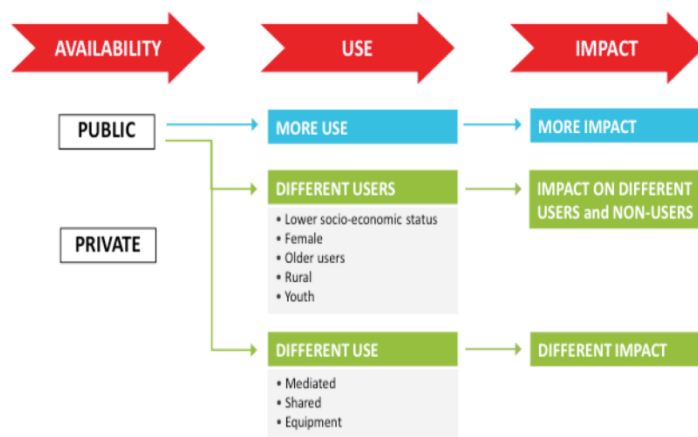
implemented since students arrive in numbers at campus despite the option to access information at a DAC. There are five (5) DACs in Gauteng, (4) four in Limpopo, (5) five in KwaZulu Natal, (3) three in the Eastern Cape and (1) one in Free State, where students can access support services. This study intended to promote awareness and accessibility to digital access centres as one of the key pillars of Unisa as an ODeL institution in its quest to reach students.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The study is based on the Global Impact Study conceptual framework, which focuses on providing ICT resources for the public to connect people for development (Sey et al., 2013). The public must have access to or be able to use the computers, which must positively impact their lives. According to the global impact study framework, digital inclusion is found at libraries, Telecentres, or cybercafés that the local public can access as an ICT venue, as shown in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1.

Global Impact Study conceptual framework (adapted from connecting people for development)



Digital Access Centres, or Telecentres, are public-owned and intended for public use by young and old students, and Unisa students fit the category of users. Furthermore, students have the ability and privilege to use the digital access Centres for their learning. The aim of Digital Access Centres is to provide access to all registered students in rural or remote areas. Each student has a maximum of six (6) hours per week and can motivate for more time where necessary. Impact refers to students' benefits when using digital resources, including accessing the internet, typing assignments, conducting research and communicating with lecturers and fellow students. The conceptual framework fits well with Unisa's DAC system since it is intended to enable students to access the centres for free. If used to their full potential, the centres can benefit students because they eliminate the transport costs and time to commute to the regional centres.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Digital Access Centres/telecentres or multi-purpose community centres are “strategically located facilities providing public access to information and communications technology-based services and applications” (Latchem & Walker, 2001). The authors further mention that Digital Access Centres should be equipped with telephony, fax, email, internet, computers, multimedia software and hardware, including TV and video, local business and community meeting spaces and training.

In Malaysia, telecentres are physical spaces that provide access to information and technology for education and personal, social and economic development (Ibrahim, Yasin & Dahalin, 2010) The Malaysian government supports telecentres to remove the digital divide. According to Sumbwanyambe, Nel and Clarke (2011), telecentres are a means to bridge the digital divide and should cater to rural populations and provide access to basic ICTs. These authors agree that telecentres, or digital access centres, are a means to bridge the digital divide.

According to Unisa's Department of Tuition and Facilitation of Learning (2014), Digital Access Centres are “private facilities situated in various provinces across SA and are equipped with computers connected to the internet, printers, photocopiers, scanners, faxes, and telephones”. Through the Directorate of Institutional Services (DISS), Unisa has entered into contractual agreements with privately owned digital access Centres. The DTFL (2014) further states that this initiative aims to reach rural and semi-urban remote students by providing access to internet and computer facilities for academic purposes. DACs benefit students by bridging the gap between student and student, students and lecturers, and students and their course work (Unisa's strategic plan, 2013).

According to Alao, Chingon, and Brink (2022), telecentres are expected to offer free services to the community and should form a part of community development projects. The authors further state that a lack of awareness of the services prevents most community members from using telecentres. Sumbwanyambe, Nel and Clarke (2011) maintain that pricing and/or prices are one of the challenges at Digital Access Centres. Ellen (1998) states that some of the emergent themes in ICT that affect telecentres include access (cost), the pattern of usage, the need for support, and internet access being too slow. At the same time, Benjamin (2001) states that technical skills may be taught, however, local trust and drive cannot be taught. Owners and managers must take their business seriously and have customer service to ensure the community uses their telecentres. In addition, most telecentres depend on external funding (Benjamin, 2001).

Like Malaysia (Ibrahim et al., 2010), South African telecentres are privately owned or owned by NGOs struggling to sustain themselves. Kapondera and Namusanya (2017) suggest that the government of Malawi should create measures to subsidize the cost of using telecentres to assist the expansion of the industry. The study focused on these factors, excluding the cost, as the institution funds every student to use the Digital Access Centres. Sumbayambe et al. (2011) cite a lack of public awareness and ignorance as some of the challenges affecting

the use of telecentres in SA, and this may be one of the factors impacting the lack of DAC usage. The researcher investigated why students do not use telecentres or DACs, walk long distances, and wait in queues to access computers at Unisa's regional offices.

Research questions

- What are the perceptions of Unisa students regarding the Digital Access Centres at the Gauteng Region campuses?
- What are the challenges faced by students visiting Digital Access Centres?

Aim

- To explore the use and impact of Digital Access Centres available for Unisa students.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research used qualitative methods, interpreted as an organised investigation into social phenomena in their natural settings (Creswell, 2014). The qualitative research approach is derived from the interpretivism paradigm, focusing on people's lived experiences in their natural environments. This includes how individuals behave and/or how organisations function. This approach was relevant to the study as it investigated how students interacted with the Digital Access Centres.

Sample and Sampling Strategy

According to Gill (2020), sampling in qualitative research aims to select enough participants to provide rich data to understand the phenomenon under study. Random sampling was chosen in the study since it is a sampling technique in which each sample has an equal probability of being chosen. Random sampling was also chosen based on the students who visited the computer labs, assuming that they likely may have used DACs in their communities and would be able to share information on their experiences. Students who visited computer labs were identified and requested to sign the consent form to show their willingness to participate in the study. Thirteen (13) students responded positively.

Data Collection

Semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were conducted to collect data. The purpose of semi-structured interviews is for researchers to get a detailed picture of participants' beliefs about the topic. Hence, the authors chose semi-structured interviews to delve into participants' subjective views of their experiences with DACs (De Vos et al., 2011). The interviews lasted for 20 to 30 minutes, depending on how the respondents engaged with the questions after reflecting on what they had answered.

Table 1.*Participant's information*

Pseudonym	Year of study
Participant 1	2 nd year student
Participant 2	3 rd year student
Participant 3	Honours student
Participant 4	Postgraduate certificate
Participant 5	3 rd year student
Participant 6	2 nd year student
Participant 7	2 nd year student
Participant 8	Postgraduate student
Participant 9	3 rd year student
Participant 10	2 nd year student
Participant 11	1 st year student
Participant 12	3 rd year student
Participant 13	Final year student

Ethical Consideration

The research was conducted in accordance with stipulated University policy, confidentiality and anonymity were observed, and students were requested not to include personal details on the answering sheet. Consent forms were given to students before taking part in the research. Only those students who returned their forms were given questionnaires to complete. Forms were collected, and 13 participants agreed to take part in the study. An ethical clearance certificate (Ref #: 2015_RPSC_107) was sourced from the University under the Research Permission Subcommittee (RPSC) of the Unisa Senate Research and Innovation and Higher Degrees Committee (SRIHDC).

Data Analysis Procedure

According to Gill (2020), the aim of qualitative research is to explore and understand the meaning grounded in human experience. This research study used the qualitative method, which employed a thematic data analysis approach. According to Creswell (2014), thematic data analysis emphasises identifying, analysing and interpreting patterns of meaning found within qualitative data. As a result, thematic analysis was used in identifying recurring themes that were comparable to one another in certain respects and grouping them. The researchers formulated questions used in the study and were solely meant to acquire responses from the sample. Data schedules were analysed using Atlas-ti, where responses were coded into main themes and further into sub themes. Some themes were common, and manual codes were used to narrow the responses.

FINDINGS and DISCUSSIONS

The discussion of the findings identified four (4) themes that focused on the Unisa context and the use of DACs. The following sub themes were identified: Support services, Access to services, Technological support, benefits, and challenges.

1. Student support services

Participants 1, 7 and 4 indicated that the students' support services they knew were the library, computer lab, counselling and tutorials. Other participants stated that they only knew that classes were used for study purposes but knew nothing about the services. In support, Participant 10 said, *"I do not know any support services. I am not a new student but have never used support services."* The response shows that the students only focused on studying and were less interested in using services to advance their studies.

Another participant stated, *"Digital services I find them on myUnisa. Other services include Microsoft Office, but I never participate. I know the library bit, but do not use it."* This also indicates a lack of information or knowledge of services for advancing student success. Of all the students who responded to the question, only one mentioned that the telecentre was one of the student support services available. Participant 1 said, *"Support services are library, telecentres and computer labs."* All the participants named just a few of the support services, and none of the 13 participants knew all the services offered. Support services available to students are unknown to students. The Regional Centres offer or conduct orientation sessions twice a year to familiarise students with available services, and yet students do not know about the services available to them.

Modes of access

Participants were asked to share their modes of accessing Unisa information, such as assignments or study material. Participant 1 said that they accessed the information through telesales. The same response was given by Participant 5. Other participants indicated that they used cell phones to download and access material for their studies, whereas others indicated that they used laptops to access information. One participant said that she went to the campus to access information required from the computer lab.

Participant 4 said, *"I know about that one you can access back home. This guy told me about it in the centre. I do not know what they call it, but he said that if I cannot come to Unisa and access it. I can go there and do my assignment. I can access the WiFi and internet for free."* The participant indicated that she had heard about DACs from a colleague. However, she had never used the services. There seems to be a lack of information on the availability of DACs where students have free access to get their study material or even write and submit their assignments. DACs are available for use by students, but it shows that Unisa students do not utilise the services.

Technological support

The participants were asked to share their knowledge of what telecentres are. This question was answered only by those participants who knew about the telecentre. Six (6) of the thirteen

participants indicated they knew what a telecentre was. However, their answers were unconvincing since they indicated they had been told about the telecentres. Participant 3 said, *"Predominantly new, but I was told it is more like a computer lab. Nevertheless, you can explain it to me. Do they have their station, or are they for Unisa?"* The statement emphasises that the participants had heard about the DAC but did not have clear information about it, nor had they visited the centre. Participant 11 responded that he knew about the DACs and stated, *"I think I do. What are they? After explaining. Do you still know any of them and where they are? Yeah, this one in Sunnyside. Alternatively, is it not one of them?"* The answer given by Participant 11 shows that he did not understand what a DAC was even after the researcher explained.

Participant 2 explained that *"Telecentres logical thinking are centres that cater for people's needs telephonically and not face-to-face. Not limited to not having people but can help people."* The participant continued, *"If I cannot come to Unisa and access it. I can go there and do my assignment. I can access the WiFi and internet for free."* Most participants who participated in the study had no information about the DAC and did not know what it was and its function. Participant 3 said it was found in rural areas but did not know where. The statements by the participants show that more information and knowledge sharing, as well as advertisement of DACs is needed. Students are disadvantaged by not getting services that benefit them due to a lack of knowledge.

Benefits of Digital Learning Centres

The concept of telecentres was explained to the participants so that they understood what they were used for. The participants' responses indicated that the telecentres are cost-practical and valuable for students since they can save the cost of transport to and from campus when they need to access the Internet. Participant 4 said, *"Closer to home, caters to students with poor financial difficulties. It will help with research and things. Individually is helping in accessing myUnisa."* The explanation seemed more apparent for participants, who agreed that by accessing telecentres, they would benefit by saving money since travelling to campus is expensive and time consuming.

There was a general agreement from participants that DACs could assist them financially as well as during load-shedding when they did not have network access at home. They would be able to go to the centres and do their schoolwork without interruptions. The statement was supported by Participant 9, *"I will use the Telecentre, as with load-shedding, you cannot connect with your data. I will have to go there."* More clarity and understanding of what DACs are will assist students in using the centres, saving them money and assisting those struggling financially not to drop out but to continue their studies with free access.

Challenges of Digital Learning Centres

For those participants who visited DACs, they had met with challenges which caused them to lose trust in the DACs. Participant 12 said, *"They are always closed. I went there twice. I passed by on my way to the hospital. It seems that the owners of Digital learning centres are not keeping up with the needs of the students. Students are supposed to get services anytime they visit the*

centre since the centre owner has a contract with the university to serve its students. It is discouraging for students who want to use the services and never get helped.” This means the university personnel should visit the DACs and ensure that they meet the needs of students by operating within the agreed hours. Participant 4 stated, “There was no internet there, so I had to come to Unisa.” Lack of WiFi could also be a limiting factor at the DACs if the network cables are stolen or there is no electricity or backup system in case of load shedding; this can limit the effectiveness of the centres. The university must ensure that they mitigate these risks in their contract with the service providers, ensuring they have backup plans when electricity is unavailable to ensure the students get service at all costs.

Participant 3: “Went once. Went to Springs. Computers are offline. I would use it, maybe it will improve since it is a new thing. The centre must upgrade its services. It is a good thing.” The participant noted a challenge with connectivity at the centre. However, she was optimistic that the centre could improve, and if so, she would use it again. It appears that network or connectivity is a main issue at the DACs. The service providers are also affected by the countries’ electricity challenges, and as a result, they struggle to serve students. Measures should be put in place to address these challenges.

Discussion

The study investigated students’ perception of using Digital learning centres in the Unisa context. The results revealed that accessibility and resources in the centres are insufficient. Unisa has tried to avail the resources to students by contracting Internet centres in communities to avail ICT access to students and make their life journey more manageable, but this has yielded no fruitful results. Accessibility of services in DACS is a challenge where there is no connectivity due to a lack of stable Internet. This is confirmed by Attwood et al. (2013), that SA has made substantial efforts to make information technology infrastructures available in rural areas by providing access to the internet and other ICT facilities through the establishment of telecentres, but the internet access problem persists. The study by Alao, Usadolo and Brink (2021) states that the communities’ opportunities to access information technology, such as internet-enabled computers, are limited. Lack thereof prevents students from willingly visiting the DACs.

The university’s lack of communication and awareness has led to minimal use of the centres. The DACs contracted by Unisa are not branded, which poses uncertainty for students. According to Pather and Gomez (2010), “Telecentres in SA are not always visible or well-marketed as people friendly. The centres require visibility and a marketing strategy to attract more students. This requires all stakeholders, including lecturers, DACs, Regional centre management, and the communication and marketing department, to work together to promote the service centre.

CONCLUSION

Accessibility to DACs is one of the key pillars of Unisa as an ODeL institution in its quest to meet students’ needs. However, there appears to be a lack of information sharing with students on

the availability of DACs, which affects the optimal usage. As such, students are not benefiting from the services. Management should vigorously market these services even in rural areas to accommodate all students since now there are 20 DACs.

The participants stated that the centres they had visited struggled with connectivity. This requires Unisa to investigate and visit all the registered centres to ensure they are functional. The centres should have the necessary tools that students need for their schoolwork, especially since the university is funding them. It does not benefit the students to visit centres that are not functioning optimally. These challenges lead to students queuing for services at regional computer labs and complaining about lack of access to resources.

The lecturers should highlight and verbally share information about DACs with students during their contact sessions to limit students' movements on campus. The marketing department should vigorously advertise these centres on social media to conscientise and attract students to use the DACs.

Implications and Recommendations

Information about DACs (Telecentres) and their benefits should be widely communicated on all platforms. Digital Skills at DACs must be conducted by Unisa staff since they are familiar with the offerings. Policymakers at the university should be informed to ensure policies are in place when contracting the telecentres, as this will ensure that standard measures are put in place. Collaboration with Academics in disseminating information to students is vital for optimal use of digital learning centres. More involvement of Unisa's ICT department is required to mitigate risks surrounding the DACs.

Few students responded to the questionnaire hence, the study cannot be generalised. A low turnout of students due to a lack of knowledge of the centres contributed to few respondents, which confirms the lack of knowledge of the existence of the DACS by students. Further study is recommended on the ownership of Telecentre and how they advertise their services for maximal use by students. The study will contribute to the academic environment, to policymakers, marketing and communication divisions to address the accessibility of technology to benefit students in an open-distance institution. Finally, Unisa should invest in creating campaigns and awareness programmes for promoting digital learning centres in rural areas to increase their visibility, which may lead to high usage by students.

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