

# Mmabaledi K. Seeletso (PhD) & UNESCO CHAIR ON ODL - UNISA

**Title:** Virtual Classroom: The Lacuna for Improved Access, Openness and Flexibility in an Open and Distance Learning University

**Theme:** Transforming Lives and Societies

**Sub-Theme:** Expanding Access, Openness, and Flexibility



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# Adult Learners



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# Overview

- Introduction
- Research Question(s)
- Research Design and Methodology
- Participants
- Findings
- Conclusions



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# Introduction

- Study on perceptions & experiences of **virtual** students enrolled in the Master of Educational Leadership (MEdEL) programme (**On-going programme – study to guide in the evaluation and review of the programme**)
- Virtual classes started in July 2016 to address issues of access and openness

## Key issues:

- **Online interaction for both learners and students**
- **Quality of both content and support**
- **Satisfaction of the virtual class students regarding available resources**
- **Simultaneous delivery of the programme**



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# Research Questions

## Research Questions:

- (i) How do MEdEL students at BOU perceive the virtual delivery of the programme?
  
- (ii) What are lived experiences of MEdEL virtual students?



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# Research Design and Methodology

- Exploratory Mixed Methods Design
- Purposively Sampled Participants
- Survey questionnaire administered to establish the extent to which virtual classroom delivery provides improved access, openness and flexibility in an ODL university
- Thematic data analysis



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# Participants

- 32 students invited guided by year 2 Semester 2 tutorial attendance register
- **27 responded;** ( 18F & 14M)
- Aged between 34 & 55+ years



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# Findings (mostly from students)

- Students provided what they perceived as good effects of a virtual class and what they regarded as challenges.
- Also shared their experiences against these perceptions



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# Findings Cont ...

## Perceptions & experiences of virtual classroom

- Virtual class not significantly different in terms of quality of content
- Creates more autonomous, self-directed learners who devise means to support each other

(Knowles, 1975)

- Creation of social platforms to break isolation
- High retention due to high interaction, both synchronous and asynchronous
- Out perform the face-to-face class
- The smartboard used required internet to function, and most of the time internet is down especially during working hours



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# Findings ont ...

## Perceptions & experiences of virtual classroom cont ...

- Virtual class students develop to be better managers, for both their time and study
- Motivate each other and help break isolation
- More disciplined than the face-to-face cohort, who can easily procrastinate
- Sharpen students' digital and knowledge skills (in areas of expertise)
- Reduce social anxiety (Domingo *et. al.*, 2017)



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# Findings cont ...

## Challenges of virtual Class room

- Generally low levels of satisfaction
- Not easy to follow instruction during face-to-face support session, ie, when given group work to do
- Miss a lot from discussions during support sessions
- Communication generally poor between facilitators at the face-to-face region and the virtual class
- Very limited interaction with facilitators compared to the face-to-face group



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# Findings cont ...

## Challenges of virtual Class room cont ....

- Facilitator not visible, but only the voice – picture would help bridge the human absence
- General technological glitches that affect delivery every time
- Poor internet connection and high prices for data
- Low bandwidth
- Constant power cuts, which can be very disruptive
- Lack of technical skills (both students and facilitators)



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# Conclusion

- Need to introduce multiple modes to facilitate learning (using of pictures and other cues to support learning)
- Vary presentation to engage the virtual class
- Need to provide tailor made support activities for the 2 groups for access and flexibility which characterise distance learning.
- **And .... Yes! Virtual classroom can be the lacuna for improved access, openness and flexibility in an ODL University!!!**



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# WALLAH!



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- **THANK YOU**
- **KE A LEBOGA**
- **MERCI BEAUCOUP**
- **MUITO OBRIGADO**

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