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Designing for Well-being in Open Distance e-Learning: A Curriculum Framework for First-Year Bachelor of Education Students

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Abstract

Open Distance e-Learning (ODeL) has broadened access to higher education. However, first-year students often face significant academic, emotional, and social challenges that hinder their overall well-being and academic performance. Although student well-being is increasingly acknowledged in higher education, it is frequently treated as a support service rather than an integral element of curriculum design. This study investigates the integration of student well-being into the curriculum for first-year Bachelor of Education (BEd) students at a South African ODeL institution. Employing an interpretivist paradigm and a qualitative, exploratory case study design, the research involved semi-structured online interviews with 14 purposively selected first-year BEd students. The data were analysed using thematic analysis. Five interrelated themes emerged: academic and emotional adjustment, challenges in self-regulated learning, gaps in digital and academic literacy, feelings of isolation, and the necessity for structured well-being support within the curriculum. The findings indicate that well-being challenges are structurally embedded in the ODeL context, necessitating targeted curricular responses. The study proposes a curriculum framework informed by Positive Emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment (PERMA) that promotes well-being through six key areas: emotional resilience, self-regulated learning, digital literacy, self-care, belonging, and meaning-making, thereby reframing well-being as a critical curriculum outcome.

1. Introduction

Over the past decade, higher education worldwide has undergone a significant transformation, driven by rapid technological advancement, increasing demands for flexible learning opportunities, and the expansion of open and distance education. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, institutions across both developed and developing countries accelerated the adoption of online and Open Distance e-Learning (ODeL) approaches to widen participation and improve educational accessibility. While these developments have increased opportunities for millions of students, they have also highlighted persistent challenges related to student engagement, well-being, belonging, and academic success, particularly among first-year students transitioning into higher education.

Expanding the use of ODeL mode has fundamentally improved access to higher education, particularly in developing countries, where geographical, economic, and social barriers would otherwise prevent many individuals from participating in tertiary study [1]. The University of South Africa (UNISA) is recognised by Sherrif-Shüping [2] as the largest ODeL institution on the African continent, with an enrolment of over 300 000 students each year. This substantial student population makes UNISA an essential focal point for examining the challenges and opportunities inherent in open and distance education [3]. Although access to ODeL has increased, first-year students still face distinct challenges. They must balance the academic requirements of higher education with the technological and social aspects of remote learning. Xavier and Meneses [4] assert that this can be especially difficult because they often lack the in-person support systems and peer networks that ease the transition in traditional university contexts.

A constant issue in academic discussion relates to the role of student well-being, often regarded as an ancillary aspect rather than a fundamental component of curriculum development. A study by Moosa and Bekker [5] emphasises that first-year students who transitioned to online learning encounter multiple psychological, emotional, and financial challenges that undermine their sense of inclusion and belonging. Similarly, Versfeld et al. [6] maintain that the shift from high school to university in South Africa presents a notably stressful challenge for students, who must navigate both unfamiliar institutional landscapes and significant socioeconomic pressures. In the context of ODeL, the geographical separation between students and their educational institutions diminishes the informal support structures typically found in residential learning contexts, as noted by Aphane and Du Plessis [7].

Despite the growing body of literature on first-year students' experiences, a significant gap remains in scholarly research that explicitly links student well-being to curriculum design in ODeL. The existing literature, according to Hill et al. [8], treats well-being as a pastoral concern to be addressed through student support services, rather than as an integral part of the learning experience itself. This study argues that well-being must be designed, not assumed, and presents a curriculum framework grounded in Seligman's (2011) [9] Positive Emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment (PERMA) model as cited in Kovich et al. [9]. Seligman's PERMA model is regarded as a practical and theoretically robust approach to embedding well-being within a first-year BEd programme in an ODeL context. The aim of this study is to develop a curriculum framework that emphasises well-being in the context of ODeL for first-year BEd students. The study sought to identify and integrate elements that support students' mental, emotional and educational well-being in ODeL contexts, thus enhancing their overall learning and success.

2. Literature review

2.1 Open Distance e-Learning (ODeL)

ODeL represents a mode of higher education delivery that combines the pedagogical principles of open learning, including flexibility, access, and learner autonomy, with the affordances of digital technologies for communication, content delivery, and assessment [10]. While this learning modality has significantly expanded access for students who cannot attend residential institutions due to employment, family, financial, or geographic constraints, as highlighted by Tabe et al. [10], it simultaneously puts significant demands on students to self-regulate their learning, navigate digital contexts, and sustain motivation without the immediacy of face-to-face contact with lecturers and peers [11]. According to Maphalala and Nkosi [12], self-directed learning is fundamental to ODeL as it requires students to set their own goals, manage their time effectively, and independently track their progress. This is supported by Mairi [11], who asserts that self-regulated learning is a critical determinant of academic success in higher education.

Moreover, the effectiveness of ODeL depends not only on the quality of the digital resources provided but also on the support systems in place to assist students. Institutions that integrate robust online support

services, including academic advising, tutoring, and mental health resources, can enhance the overall learning experience and help students manage the challenges of online learning. Furthermore, the development of strong online communities can foster a sense of belonging and collaboration, ultimately promoting greater engagement and success in the ODeL environment. As the landscape of education continues to evolve, ongoing research and adaptation will be critical in addressing the needs of diverse learners and continuously improving the effectiveness of ODeL.

2.2. The transition of first-year students to ODeL

First-year students in ODeL contexts face what the literature terms a “double transition”: the general challenge of adjusting to higher-education norms, expectations, and academic demands, compounded by the specific challenge of learning to function in a mediated, asynchronous environment [13]. Kahu et al. [13] further argue that first-year student engagement is shaped by the interplay between structural factors, including curriculum design, assessment practices, and institutional support, and personal factors such as self-efficacy, sense of belonging, and resilience. When structural support is insufficient or unavailable, the personal burden on students intensifies, with well-documented negative consequences for academic persistence and completion [14].

In the context of South African ODeL, these challenges are increasingly exacerbated by structural inequalities in digital access, infrastructure, and prior educational preparedness [15]. Carow et al. [16] note that ODeL institutions in South Africa serve a student body characterised by significant diversity in socioeconomic backgrounds, geographic locations, and digital literacy. In addition, many students access learning resources on their mobile phones rather than desktop computers. Carow et al. [16] further argue that many students lack adequate connectivity and quiet study spaces. These contextual realities mean that well-being interventions designed for well-resourced, residential university contexts may require significant adaptation to be effective in ODeL settings [17].

Thus, to enhance academic persistence and completion rates, it is imperative that educational stakeholders develop supportive frameworks that address both the structural and personal dimensions of the ODeL experience. Thereby, institutions will create a more equitable and conducive learning environment that empowers all students to thrive despite the challenges of distance education.

2.3. Student well-being in higher education

The construct of student well-being has gained traction in higher education research owing to rising concerns about the mental health of university students globally [18]. Kovich et al. [9] provide evidence that the PERMA model, as conceptualised by Seligman (2011), serves as an effective framework for understanding student prosperity. The five constructs of the PERMA model (Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment) can be reliably assessed in undergraduate populations. And they are associated with key indicators such as academic achievement, engagement, and overall life satisfaction. Furthermore, empirical studies consistently indicate a negative correlation between the PERMA model and various college-related difficulties, including stress and interpersonal

relationship issues. Conversely, the model is positively correlated with factors contributing to success, such as student engagement and positive self-perception [9].

Magare, et al. [19] examined the validity and reliability of the PERMA well-being scale in an ODeL context in sub-Saharan Africa. Their findings confirm that the five-factor PERMA structure holds in ODeL settings and that the model provides a meaningful framework for understanding well-being among adult undergraduate students studying at a distance institution. This is significant for the current study, as it establishes the cross-contextual validity of applying the PERMA model to design well-being interventions in South African ODeL contexts. Morgan et al. [20] provide further evidence of the utility of PERMA-based interventions in higher education by evaluating an online positive education programme designed to promote university students' well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their findings suggested that structured, curriculum-embedded activities aligned with each PERMA element produced meaningful improvements in student well-being and gains in positive emotions and sense of meaning. These findings are consistent with Seligman's (2011) [9] original argument that well-being is best promoted not through deficit-focused interventions but through deliberate cultivation of the five PERMA elements as positive capacities.

2.4. Curriculum Design and Well-being in ODeL

The integration of well-being into the higher education curriculum has emerged as a crucial element that significantly impacts student success, yet, as Versfeld et al. [6] affirm, it remains largely underexplored in academic contexts. Traditional curricula often regard student well-being as an ancillary issue rather than a core focus, resulting in a fragmented approach that fails to address learners' holistic needs. Rather than embedding well-being in the curriculum, institutions typically provide support through opt-in services, which can inadvertently marginalise students who most need these resources [21].

Woldegiorgis and Chiramba [22] highlight that the disconnect between academic content and well-being support in higher education creates substantial barriers to accessibility for students, particularly those who encounter significant structural challenges. As Bakker and Mostert [21] argue, these barriers can severely limit the likelihood of students availing themselves of available support services. Factors contributing to this lack of engagement include limited awareness of the services offered, reluctance to seek help, and an underdeveloped sense of entitlement in first-year students, especially in ODeL contexts.

Moreover, the online nature of ODeL can further exacerbate feelings of isolation and disconnection from institutional resources. According to Kaufmann and Vallade [23], students in ODeL settings often experience a sense of isolation from their peers and lecturers, which can reduce their engagement and motivation. This disconnection may impede their ability to navigate academic challenges effectively and to seek the support they need when faced with personal or academic difficulties. Additionally, Surdey and Byrne [24] stress the necessity of proactive curriculum design that incorporates well-being into the learning process. By integrating well-being strategies within academic curricula, institutions can create a supportive educational ecosystem that not only enhances learning outcomes but also fosters resilience.

It could incorporate mental health education, stress management techniques, and effective self-advocacy skills into the curriculum, thereby equipping students to better navigate the complexities of academic life.

Finally, addressing these issues calls for a systemic shift in how educational institutions conceptualise student support. It necessitates an understanding that well-being is not merely an individual concern but is deeply intertwined with the educational framework itself. Germain [25] and Thompson and Brewster [26] note that embracing an inclusive curriculum that prioritises well-being can lead to more equitable educational experiences, ultimately benefiting a diverse student population.

3. Theoretical framework

The PERMA model, developed by Martin Seligman, serves as a comprehensive framework for understanding well-being and optimal human functioning [20]. A holistic sense of well-being, particularly in the context of education, as confirmed by Fitrianto [27], is significantly influenced by each of the five elements constituting this model. Each element will be discussed next.

3.1. Positive Emotions

This element emphasises the importance of cultivating positive affect and emotional experiences. In an educational setting, this could involve creating contexts where students feel valued, supported, and motivated. Fitrianto [27] affirms that positive emotions enhance students' resilience, increasing their ability to cope with challenges and setbacks in their learning journey. In the context of ODeL, cultivating positive emotions is crucial for enhancing students' learning experience and outcomes [10]. Tabe et al. [10] further argue that ODeL contexts should prioritise creating supportive and motivating spaces that foster positive affect among students. Research shows that positive emotions are linked to improved engagement and academic performance. For instance, studies by Pekrun et al. [28] demonstrate that emotions such as joy and interest can lead to greater academic success by enhancing students' focus and motivation. In an ODeL context, lecturers can use different strategies to promote such positive emotions. One effective approach is to encourage interaction and community among students.

3.2. Engagement

Engagement refers to being fully absorbed in activities and is essential for effective learning, especially in OdeL, as it enhances student interest and retention. This aligns with a study by Kahu et al. [13], which finds that higher engagement is associated with improved learning outcomes. In distance learning, effective strategies to enhance engagement include quizzes and gamification, which promote a sense of community and belonging [29]. Crogman et al. [30] contend that facilitating group work through discussion forums and collaborative platforms promotes peer interaction, encourages critical thinking, and fosters a deeper understanding of the material. Giving students control over their learning paths significantly increases their motivation and renders the learning experience more meaningful [20]. Furthermore, the integration of virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR), and online simulations offers

immersive experiences that can significantly enhance student engagement [30]. Crogman et al. [30] contend that regular and constructive feedback is crucial for maintaining motivation and guiding learning processes. Through these strategies, lecturers can foster a more engaging and effective learning environment.

3.3. Relationships

Social connections promote well-being and engagement in ODeL [31]. Therefore, building a sense of community among students enhances motivation and satisfaction, particularly in online contexts where isolation can negatively affect learning. According to Aphane and Du Plessis [7], effective communication and building positive relationships between lecturers and students are imperative for bridging psychological gaps and fostering a sense of belonging that encourages active engagement with course material. Integrating interactive practices, such as discussion forums and group projects, can strengthen these connections, as research indicates that a strong sense of community correlates with higher satisfaction and persistence in learning [32]. Moreover, Maphalala and Nkosi [33] emphasise that lecturers play a pivotal role in this by providing constructive feedback, facilitating meaningful discussions, and demonstrating empathy, thus helping students overcome academic challenges. Despite its advantages, ODeL has its challenges, including geographical and technological barriers, that may hamper the formation of social connections between students [29]. Studies by Mueller et al. [34] and Tabe [29] indicate that strategies such as peer mentoring and the development of an inclusive online culture are necessary for fostering trust and collaboration among students in ODeL contexts. Enhancing student engagement and satisfaction requires prioritising social connections through community-building initiatives and responsive interactions.

3.4. Meaning

Magare et al. [19] argue that meaning in educational contexts is critical for enhancing student motivation and understanding. In ODeL, the lack of face-to-face interactions can easily foster isolation, making it crucial for lecturers to link course content to real-world applications, personal interests, or societal issues to enhance intrinsic motivation [35]. One effective strategy is to integrate experiential learning opportunities, in which students tackle real-world challenges, thereby aligning theoretical knowledge with practical contexts and enhancing the perceived significance of their studies [36]. Additionally, fostering a community of students through discussion forums and collaborative projects can create a sense of belonging, which is essential for a positive online learning experience [37]. Promoting self-directed learning not only empowers students to set personal goals and pursue their interests but also enhances their engagement and sense of meaning in their education [37]. Thus, helping students find meaning in ODeL motivates them, enhances their engagement by relating coursework to real-world contexts, facilitates their social interactions, and encourages autonomy in their learning.

3.5. Accomplishment

Accomplishment is closely associated with the pursuit of personal and academic goals and a sense of achievement upon their attainment [19]. In addition, Magare et al. [19] argue that enabling students to

establish and achieve such goals enhances their self-efficacy and confidence in educational settings. Furthermore, recognising and celebrating both significant and minor achievements contribute to a positive learning space. Thus, the concept of accomplishment is linked to goal-oriented efforts and the resulting feelings of success. Bandura and Wessels [38] emphasise self-efficacy in learning and suggest that students who believe in their capabilities are more likely to set challenging goals and persist in the face of difficulties. Fostering self-efficacy through structured goal setting can play a critical role in students' motivation and learning outcomes. Research supports the notion that opportunities to set and achieve personal and academic goals significantly enhance students' self-efficacy and overall confidence [39]. According to Green et al. [39], students engage more deeply with the learning material and take ownership of their educational journey when they are helped to define their own goals. Recognising and celebrating achievements, irrespective of their magnitude, reinforces positive behaviours and encourages a growth-oriented mindset. As highlighted by Botha et al. [37], acknowledgement of accomplishments fosters a sense of belonging and motivates students to strive for continuous improvement. Moreover, the impact of accomplishment extends beyond individual recognition; collective achievement can also enhance classroom dynamics and community spirit.

The PERMA model offers a multi-faceted approach to well-being that can be effectively integrated into curriculum design. By addressing all five elements, lecturers can create a learning context that not only imparts knowledge but also nurtures students' emotional and psychological needs, leading to a more fulfilling and enriching educational experience. This holistic approach is consistent with current educational research that stresses the importance of student well-being alongside academic achievement.

4. Research methodology

4.1. Research Design

The present study utilised a qualitative exploratory case study design rooted in the interpretivist paradigm, which postulates that reality is socially constructed through individual interactions and interpretations [40]. This approach is particularly well-suited to investigating the experiences of first-year BEd students at an ODeL institution, enabling an in-depth exploration of their well-being and transition challenges. By employing in-depth interviews, the researchers gathered rich, descriptive data that enable a distinct understanding of how students navigate their educational experience. Pervin and Mokhtar [41] assert that the interpretivist lens highlights the significance of context and relational dynamics, prioritising participants' voices and allowing their narratives to shape the exploration of relevant themes. This qualitative exploratory research focused on getting in-depth insights rather than generating quantifiable data. The aim was to uncover diverse perspectives and experiences that may be overlooked by quantitative methods. The design generates valuable insights into the complexities faced by first-year BEd students in ODeL settings, enhancing discussions on student well-being and on institutional support.

4.2. Participants and Sampling

Participants comprised 14 purposively selected first-year BEd students enrolled at a South African ODeL institution. Purposive sampling was used because they were actively engaged in the programme during the data collection period. Thus, they were best positioned to provide rich, first-hand accounts of their transition experiences and well-being challenges. The purposive sampling strategy is consistent with the interpretivist paradigm, which emphasises strategic selection of information-rich cases over probabilistic sampling [42]. The sample was diverse in socioeconomic background, geographic location (urban and rural), age, and gender, reflecting the breadth of the ODeL student population in South Africa.

4.3. Data Generation

Semi-structured online interviews were employed to investigate the experiences of first-year students in an ODeL institution. This methodology was selected for its ability to provide in-depth insights into students' transitions into this educational modality. In addition, it allowed the participants to share their lived experiences and the researchers to explore emerging themes relevant to the study [43]. Furthermore, an interview guide consisting of open-ended questions that aligned with the study's objectives and the existing literature on student well-being was developed. The questions focused on participants' transitions to ODeL, challenges related to their well-being, perceptions of institutional support, assessments of the curriculum, and suggestions for improvements. Interviews were conducted online via Microsoft Teams, enabling participation by 14 purposively selected, geographically dispersed individuals. Each interview lasted between 40 and 60 minutes and was scheduled to accommodate participants’ availability, thus minimising disruption to their routines [44]. To foster an environment conducive to open dialogue, a respectful, non-judgmental atmosphere encouraged participants to discuss their experiences freely and openly [44]. All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent to ensure the accuracy and reliability of the data.

4.4. Data Analysis

The qualitative data were thematically analysed following the six-phase framework established by Braun and Clarke [45]. The process commenced with data familiarisation, allowing the researchers to engage thoroughly with the dataset [46]. This was followed by the initial coding phase, in which salient features of the data were identified through open coding, yielding preliminary codes that captured the data's essence. Subsequently, these initial codes were aggregated into broader themes, facilitating the conceptualisation of interconnected patterns within the participants' experiences.

The refinement phase involved critically evaluating the themes against the dataset to ensure accurate representation of the data and to consider the overall research narrative [47]. This iterative review process led to a refined set of themes, each carefully defined and named to enhance clarity for the intended audience. The findings were then synthesised into a coherent narrative addressing the research question.

Reflexivity was an integral part of this analytical process. The researchers engaged in reflective journaling to document interpretations and recognise biases, thereby enhancing the transparency and trustworthiness of the findings. Member checking further enhanced the credibility of the analysis. Preliminary themes were presented to a subgroup of participants for feedback, thereby facilitating necessary adjustments based on their insights.

These methodological approaches align with Lincoln and Guba's quality criteria (1985, cited in Adler [48]), addressing key aspects such as credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability within interpretivist qualitative research. Adhering to these standards not only bolstered the reliability of the findings but also enriched the understanding of how to design for well-being in ODeL contexts.

4.5. Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are paramount in research involving human participants [49]. This study adhered to the rigorous ethical standards as outlined by the institution's Research Ethics Committee. Prior to the commencement of data collection, ethical clearance was obtained, ensuring that the research protocol was reviewed and deemed ethically acceptable. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary, thereby highlighting the principle of autonomy, which is central to ethical research practices [49]. In accordance with ethical research standards, written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to the study. Participants were given comprehensive information regarding the nature and objectives of the research, as well as a detailed outline of the potential risks and benefits associated with their participation. To protect participants' privacy, confidentiality was maintained by using pseudonyms. This measure not only safeguards participants' personal information but also contributes to the integrity and credibility of the research findings. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without repercussions. This provision is essential for upholding the autonomy and decision-making capacity of individuals engaged in research.

5. Findings

Thematic analysis of the interview data yielded five interrelated themes, each illuminating a distinct yet interconnected dimension of first-year student well-being in the ODeL context. These themes are presented below, with illustrative participant quotations.

Theme 1: Academic and Emotional Adjustment

The most pervasive challenge identified by participants was the compound nature of academic and emotional adjustment in the first year of ODeL study. Participants consistently described a sense of disorientation not only with the academic content and expectations of university study but also with ODeL learning itself. Several participants noted that the absence of a structured daily rhythm of lectures and physical attendance created both freedom and anxiety, as they struggled to organise their time and assess whether they were on track.

I did not know what I was supposed to be doing. Nobody told me I had to check the portal every day. I just waited, and then suddenly there was a test, and I had missed everything. I felt so stupid and just... lost. (Participant 4)

This sense of academic disorientation was frequently accompanied by emotional distress, including anxiety, loneliness, and feelings of inadequacy. These findings are consistent with those of Kahu et al. [13], who reported similar epistemological and psychosocial challenges among first-year students in online learning contexts. Participants indicated that these emotional challenges were not acknowledged in the curriculum, leaving them to manage their feelings privately and without institutional guidance.

Theme 2: Self-regulated Learning Challenges

Related to academic and emotional adjustment was the challenge of self-regulated learning. ODeL requires students to exercise a high degree of autonomy in planning their studies, managing their time, and monitoring their own progress, skills that many first-year students have not yet developed [11, 12]. Participants in this study described a wide range of self-regulation difficulties, from procrastination and time management to difficulty understanding assignment requirements and competing demands such as employment and family responsibilities.

I have three children, and I work during the day. I thought I would study in the evenings, but I am always tired. I failed two assignments in the first semester because I did not plan properly. I wish someone had told me how to study in this way. (Participant 12)

These self-regulation challenges reflect a deficit in what Ryan and Vansteenkiste [35] describe as competence need satisfaction, the sense that one has the skills and strategies to succeed in one's learning environment. The curriculum framework proposed in this article addresses this gap by teaching self-regulated learning skills within the first-year well-being module.

Theme 3: Digital and Academic Literacy Gap

Participants identified significant gaps in their digital and academic literacy as barriers to effective learning and hindrances to their well-being. Digital literacy challenges ranged from basic unfamiliarity with the institutional Learning Management Systems (LMS) to difficulties accessing study materials and navigating the digital library. Academic literacy challenges included unfamiliarity with academic writing conventions, referencing, and critical reading.

I have never written an academic essay in my life. In school, we just answered questions. I did not know what a reference list was or why I had to have one. I spent three days on an assignment because I kept starting over. I was so stressed. (Participant 9)

This notion was supported by Participant 2: “Honestly, I sometimes struggle to start my assessments because I'm unsure what to do.

These findings resonate with broader research on digital inequality in South African higher education, where disparities in access to devices, internet connectivity, and prior digital experience create uneven starting points for students in online learning contexts [16]. For ODeL first-year students, these gaps are not merely academic inconveniences, but they cause complex emotional distress and undermine the sense of belonging that is foundational to well-being.

Theme 4: Isolation and Limited Social Interaction

The theme of isolation emerged as one of the most emotionally significant findings of the study. Participants described a profound sense of social disconnection from peers, lecturers, and the institution itself, which made their first year of ODeL study feel alienating rather than enriching. Because many participants expected ODeL to be similar to their secondary school experiences, they were unprepared for the extent to which their sense of belonging would be challenged.

I feel like I study alone in a room. I have never met any of my lecturers or my classmates. I do not know if I am doing the right thing because no one tells me. I sometimes feel like the university does not even know I exist. (Participant 7)

'I don't feel ready for tertiary study; I can't survive without friends. I have no one to interact with except on social media. (Participant 1)

These findings align with those of McCabe [31], who holds that students in ODeL contexts often experience feelings of isolation due to limited or no interaction with their peers and lecturers. If affects their academic engagement and their motivation to continue with their education. These findings also resonate with the PERMA model's Positive Relationships element, which is critical to human flourishing.

Theme 5: Need for a Structured Curriculum-Embedded Well-being

The fifth and most progressive theme is the need for well-being support as an integral part of the curriculum, rather than an optional extra. Participants were remarkably consistent in stating that they would engage with well-being content if it were part of their academic programme.

If there were a module that taught me how to manage my studies and my stress and how to use the computer for learning, I would have done much better in my studies. I do not know where to find support. I did not even know it existed. (Participant 8)

The same sentiments were echoed by participants 2 and 11. Both participants highlighted the need for a module that will address the challenges they face in ODeL.

This finding points to the lack of a well-being model for support and calls for well-being to be part of the curriculum. It is consistent with the growing consensus in the positive-education literature that well-being outcomes are best achieved through deliberate, structured pedagogical interventions rather than reactive support services [25, 26]. By prioritising well-being within the educational framework, lecturers

and institutions create a more holistic and supportive learning environment that not only addresses immediate needs but also promotes long-term emotional and psychological resilience.

6. Discussion: designing for well-being (a perma-informed framework)

The findings of this study point to a significant reconceptualisation of the intertwined relationship between well-being and curriculum in ODeL contexts. The five identified themes are: academic and emotional adjustment, self-regulated learning challenges, digital and academic literacy gaps, isolation and limited social interaction, and the imperative to integrate well-being within the curriculum. The themes collectively demonstrate that the challenges associated with student well-being in ODeL contexts are not merely individual struggles. Rather, they are structural conditions that require intentional consideration in curriculum design. The crucial proposition of the proposed curriculum framework is that well-being should be purposefully designed rather than presumed; in other words, it does not emerge organically from academic engagement but requires deliberate pedagogical attention and cultivation.

The PERMA model offers a practical and empirically supported framework for integrating well-being principles into curriculum design. Each of the five elements of PERMA corresponds to the five well-being challenges identified in this study's findings. Furthermore, each element can be operationalised through specific curricular content and pedagogical strategies, as elaborated on in the subsequent sections.

P: Positive Emotions

The literature on positive emotions consistently shows that positive affect broadens cognitive and behavioural collections, builds psychological resources, and cushions against the negative effects of stress [20]. For first-year ODeL students, cultivating positive emotions requires deliberate attention to the emotional climate of learning, something that is easily neglected in content-focused curricula. The proposed curriculum framework incorporates activities designed to foster gratitude, optimism, and hope throughout the ODeL learning journey. These include structured reflection exercises that invite students to identify and celebrate small academic wins; "orientation narratives" that normalise the challenges of first-year ODeL study and frame struggle as a normal part of learning; and peer encouragement activities that build emotional support networks within cohorts.

E: Engagement

Engagement, in the context of the PERMA model, is characterised by experiences of flow, deep absorption, and sustained interest in activities [20]. Within ODeL curricula, fostering engagement is achieved through learning activities that are not only intrinsically intriguing but also appropriately challenging and responsive to students' diverse interests and contexts. The proposed framework advocates for learner-centred activities, including case-based learning scenarios that draw from students' professional and community experiences, digital storytelling assignments that encourage

students to relate academic content to their lived realities, and collaborative online discussions designed to cultivate intellectual curiosity and facilitate rigorous debate.

R: Relationships

As the findings of this study demonstrate, relationships constitute perhaps the most critically under-designed element of ODeL well-being. The social isolation experienced by first-year ODeL students is not an inevitable consequence of distance learning; it is a consequence of curricula and teaching practices that fail to prioritise social presence and connection. The framework proposes a range of strategies for building relationships within ODeL programmes, including structured peer learning circles facilitated through the LMS; synchronous online coffee sessions in small groups at the beginning of each semester; a peer mentoring scheme pairing first-year students with senior students; and regular, personalised communication from academic staff that signals the human dimensions of the ODeL teaching relationship.

M: Meaning

The consideration of meaning, defined as the recognition that one's actions have significance and are linked to a greater purpose, is a vital aspect of well-being that frequently receives insufficient attention in curriculum design [19]. For first-year BEd students, this sense of meaning is intricately connected to their professional vocation. A predominant motivation for pursuing teaching is a belief in education's transformative potential. The proposed framework advocates for curricula that explicitly link academic content to students' professional identities and commitments to their communities. This approach aims to help students maintain a sense of purpose during the challenging initial stages of their ODeL studies. Suggested pedagogical activities include values clarification exercises that enable students to articulate their motivations for studying, community engagement tasks that relate academic learning to practical, real-world contexts, and reflective writing assignments that explore the nexus between their educational experiences and their aspirations as future educators. These activities align with Seligman’s PERMA model’s assertion that a sense of meaning is fostered through connections to a larger context beyond the self.

A: Accomplishment

Accomplishment, as defined within the PERMA model, refers to the active pursuit and attainment of goals for their intrinsic value, as well as the satisfaction derived from one's mastery and achievements [20]. In the context of ODeL first-year curricula, the promotion of accomplishment is facilitated through assessment structures that provide students with multiple opportunities to experience success. This is further supported by scaffolded learning sequences that progressively enhance competence and by explicit acknowledgement of academic progress.

The proposed framework includes a first-year portfolio assessment in which students are encouraged to document their learning experiences, identify their achievements, and reflect on their growth throughout

the academic year.

7. The curriculum framework for the well-being of first-year students

The proposed curriculum framework introduces a first-year well-being module as a compulsory component of the BEd programme. It is structured around six content areas that address specific well-being challenges in ODeL and are aligned with the PERMA model. These areas comprise:

- Understanding Well-Being in ODeL: Explores the multidimensional nature of well-being and its relevance to the challenges of first-year students.
- Self-Regulated Learning and Time Management: Provides strategies for goal setting and study planning, enhancing academic skills.
- Emotional Resilience and Coping: Equips students with strategies to manage emotional challenges such as anxiety and stress through peer support and personal coping plans.
- Self-Care and Balance: Focuses on the interplay between physical well-being and academic performance, promoting individualised self-care routines.
- Digital Literacy for Learning: Develops competencies in navigating digital resources and in academic writing, addressing gaps in academic literacy.
- Community and Belonging: Fosters social connections within the cohort, enhancing collaborative learning and a sense of institutional belonging.

The framework integrates well-being as a core learning outcome within the existing curriculum, utilising a portfolio assessment model to document student growth across the content areas. It is adaptable for various disciplines within BEd programmes and can be implemented across other first-year ODeL contexts.

8. Contributions to ODeL scholarship

This study emphasises the perspectives of first-year students in the South African ODeL context, a demographic often overlooked in the current international ODeL literature, which predominantly features research from the Global North. The qualitative data collected offer significant insights into their experiences, which can inform curriculum design and institutional policy. Furthermore, the proposed curriculum framework presents a transferable model for integrating well-being into first-year ODeL programmes, thereby establishing a robust connection between theoretical concepts and practical curriculum development.

9. Limitations

This study is subject to several limitations. First, the reliance on self-report data means that findings reflect participants' perceptions and interpretations of their experiences, which may not always align with behavioural reality. In addition, the case study design at a single ODeL institution limits the

transferability of findings to other institutional contexts. Furthermore, the sample, though purposively selected for relevance, is limited to a single BEd cohort at one institution in one year, which constrains the breadth of the empirical base. Future research should examine the implementation and impact of the proposed curriculum framework across multiple institutions, disciplines, and cohorts to establish its generalisability and effectiveness.

10. Conclusion

This study contends that student well-being in ODeL higher education is influenced more by structural than by personal or contextual factors, necessitating an intentional approach to curriculum design. Based on a qualitative exploratory case study involving 14 first-year BEd students at a South African ODeL institution, five interconnected well-being challenges were identified: academic and emotional adjustment, difficulties with self-regulated learning, gaps in digital and academic literacy, feelings of isolation and limited social interaction, and the demand for curriculum-integrated well-being support.

To address these challenges, the study proposes a curriculum framework informed by the PERMA model that embeds well-being as a defined learning outcome within a structured first-year module. This approach strives to provide all first-year ODeL students, regardless of their personal backgrounds and experiences, with equitable access to essential knowledge and skills for well-being, fostering their success in higher education and beyond. It posits that well-being must be intentionally designed, not merely assumed.

Future research is encouraged to investigate the implementation and long-term effects of such frameworks on student retention, academic success, and overall well-being. Additionally, the framework's adaptability across disciplines and educational contexts within ODeL should be explored, contributing to a growing body of evidence on integrating well-being into the curriculum of open and distance education.

Declarations

Funding

The study received no funding.

Data availability

The data will be made available by the first author upon genuine request.

Ethics approval and consent to participate

Ethical approval was obtained from the University of South Africa’s research ethics committee, ensuring consent, confidentiality and voluntary participation. The authors confirm that all research involving

human subjects was conducted and reported in accordance with relevant guidelines and regulations. The study adhered to the Declaration of Helsinki in this regard.

Informed consent

Informed consent was obtained; the authors attest that the participants were aware of the study's purpose, risks, and benefits.

Consent for publication

Not applicable.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

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