



## Student Support for Incarcerated Females in an Open Distance e-Learning Institution

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### ABSTRACT

In South Africa, higher education is a constitutionally enshrined basic human right and one of the cornerstones for accomplishing the ideals of offenders' rehabilitation and preparation for life beyond bars. However, acquiring higher education whilst serving a sentence in a correctional centre is compounded by many institutional challenges especially towards incarcerated female students. Framed by the transactional distance theory (TDT), the qualitative study from which this paper emanates, used purposive and snowball sampling to recruit twenty-nine female distance learning students incarcerated at four female correctional centres across three provinces in South Africa. Based on the thematic content analyses of the data, the findings indicate that there is restricted access to learning resources, and that online participation in both learning and assessment is affected by erratic internet connectivity caused by UNISA-DCS hubs (computer laboratories) due to the security-focused nature of the correctional centres. Furthermore, the lack of direct access to the internet, smartphones, or internet-enabled devices exacerbates the digital marginalisation and exclusion of incarcerated students which engenders feelings of despondency against a system that is meant to empower them. Thus, owing to these findings, the paper recommends that practitioners, researchers, and policymakers must endeavour to design not only inclusive, but correctional centre-friendly student support. This entails acknowledging that incarcerated students do not have 24/7 access to the internet, the technological gadgets that make online learning possible and some incarcerated students having limited digital literacy. There is a need to design learning policies and strategies that are flexible to enhance the learning experiences and graduateness of incarcerated students.

### KEYWORDS

Open Distance e-Learning; female offender; incarcerated student; University of South Africa; correctional centres.

## INTRODUCTION

In the present era which Hopkins (2022) refers to as the “contemporary network society” (p. 382), female incarcerated students are the most oppressed and marginalised members of society (Parry, 2024). This is despite the fact that the right to education, including that of incarcerated individuals, is recognised under the UNESCO (1997) *Hamburg Declaration, Article 47* (Hopkins, 2022). Recently, with the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, higher education institutions around the globe leveraged digital and internet-based technology to sustain online teaching and learning and their contact with students (Gleason & Mehta 2022; Kennedy et al., 2022). At the University of South Africa (Unisa), for instance, there was increased attention to proctoring software, student usage tracking and surveillance, and synchronous classroom camera requirements (Buckley-Marudas & Rose, 2022). In so doing, a large proportion of incarcerated students were inadvertently excluded from online learning due to the dearth of technologies and restrictions surrounding access to the Internet in correctional facilities (Farley, 2022; Hopkins, 2022). Implicitly, incarcerated students are disconnected from social media and other networked communication platforms which makes it difficult for them to benefit from informal peer learning support groups. In the carceral context, barriers to online learning usually involve physical barriers, and operational, attitudinal, and human barriers (Farley, 2022). In their recent study, for example, Mdakane et al. (2022) highlight the tension between security and control measures, with the integration of pedagogical advancements of the 21st century. The authors discuss the imbalance between safety concerns within prison settings and the adoption of innovative technologies used in the Open Distance e-Learning (ODeL) context, which leads to an overemphasis on security at the expense of access to education. Nevertheless, in the dynamic landscape of ODeL, the pursuit of education transcends physical boundaries, embracing even those confined within the restrictive walls of correctional institutions. In this qualitative study, the authors delve into the unique experiences of female incarcerated students navigating the intricacies of ODeL provided by Unisa. It also unveils the multifaceted journey of female incarcerated students as they engage with Unisa’s ODeL framework. By exploring the nuanced landscape of student support within this unique context, the challenges and opportunities encountered by female learners striving for education while contending with the constraints of incarceration, are exposed. Also, by shedding light on these experiences, this study contributes not only to the specific discourse on incarcerated female students but also to the broader conversation surrounding student support in ODeL contexts. The examination of support mechanisms, ranging from formal institutional structures to informal networks, becomes pivotal in comprehending the dynamics that contribute to both academic engagement and personal development for incarcerated women in the ODeL framework. Since existent literature largely focuses on the experiences of incarcerated male students (Parry, 2024), the study was propounded by the following objective:

- To understand the views of incarcerated female students about the quality of student support in an ODeL learning context.

- The attainment of the above objective was animated by the following research question:
- How do incarcerated female students characterise their lived experiences of student support in an ODeL context?

The research questions facilitated the creation of an interview guide which was subsequently used to interview participants. The next sections of the paper entail the literature review, theoretical framework, and methodology as well as the thematically arranged findings and discussions.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Gendered Perspective in Carceral Environments

Previous studies have predominantly focused on the experiences of incarcerated male students (Parry, 2024). Understanding the compounding vulnerabilities and discrimination of the most marginalised student populations (i.e. female incarcerated students) is equally important (Hopkins, 2022). Research has so far reported on themes related to the 'double exclusion' of incarcerated male students, the different ways in which students overcome some of the barriers associated with ODeL, the unique terrain encountered by incarcerated students studying through ODeL and the balance (or lack thereof) between security measures and pedagogical advancements of the 21st century (Mdakane et al., 2022; Miselo, 2018). Correspondingly, a notable gap exists in the literature concerning students' experiences in female correctional centres. This raises the critical question of whether results emanating from studies on male students' experiences resonate similarly with their female counterparts. Parry (2024) supports the notion that incarcerated female students' experiences remain underexplored, an oversight that has profound implications. This often leads to a neglect of the conditions in female correctional centres, and thus a lack of contextual understanding of their needs and problems (Qhogwana, 2017; Sibisi et al., 2023). Other studies report that incarcerated female students are disadvantaged by the experience of incarceration, despite their attempts to improve their life chances and social positioning through distance education (Hopkins, 2022). In this regard, Kaun and Stiernstedt (2022) rightly assert that in the rapidly evolving social media age, it is precarious to assume that all technological advancements are inherently positive, even and especially for incarcerated students. The profile of the carceral population indicates that it is predominantly from disadvantaged communities that experience the digital divide even before their incarceration (Farley, 2022). Over and above this, many correctional centres in South Africa are technologically poor, and restrict access, at least to some degree, to the internet (Barrow et al., 2016). Unrestricted access to the internet is perceived as posing a danger to the community and the victims of crime (Farley, 2022). Therefore, to uphold security, incarcerated students are prevented access to educational technologies compared to the general student population (Farley, 2022). The online disconnection from mainstream society frustrates full integration into the digital economy upon release, a disadvantage compounded by further factors such as the association between the criminal record and the inherent requirements of the job applied for,

the nature of the offence, the age of conviction and the length of the sentence (Mdakane, 2022). In light of these complexities, it was essential for the researchers to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the specific challenges and triumphs encountered by this marginalised minority group of incarcerated female students within the context of ODeL. Moreover, Parry (2024) rightly advocates for an exploration of incarcerated female students' experiences, emphasising the need to understand the carceral educational journey through the gender lens.

### **UNISA's ODeL and its Significance in Correctional Education**

Unisa is renowned for its dedication to open and distance learning, offering students opportunities to pursue higher education even when they are physically separated from the lecturers and the institution (Mncube et al., 2024). Being a leading ODeL institution in Africa, Unisa offers a diverse range of courses. These are delivered through a flexible mode of learning that utilises various teaching and learning methods, including online resources and study materials, e-tutoring and other multimedia tools (Ngubane-Mokiwa, 2017). This makes it suitable for students who face barriers to traditional forms of education, such as those who are incarcerated. In 2017, a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between Unisa and the Department of Correctional Services (DCS) led to the establishment of Unisa hubs in numerous correctional centres around South Africa (Unisa, 2017). These hubs were established to provide administrative support to students studying through Unisa in various South African correctional centres (Unisa, 2017). This includes access to laptops with internet, Unisa library materials, tutorial services, online submission of assignments, and recently, online examinations (Mahlangu, 2017). This MoU is meant to enhance the social and educational justice mandate as dictated by the university's mission statement. It is also underpinned by the White Paper on Corrections in South Africa (2005) in its support of the use of education as a rehabilitative tool that can assist the carceral community to augment employment prospects and prevent recidivism upon release.

### **Student Support Systems in ODeL Contexts**

Arko-Achemfuor (2017) supports the notion that in ODeL, one of the important objectives is ensuring a lasting and positive learning experience for all students. According to Arfin (2018), student support goes beyond course materials, encompassing a range of services tailored to meet students' specific needs. Mpofu (2016) elaborates on three essential categories within ODeL student support: the course and design dimension, educational support services, and university support services, all contributing to a holistic learning experience. Equally, Netanda et al. (2017) posit that offering support services to students is intended to enable them to contend with various academic demands, assist in enhancing their academic prospects, and support them until the successful completion of their studies. For incarcerated students, these support systems play a particularly pivotal role in addressing barriers and fostering a conducive educational environment, acting as a lifeline for an isolated population in a constrained environment with limited resources (Watts, 2010). Nevertheless, Arko-Achemfuor (2017)

identified gaps in the provision of support services to students, highlighting shortcomings in both the availability of support services and the students' access to such services offered by Unisa. A similar sentiment is drawn from Nkambule et al. (2023) whose study identified some inadequacies in the quality and quantity of the extension of academic support services towards students from the marginalised corners of society. As a measure to create a socially just ODeL environment, these authors suggest that techno-progressivism, which is a contemporary philosophy that emphasises the need for broad-based and indiscriminate access to technology in educational processes, ought to also permeate the spheres where vulnerable populations of students are situated (Nkambule et al., 2023). The authors argue that correctional facilities constitute a part of the "spheres" where such vulnerable students, namely incarcerated female students, can be found.

Much of what was discussed above points to the need for refinement of support services especially those that can potentially curtail students' enjoyment of the 21<sup>st</sup> century-oriented aspects of their ODeL journey such as connectivity problems, lack of ICT devices and limited contact between students and their lecturers and faculties. Therefore, it is sensible to consider that within the realm of ODeL, e-learning technologies and systems pose both opportunities and challenges, a point also supported by Mdakane et al. (2022). Moreover, in correctional institutions (Mdakane, 2022) there little is known about the extent to which the state of student support systems affects incarcerated female students. Contrary to the assumption that incarcerated students readily have access to e-learning technologies, several studies refute this notion (Barrow et al., 2019; Watts, 2010). Drawing upon their experience as tutors within correctional centres, these authors contend that internet accessibility, especially in high-security centres, remains a contentious issue. These perspectives align with the findings of Farley et al. (2016) and Parry (2024), whose studies indicate that incarcerated students, as a general trend, contend with limited access to the internet, digital infrastructure, and educational technology. While these frailties of student support systems in correctional facilities predate the COVID-19 era, there is a sentiment that they became more pronounced at the peak of the pandemic. A point of reference is Makgopa (2022) who discusses the challenges linked to the implementation of ODeL amid the COVID-19 era. Among many challenges, Makgopa (2022) points to poor internet connection, and late feedback on administrative queries, which effectively caused a disconnect between students and their respective academic departments. Although Ngubane-Mokiwa and Zongozzi (2021) conducted their study on students with disabilities, the exclusionary practices they illuminated are also relatable to much of what happens to incarcerated students in pursuit of higher education through the ODeL system. These authors highlighted that lockdown-induced online learning, assessment and student support excluded those who do not have full access to technological affordances including reliable internet (Mokiwa & Zongozzi, 2021). They further revealed that COVID-19 also created a barrier for those who did not have functional digital literacy, though it also became an opportunity for a fortunate few of them to quickly learn and adapt to online learning and

assessment demands (Mokiwa & Zongozi, 2021). Thus, considering that Unisa and the Department of Correctional Services (DCS) reached an agreement through an MoU to establish tertiary education opportunities for inmates within South Africa's correctional facilities, including technological assistance for incarcerated Unisa student. Therefore, the authors of this paper are inclined to contend that the MoU fails to achieve fair and equitable education (refer to page 3 for a comprehensive discussion of the terms and conditions of the MoU. Also see Mahlangu (2017).

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This study adopted a Transactional Distance Theory (TDT) as its theoretical lens to explore the experiences of incarcerated female students in Unisa's Open Distance e-Learning (ODEL) context. Transactional Distance Theory (TDT) underscores the dynamic relationship between academic teams and students in spatially separated educational settings, emphasising the unique context of incarcerated learners. The theory recognises the diverse nature of online distance education and the need for tailored support for incarcerated students, including access to technology in correctional facilities. Applying a constructionist perspective, the study advocates for a balanced approach between structure and dialogue in designing learning environments for incarcerated higher education students. The theory spells out that the prospects of success in learning are reliant on maximally leveraging the affordances of technologies to bridge the transactional gap or distance that exists between students and lecturers, owing to them being in different localities. It further points to the need for deployment of such technologies to foster meaningful dialogues, and learning experiences, as propounded by Witthaus's constructionist approach. The foundational constructs of TDT—structure, dialogue, and autonomy—are crucial for understanding the pedagogical intricacies in connecting incarcerated students with lecturers and peers in distance learning. The study aimed to unravel the challenges of communication and learning within Unisa's ODeL context, shedding light on the complexities of spatially separated educational interactions and providing insights for improving tailored support mechanisms for incarcerated learners. It is hoped that the results of this study can inform the conceptualising of bigger longitudinal studies on incarcerated students. The next section delineates the research methods employed to make sense of the students' experiences of online learning in incarcerated contexts. Authors deemed the midpoints of TDT suitable for not only contextualising and curating the lived experiences of female incarcerated distance learning students but also for conceptualising the recommendations for a socially just rollout of student support towards the marginalised student populations in different social settings.

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This qualitative multiple-case study design inquiry was embedded in an interpretivist paradigm. The scope of the inquiry covered four cases (i.e. correctional centres) across three South African

provinces (i.e., Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal and the Western Cape) and four cities, namely Johannesburg, Pretoria, Durban and Cape Town. The decision to conduct the study was based on convenience because individual researchers hailed from two of the three provinces, a factor that made it plausible for them to travel to the centres with ease and cost-effectiveness to collect the data. The only exception was the Western Cape province, where the researchers made a concerted effort to travel to the selected correctional facility to collect data. The fact that the study was self-funded implied that the researchers had limited financial resources to upscale the investigation beyond the four cities and three provinces. The data were collected via focus group interviews. This approach enabled the researchers to explore distinctions, similarities and contrasts across the selected cases (Hunziker & Blankenagel, 2021). Furthermore, focus groups offer opportunities to explore the lived experiences of individuals within a group context where the dynamic interaction between participants contributes towards insight into research questions (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009). The first ethical clearance was provided by the College of Human Sciences Research Ethics Review Committee of the University of South Africa (Reference number: 90230337\_CREC\_CHS\_2020), and subsequently followed by approval from the Department of Correctional Services Research Ethics Committee (DCS-REC). Participants upheld the autonomy to decide whether they wanted to take part in the research, and their involvement was entirely voluntary. Furthermore, to preserve anonymity and protect the real identities of participants, pseudonyms were assigned to each individual. In the context of focus group discussions, confidentiality posed a dilemma. However, measures were implemented to safeguard participants' confidentiality, by explicitly advising against repeating or sharing any information disclosed during the focus group sessions.

**Table 1.** (see appendix).

Data were collected in four female correctional centres, across four provinces of South Africa, as specified in Table 1 above. These centres were specifically chosen because they were the only female centres with Unisa DCS hubs. All the interviews were conducted separately inside the classrooms at the school premises, with the presence of an internal guide at each site. A combination of purposive and snowball sampling techniques was employed to recruit study participants, resulting in a total sample size of 29 participants. Eligible participants were adult incarcerated female students between the age range of 18 to 61 years, enrolled at Unisa for the 2021 and 2022 academic years. This approach aimed to capture the unique experiences of female incarcerated students engaged in educational pursuits in an ODeL context, providing a nuanced understanding of their challenges and perspectives. Similar interview guides were used for all groups.

The proceedings of group discussions were recorded electronically and thereafter transcribed. Thematic Content Analysis (TCA) was employed to analyse the data from the transcribed interviews. This method involved constantly moving reflectively back and forth through the data. Initial codes were allocated, and themes were developed. Vivid, compelling

excerpts were selected to enlighten the themes, while narrative discussions offered an interpretation of the themes and excerpts (Kvale, 1996). Excerpts were quoted to demonstrate the credibility and trustworthiness of the identified themes and conclusions drawn (Elo et al., 2014). The languages spoken by the study participants varied during the interviews depending on the province where the data were collected. For instance, in the Gauteng province, a combination of *SeSotho sa Pitori*, *isiZulu*, and English was predominant; while in Worcester correctional facility, it was predominantly a combination of *isiXhosa*, English and *Afrikaans*; and lastly, in Durban Westville, *isiZulu*, *isiXhosa* and English were the predominant languages. All indigenous languages were translated into English by the research team. The validity of the translations was checked for correctness through a peer review process. The approach taken by the researchers to allow participants to express themselves freely in their indigenous languages is endorsed by Khupe (2020, p.100), in stating that “the inclusion of indigenous languages in research contributes to meaningful participation, strengthens collaboration and facilitates the generation of authentic data.” In line with the ethical requirement of assuring anonymity, as propounded by Saunders et al. (2015), participants’ real names were replaced with pseudonyms, also illustrated in **Table 1**.

Several steps were taken to cement the integrity of the findings of the study. Data triangulation, in terms of which the interview data were reported in consideration of the reviewed literature. In so doing, the researchers ensured that verbal (interview) data were hinged on varied empirical perspectives rather than on a single perspective (Yende, 2024). Lastly, independent auditors, namely the language editor and one of the faculty members in one of the researchers’ institutions wore “independent hats” to critique and diminish any conspicuous semblance of data reporting bias on the part of the researchers. While it is impossible to assertively lay a claim that, given the steps taken, rendered data reporting in the study was completely free of bias (Florczak, 2022), it is however the researchers’ contention that such measures sufficiently captured the essence of incarcerated female students’ views about the quality of student support in an ODeL learning context.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The data analysis phase, which dealt with the bundling and unbundling of the transcribed interview content to identify the elements of participants’ inferences that best responded to the research questions, precipitated the adoption of two primary themes and three sub-themes, as enunciated below.

### **Theme 1: Restricted access to learning facilities and technological devices**

According to the study results, the participants experienced challenges accessing the resources that enable effective learning, such as access to cell phones, computers, and the Internet. This is due to the protocol that applies in correctional centres, which effectively renders incarcerated students digitally absent for most of their weekdays. The only available time for them, to focus



on their studies, is between 9 am and 2 pm on weekdays only. To express their frustrations regarding the rigidity of such a protocol, participants stated:

*“I am stressed out; I find it very challenging because firstly, we don't have access to phones and computers. I have been told that I need to download it (study material) online but then how do I even download it when I don't have access to any internet?”* (Portia, Correctional Centre B)

Another participant said,

*“As a Master's student, I have challenges...Masters and Doctoral students meet in the evenings...all the discussion groups and stuff that happens among students happens in the evening. So, my contribution is always limited. And if I had access to the computer overnight, I would be able to finish my thesis in half the time!”* (Simphiwe, Correctional Centre D)

This implies that restrictions on internet usage over weekends, public holidays and in the evenings not only impede the progress of the completion of formative and summative assignments but also illuminate a deduction made by Mdakane et al. (2022), that incarcerated students are often excluded from synchronous online discussions and participation because they cannot, for instance, access the internet anytime anywhere. This study suggests that such challenges are not endemic to South African correctional centres only, but also affect correctional centres in other global contexts. A point of reference is a study by Seelig and Rate (2010, n. p.) which established that “New Zealand is one of the prison systems that does not allow offenders access to the internet” relative to the Norwegian prison systems which do allow offenders access, but only to educational websites and all other websites are blocked.

There was also a concern regarding restrictions around the use of phones for academic purposes, a factor that ruled them out of social media-mediated course discussions and knowledge-sharing sessions. Reference was made to WhatsApp, which has over the years carved a niche for itself in education as an enabler of teaching and learning and for building learning communities (Cronjé & van Zyl, 2022; Kennedy et al., 2022; Munir et al., 2021; Nkambule, 2023). To characterise the extent to which not being allowed to sufficiently use a cellphone can be a disadvantage to incarcerated students, another participant (who goes by the pseudonym of Kgothatso) from Correctional Centre C, described the feeling of not being able to fully utilise WhatsApp for learning purposes;

*“Although we do participate in class discussions - but students outside (prison) use WhatsApp...Microsoft Teams, [and] they conduct meetings in the evenings, and we do not have WhatsApp; so, we are unable to participate in conversations relating to schoolwork”.* (Kgothatso, Correctional Centre D).

In a nutshell, the participant detailed how almost all non-incarcerated students are on WhatsApp as part of the module requirement for the degree she is registered for, while she is not. Some of her assignments required her to engage with other students on WhatsApp and she could not participate (engage with other students) due to lack of access to a cellphone. Her woes

were compounded by the limited time to access the Unisa hubs, which at the Correctional Centre D could only be accessed between 8 am and 2 pm. That implies that after 2 pm, the Unisa learning hub closes for the day, only to be accessible again (at 8 am) the next day, excluding weekends and public holidays. Ultimately, there is a “continuous struggle for access to resources that come with the high-security level for women classified as maximum offenders, which has implications for the effective management of their studies, especially for Unisa students” (Qhogwana, 2017, p. 160). These limitations add an extra layer of complexity to an already challenging learning environment. The participants further indicated that they only use laptops and official public phones to communicate with Unisa.

### ***Feelings of despondency due to erratic network connectivity and poorly managed hubs***

Studies conducted in South African maximum security institutions investigating offenders’ gendered pathways to rehabilitation opine that passive incarceration due to prolonged periods of carceral inactivity contributes to offenders’ state of despair and helplessness (Mabeba, 2018; Qhogwana, 2017). Similarly, in the present study, a disproportionate number of the participants expressed a sense of hopelessness regarding the inconsistent network connectivity and inaccessible hubs which engendered feelings of despondency. In the investigation of digital challenges within correctional centres, participants consistently reported issues with Unisa hubs, intended for digital learning. They raised concerns about the impact of poor-quality internet and the central focus of these complaints related to the enormous disruptions they encountered. The network was described as erratic, often leading to frustration and hindrance in downloading or uploading documents. Theodora, from Correctional Centre A, explicitly described the struggle as follows:

*“We have a hub that has 20 Unisa notepads connected to the Telkom network, but the network is erratic and at best not working. You can spend the whole day trying to download or upload a document; it keeps kicking you out, you can even spend the whole month without connectivity!”* (Theodora, Correctional Centre A).

This was confirmed by Grace, who commented,

*“I was forced to use the Unisa hub and it was excruciating! I understand there’s an MoU in place, but I don’t know if it is really for the benefit of the offenders. I would have nightmares with not being able to submit on time, so it is a struggle...an uphill battle”.* (Grace, Correctional Centre A).

Referring to the dynamics that plagued her correctional facility experience, Sophie stated,

*Our hub is not up and running. Our internet is not working. It stopped working last year November. It’s now June and it’s not fixed. I am telling you...the stress! I, for, instance, registered on the 4<sup>th</sup> of January. I waited until March to receive my study material. So yes, it’s all these problems but prison people [correctional officials] will tell you that ‘I did not call you to come to prison!’* (Sophie, Correctional Centre B).

In another correctional facility, Phumzile indicated that,

*“In a week of five days, at least 2 days out of that week I am unable to access the portal. It’s very, very slow, you can’t even get in. I remember this other time, I was supposed to write an exam and I couldn’t because the system kept kicking me out from 8 o’clock until 11 o’clock”.* (Phumzile, Correctional Centre D).

Basing her views on the state of affairs in her facility, Maria said,

*“It is very challenging, especially with the signature modules because you need to come to the hub almost every day. And although we are allowed to take the laptops to our rooms, but not the internet...and I would be busy typing the assignment and at 10 o’clock at night I suddenly realise I need more resources and I can’t go look for them until the next day”.* (Marcia, Correctional Centre B).

Based on these inferences, it is apparent that the unreliability of the hubs and internet connectivity exacerbates students’ feelings of despondency. The severity of this is described by Theodora as follows,

*“I have the experience of using the Unisa hub and it is a painful experience. From having my laptop and modem (which were confiscated) and being expected to adjust and make it work regardless!”*

As a result of these and other experiences, the majority of the participants mentioned that writing online examinations was difficult and elevated their levels of anxiety. They further pointed to load-shedding and slow internet speed as some of the glitches that in some instances made it nearly impossible to access question papers. For example, they complained that often, access to the myUnisa system, due to being overloaded with volumes of candidates, caused the internet to be slow and resulted in them not completing the question paper. Both load-shedding and poor internet connectivity were found in studies by Matsheta and Sefoka (2023) and Nkambule (2023) as some of the inhibitors of education and training. The evidence presented here of the emotional difficulties involved in ODeL appears to be more pronounced for incarcerated female students with fewer resources. In the grand scheme of things, this finding indicates that, despite there being a Memorandum of Understanding between Unisa and DCS, some of the prescripts of the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) entered into between the Unisa and DCS are not enforced by the correctional officials who are entrusted with implementing it.

## **Theme 2: Correctional officials’ negative attitude towards implementing student support**

As public servants, correctional officers ought to serve members of the public including incarnated students. In the study, contrary to what their jobs demand of them, it became apparent that the officials in charge of student support services did not wholeheartedly honour all the key performance areas of their job description, which *inter alia*, include properly managing student facilities and arranging for network connectivity, computer and other technological gadgets to be properly serviced/maintained. Thus, it is incumbent upon them as public servants to exercise *Batho Pele* Principles (BPPs) (*a Se Sotho* language word for people first) as specified in the *Batho Pele* White Paper (Nkambule & Ngubane, 2023). The BPP White

Paper is a public policy derived from the philosophy of *Ubuntu* (i.e., humanity), and binds all public servants to be accessible, and extensively engage in consultation with members of the public while exhibiting values of care, support, and courteousness towards them (Nkambule & Ngubane, 2023). The following sub-theme entails participants' subjective accounts of the attitude of correctional officials towards them.

***"It's your problem you're in prison, sort it out yourself!"***

The majority of the study participants strongly felt that correctional officials do not present with the same attitude. All in all, the findings suggest that support received from correctional officials is inadequate, with some officials displaying supportive and others unsupportive behaviours. For instance, participants at the Correctional Centre D indicated that they enlist the assistance of the hub coordinator for urgent queries they have relating to their studies at Unisa. According to these participants, the hub coordinator can direct their queries to Unisa via WhatsApp, which in their experience is quicker and more effective than emails. The ambivalent, almost conflicting experiences of the participants were captured as follows:

*"We are [considered as their enemies] because we decided to study while in prison and they will even mention words like, 'you know you couldn't study outside, now you want to give us problems here'"* (Abigail Correctional Centre A).

However, two of the participants clarified that although a majority of correctional officials did not pull all the stops to satisfy their student support needs, there was nevertheless a minority of them who did all they could to render support.

*"They [correctional officials] assisted me a lot when I arrived here. I knew nothing and really commend what they are doing because if it's exam period and there is a problem with the exam, for instance, you can't access the exam, then our hub coordinators are able to communicate with the people from Unisa"* (Thabisile, Correctional Centre D).

*"With Unisa, let me be honest, they [correctional officials] do accommodate us; but it always depends on the official. For instance, like today, we've got only one member [official] in our section; we cannot ask her to accompany us to D-section [and phone] because she is all by herself. But sometimes they tell us that 'we are tired of all your requests to accompany you!'"* (Nthabiseng, Correctional Centre B).

As the focus group discussions intensified, there was a consensus among almost all the participants, except for the above two, that the attitude of a majority of officials was far from being ideal. Participants had this to say,

*Sometimes they don't open the library...won't unlock the gate...they will make you wait for like 30 to 40 minutes [before they decide to open the facility]* (Grace, Correctional Centre A).

Detailing how on one occasion she missed her examination because the official on duty absconded from escorting her to the exam venue, one participant said,

*"The exams were very late in the afternoon and when the person [correctional official] that's supposed to come fetch you forgets about you. Then you can't write your exams"*

*and they don't care whether you missed your exam or not".* (Abigail, Correctional Centre A)

The aforementioned inferences suggest that the relationship between the students and correctional officials tends to be hostile at given periods. For instance, the phrase *"we are their enemies"* illustrates the concept of the in-group versus out-group dynamic, which according to Branscombe and Baron (2017) can engender a scenario where belonging to a particular group (e.g. correctional officials as an in-group and offenders as an out-group) affects the behaviour and style of a person, particularly evident when incarcerated students pursue education or possess higher qualifications compared to the correctional staff. Furthermore, it is the responsibility of the correctional educators to oversee computer usage in the hubs, as well as ensure that students are accompanied to other sections of the prison to make telephone enquiries related to their Unisa studies. According to participant feedback, correctional staff become irritable and end up complaining when the students consistently request assistance. In response, they demoralise the students by creating a sense of apprehension, so much so that, *"When I face challenges, I sometimes get the sense that they are saying 'that's your problem that you are in prison, you know, sort it out yourself."* (Grace, Correctional Centre A).

A similar sentiment was echoed by another participant, stating that, *There are those that demoralise you...sometimes even a member [correctional official] would ask 'where are you going to work with a criminal record?'* (Kgothatso, Correctional Centre C). This finding corresponds with that of Qhoqwana (2017) who found that studying in a correctional facility can evoke feelings of hopelessness due to minimal student support systems. Similarly, Parry (2018), in her study, conveyed the message that incarcerated female students are prone to experiencing challenges educationally and otherwise in comparison to their male counterparts. This points to inadequate cooperation between correctional institutions and the students pursuing higher education via the ODeL mode. Participants remarked that, despite enduring negative treatment at the hands of officials, all the daily hardships they go through in their quest for higher education, have made them even more resolute, as lucidly discussed in the following sub-theme.

### ***Growing a 'thick skin': demanding a fair share of access to learning facilities and devices***

To spare its students from the expense of budgeting for data, Unisa undertook to provide each student with 30 gigabytes of monthly data (Lekhetso, 2022; Nkambule et al., 2023). Although incarcerated students across the length and breadth of South Africa are also eligible to receive 30 gigabytes of monthly data, security measures applied by DCS make it virtually impossible for them to access it on the basis that they are precluded from keeping cell phones inside prisons. Thus, feeling hard done by their first-hand experiences of marginalisation and exclusion of the already socially excluded, participants felt that they had no other option but to "grow a thick...crocodile skin" to persevere with their education despite the systemic challenges. It is their "growing of a thick...crocodile skin" that motivated them to resolutely demand justice to enjoy efficient student support systems in their hubs.

Furthermore, the late opening of the library, which is due to officials' lower levels of commitment towards rendering quality student support, usually takes place between 30 and 40 minutes behind the scheduled time. Unfazed by this, one of the participants said *"Arg! But you know what, they can stay with their keys because we stand there until they open"* (Grace, Correctional Centre A). Her attitude shows that she conditioned herself from feeling demoralised by such deeds.

Another projection of resilience was drawn from the following inference, *"Prison teaches you to be stubborn, but carefully, so that you don't burn your bridges"*. (Theodora, Correctional Centre A)

Other participants resorted to courts to demand fair treatment and their right to equality and quality education, as inferred below,

*"Sophie and I went to court to get a court order instructing the centre [Correctional Centre B] to keep our personal computers inside our cells. Fortunately, I still got my court order that says until the hub is up and running, I can keep my computer."* (Kagiso, Correctional Centre B).

The reason for Sophie and Kagiso to approach the court emanated from Correctional Centre B's unilateral decision to unjustly regulate the students' access to laptops, including a general discontentment with the poor conduct of officials, late opening of the hub, erratic internet connectivity in the hub as well as a lack of maintenance of the mobile learning devices. A deduction was made by one of the participants about the challenges they have to contend with to realise their basic right to quality education, as follows,

*"Clearly, it is the Unisa hub that is disadvantaging us because we cannot take the very same laptops donated by Unisa to our cells. So how are we supposed to study if we must wait the following day and do not have the physical study material with us?"* (Kagiso, Correctional Centre B).

Based on the participants' inferences, it is sensible to contend that not only did the negative attitude of correctional officials recalibrate their resilience, but also brought them closer and dependent on each other for moral and resource support. Comprehensive details of how this panned out are provided below.

### ***Personal resource dependency and peer support***

Participants expressed the need to resort to personal resources due to the unreliability of the provided infrastructure. One of the participants from Correctional Centre A mentioned that, *"Telkom line that we have been given in the hub is never working"* resulting in them/families purchasing their own data." (Abigail, Correctional Centre A)

To the extent that the correctional centres are a high-security environment, incarcerated students are not permitted to have access to cellphones and this automatically excludes them from the monthly Unisa data provided to non-incarcerated students. Their reliance on personal resources stemmed from the realisation that the only way to succeed in their pursuit of education is to be each other's pillar of strength.

Another participant mentioned that in cases where fellow students/inmates do not have means, *“we tend to stick to each other for help...we stick together, and we help each other out”*. (Thuli, Correctional Centre D)

Other comments deposited by participants are as follows, *“We can't rely on the hub, it's never working. So, we buy our own modems, and we buy our own data [because] it feels like if you don't do it yourself, nobody else is going to do it for you”*. (Abigail, Correctional Centre A)

*“We don't cope and I am honest about it. You can't even go ask them [correctional educators], can I use the computer overnight because if that computer breaks, it's my responsibility. That's where we come in - to help them [students] because we cannot afford to see them not submitting their assignments due to their laptops not working”*. (Sophie, Correctional Centre B)

*“We have somebody [correctional educator] who is supposed to assist us, but you end up assisting yourself. For instance, I struggled getting a Unisa student number. I didn't go to an official because I knew they would not help, but instead went to another student who then gave me a name and I contacted that name directly”*. (Theodora, Correctional Centre A)

Having realised that they only have one another to surmount student support challenges, participants were drawn to the practice of *Ubuntu* philosophy, which, as underscored by Qhogwana's (2017) study, evokes the elements of co-dependence, care and empathy among inmates, even in the absence of robust institutional support. It was through the spirit of *Ubuntu* that some students voluntarily shared resources, such as laptops and data, to make it possible for their peers to submit assignments. This *Ubuntu* spirit was evident in the participants' willingness to help one another, even in the absence of robust institutional support.

## CONCLUSION

The student population is diverse and students in general pursue higher education within different contexts, including various backgrounds, experiences, and attributes. Notwithstanding the many efforts aimed at assisting with the provision of educational technologies in carceral settings, it nevertheless appears that incarcerated female students in the present study are still relatively disadvantaged by internet disruptions, no direct internet access to email their lecturers or tutors or engage in other networked socialisation, and enculturation such as online peer learning forums (Hopkins, 2022). Propounded by the Transactional Distance Theory (TDT), the findings indicate that there is restricted access to learning resources, that online participation in both learning and assessment is affected by erratic internet connectivity and poorly managed Unisa DCS hubs (computer laboratories) caused by the security-focused nature of the correctional centres, hence limiting the epistemic dialogue and student autonomy. Furthermore, the lack of direct access to the internet, smartphones, or internet-enabled devices exacerbates the digital marginalisation and exclusion of incarcerated students which engenders

feelings of despondency against a system that is meant to empower them. Thus, owing to these findings, the paper recommends that practitioners, researchers, and policymakers ought to endeavour to design not only inclusive but Correctional Centre-friendly student support. This entails acknowledging that incarcerated students do not have 24/7 access to the internet, including the technological gadgets that make online learning possible. There is a need to design learning policies and strategies that are flexible to enhance the learning experiences and graduateness of incarcerated students. There is also a need for constant servicing of the Unisa DCS hubs to enable equitable access to online teaching, learning, assessment and student support.

### Limitations of the study

The authors concede that the study was not without limitations. Due to budget and time constraints, the researchers could not afford to engage in member-checking since geographically, the four correctional centres where the data were collected (in three separate provinces) are far from each other. Another limitation of the study emanates from data collection which was conducted in only four female South African correctional centres. Conducting data collection in exclusively female correctional centres implies that the findings cannot be generalised to other correctional service contexts.

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## APPENDIX

**Table 1.**

Demographic information of focus group participants.

Name of the correctional facility	Locality	Age Group	No. of participants	Qualifications registered for	Sentence imposed
Correctional Centre A	Pretoria, Gauteng Province	20-30	4	BA (Psychology) B.Com (Statistics) (Quantitative Management) B.Com (Life Sciences) B.Com (Law)	All four study participants served life sentences
Correctional Centre B	Johannesburg, Gauteng province	22-50	6	LLB (x2) Masters in Human Resource Management Higher Certificate in Law BA (Information Science) B. Ed	Half of the study participants served life sentences
Correctional Centre C	Worcester, Western Cape	23-55	3	BA Hons (Visual Media Arts) Law (Criminal Justice) BA (Counselling Psychology)	One study participant served a life sentence
Correctional Centre D	Durban, KwaZulu-Natal	18-61	16	B. Ed (x6) BCom-Fin Man (x1) Higher Certificate Economic and Management Sciences (x3) LLB (x3) MEd (x2) MA (x1)	Due to protocol at the facility, the length of participants' sentences was not revealed