Sustaining Communities of Learning and Practice in Innovative Open Education: The Case of the Pre-entry to Tertiary Education (PETE) Programme at NAMCOL

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Abstract

This study examines the influence of the Pre-entry to Tertiary Education (PETE) Programme offered by the Namibian College of Open Learning (NAMCOL) on Grade 12 (NSSC) students' admission to higher education. Focusing on learners at the NAMCOL Head Office Centre, it investigates how this bridging initiative facilitates equitable access to tertiary institutions. Anchored in Moore's Theory of Transactional Distance and Tinto's Student Integration Theory, the study used a mixed-methods case study design, combining questionnaires from 104 learners with interviews and a focus group involving students, staff, and management. Findings show that 69% of PETE graduates gained entry to higher education, with 91% reporting increased confidence and 88% noting alignment between the curriculum and tertiary requirements. The programme also fosters supportive learning communities of peers, tutors, and family members, enabled by flexible and inclusive Open and Distance Learning (ODL) methods and Open Educational Practices (OEP). PETE serves both out-of-school youth and working adults, addressing lifelong learning needs. The study highlights how targeted ODL interventions can empower marginalised learners, enhance retention, and promote community-based empowerment. It also demonstrates the value of sustaining learning communities through peer support, family engagement, and institutional collaboration, offering a scalable model for similar contexts across the Commonwealth.

Keywords: Pre-entry to Tertiary Education, Open and distance learning, Educational Access and Equity, Student Integration, Learning Communities, Bridging Programmes.

Introduction

The challenge of youth unemployment, learning poverty, and exclusion from tertiary education continues to threaten economic development and social stability. Many young people in Namibia, particularly those from low-income or rural backgrounds, fail to transition successfully from secondary to tertiary education. They are often left behind due to structural barriers, including poor-quality schooling, limited financial resources, and restrictive admission policies. According to the Namibia Statistics Agency (2023), only about 19% of youth aged 18–24 are enrolled in tertiary education, with participation rates significantly lower for rural and marginalised communities. This mirrors trends in several Commonwealth countries, where high youth populations face persistent barriers to post-secondary access despite policy commitments to universal education (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2022).

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) and Open Educational Practices (OEP) have emerged as promising strategies to widen participation in education. Institutions like the Namibian College of Open Learning (NAMCOL) have responded to this need by designing programmes that are flexible, learner-centred, and responsive to diverse student needs. The Pre-entry to Tertiary Education (PETE) Programme is one such initiative. It aims to support Grade 12 learners who did not initially qualify for tertiary admission by equipping them with foundational academic skills, boosting confidence, and fostering a readiness for post-secondary success. The paper draws on theories of student integration and transactional distance to interpret the experiences of PETE learners at NAMCOL's Head Office Centre, offering insights relevant to other Commonwealth contexts.

The following literature review situates PETE within the broader research on bridging programmes, open and distance learning, and learner integration, providing the conceptual foundation for the study's methodology and analysis.

Literature Review

Bridging programmes have increasingly been recognised as transformative tools in widening access to higher education. These interventions target learners who, due to academic underperformance or systemic barriers, are unable to transition directly into tertiary institutions. According to McGhie (2016), successful transition to higher education requires more than academic ability; it hinges on preparedness, motivation, socio-economic context, and support systems. In Namibia, where the national education system has historically struggled with equity and inclusion, bridging programmes like PETE serve as corrective mechanisms, providing academic strengthening, study skills development, and renewed learner motivation.

Several studies in the Southern African region affirm that bridging initiatives help mitigate the effects of poor secondary school outcomes by creating an academic buffer zone in which learners can consolidate knowledge, acquire study skills, and build confidence (Nolene, 2019; Mphahlele & Maphalala, 2023). These programmes also carry psychosocial benefits, especially for learners who internalise failure and view themselves as incapable of academic success. Comparable successes have been reported in Kenya, where the University of Nairobi's Bridging Course Programme has improved science and mathematics entry qualifications for over 60% of participants (Mungai, 2021), and in India, where the Indira Gandhi National Open University's bridge courses have enabled rural learners to access formal higher education through flexible, community-based delivery (Chaudhary & Dey, 2020). Such findings align closely with PETE's learner outcomes reported in this study.

The contribution of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) to educational inclusion is well documented. UNESCO (2020) and the Commonwealth of Learning identify ODL as pivotal to democratising education across the Global South, offering flexible alternatives to formal schooling. In Namibia, NAMCOL plays a central role in this ecosystem. ODL programmes enable learners to work while studying, care for dependents, or pursue education from rural areas—circumstances that typically hinder participation in conventional systems. Research by Dlodlo and Mahlangu (2018) confirms that ODL frameworks help narrow the urban-rural education gap and respond to evolving learner needs through flexible delivery and technology integration. However, the persistent "digital divide" in sub-Saharan Africa, where only 33% of households have reliable internet access (World Bank, 2022), underscores the importance of PETE's low-bandwidth strategies, such as print materials, radio, and SMS support, which make participation possible for learners in connectivity-constrained areas.

Open Educational Practices (OEP) complement ODL by encompassing not only the use of Open Educational Resources (OER) but also participatory pedagogies that promote learner autonomy, co-creation, and peer collaboration (Weller, 2014). Within PETE, OEP appears in learner-initiated WhatsApp groups, shared revision notes, peer tutoring, and voice-recorded explanations—practices that extend learning beyond formal tutorials and foster learner-led engagement. PETE's low-bandwidth delivery methods, including print, SMS, and radio, align with OEP's emphasis on accessibility. Tutors reinforce this by adapting instruction based on feedback, reducing transactional distance and promoting collaborative learning. Even in low-resource settings, PETE illustrates how OEP can transform learners from passive recipients to active contributors.

Youth empowerment and lifelong learning are central to policy frameworks like Agenda 2063, Vision 2030, and NDP5, which promote inclusive education for employment and adaptability. PETE aligns with these priorities by restoring purpose, confidence, and academic hope in youth (Zepke & Leach, 2010).

Social capital is equally significant. Wenger's (1998) communities of practice concept explains how PETE learners build knowledge through peer groups, digital collaboration, and tutor engagement. Family support through cost-sharing, adjusting domestic duties, or encouragement is critical for persistence (Tinto, 1997).

These interconnected elements, which are bridging curricula, open learning practices, youth development, and community support, create sustainable learning ecosystems. The next section outlines the theoretical framework guiding this study, showing how Moore's and Tinto's models inform PETE's design and its learners' experiences.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on two fundamental theories that shape both the learner experience and the design of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) initiatives: Moore's Theory of Transactional Distance and Tinto's Student Integration Theory. Moore (1993) defines transactional distance as the potential gap in understanding and engagement between instructor and learner in distance education, influenced by the degree of dialogue, programme structure, and learner autonomy. In PETE, these elements are deliberately managed to minimise this distance. Tutors communicate frequently and empathetically, materials are structured for clarity, and learners receive guidance on managing study schedules. Support mechanisms such as WhatsApp groups and responsive administrative staff provide ongoing interaction, showing how low-tech tools and consistent feedback reduce isolation.

Tinto's Student Integration Theory (1997) emphasises that persistence increases when learners are integrated both academically and socially. Academic integration relates to competence and success in coursework, while social integration involves belonging and peer support. PETE addresses both by offering targeted academic assistance through structured tutorials and fostering an inclusive environment where learners engage in peer mentoring, collaborative study, and shared goal-setting. Many PETE learners initially viewed themselves as academic failures, but through peer sharing, tutor feedback, and steady progress, they developed a renewed learner identity. This process is closely linked to the development of learner resilience, which Windle (2011) describes as the capacity to adapt positively to educational adversity, a quality nurtured through sustained peer networks, responsive teaching, and family support.

Together, these theories explain how PETE's design reduces transactional barriers, promotes academic competence, and cultivates a sense of belonging. By embedding resilience-building mechanisms into its structure, PETE not only facilitates academic success but also prepares learners to navigate future challenges in higher education and beyond. This dual focus forms the conceptual foundation for the study's mixed-methods investigation, described in the next section.

Methodology

A mixed-methods case study approach was used, focusing on PETE learners at NAMCOL's Head Office Centre. This site was purposively selected due to its longer operational history and the availability of comprehensive learner records, allowing for detailed tracking of outcomes. A mixed-methods design was chosen because it enables the integration of numerical trends with the depth of personal experiences, producing richer insights into educational interventions (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). While this case study focuses on the Head Office Centre, the findings are context-specific and may not fully reflect variations across regional PETE centres or other Commonwealth contexts.

Quantitative data were collected from 104 learners selected through purposive sampling to ensure representation across age, gender, and subject enrolments. Questionnaires assessed academic readiness, perceived support, and admission outcomes. The questionnaire items were adapted from validated educational access instruments used in ODL research (Kember & Leung, 2009) and piloted with a small group of former PETE learners to ensure clarity and content relevance.

Qualitative data included semi-structured interviews with six staff members and a 90-minute focus group with 20 students, guided by a discussion protocol covering academic experiences, peer interaction, and institutional support. All sessions were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim.

Qualitative data were analysed thematically using Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework, with themes coded for learner integration, community formation, resilience, and empowerment. Quantitative data were summarised descriptively and cross-referenced with qualitative themes to explain patterns (e.g., linking high reported confidence with focus group narratives on peer support). This triangulation enhanced both depth and validity.

Ethical clearance was obtained, and participants gave informed consent. Potential limitations include response bias in self-reported data, the researcher's dual role in programme delivery and evaluation, and the restricted scope to one PETE centre.

Findings

While PETE demonstrated overall success, some constraints emerged. A few students did not improve due to irregular attendance, caregiving duties, or limited access to learning technologies. Tutors also faced challenges in providing consistent one-on-one support, particularly during peak periods, underscoring the need for increased staffing and support structures. Using a mixed-methods approach, the study triangulated quantitative and qualitative data to identify five key themes: (1) Academic Progression, (2) Empowerment, (3) Peer Learning, (4) Family Support, and (5) Tutor Engagement and Institutional Responsiveness.

Academic Progression and Access

Of the 104 PETE learners surveyed, 72 (69.2%, n=72/104) reported successful admission into institutions of higher learning. Among them, 83.3% (n=60) had resat English, Mathematics, or Biology subjects critical for university entry in Namibia. Seventy-six per cent (n=79) believed PETE significantly improved their subject knowledge, and 67% (n=70) felt they would not have qualified without it. Additionally, 88% (n=92) found the curriculum aligned with tertiary requirements. When disaggregated by employment status, unemployed learners reported slightly higher gains in subject mastery (78%) compared to employed learners (72%). Male learners were slightly more likely than females to resit Mathematics (46% vs. 39%), whereas female learners reported higher gains in confidence (93% vs. 87%).

Empowerment and Self-Belief

Before joining PETE, 64% (n=67) of learners reported a confidence level of "low" or "very low." After completing the programme, 91% (n=95) reported increased confidence, with 45% (n=47) noting significant improvement. One learner remarked, "Before, I thought my dreams ended with failing Grade 12. PETE gave me the courage to try again." These experiences demonstrate how PETE contributes to both academic improvement and psychosocial well-being.

Peer Learning Communities

Seventy-four per cent (n=77) participated in some form of peer study group: 61% (n=64) in WhatsApp circles, 46% (n=48) in physical group sessions, and 28% (n=29) received daily motivation from peers. One student shared, "Our WhatsApp group was my lifeline… whenever I felt like giving up, someone encouraged me."

Family Support and Intergenerational Involvement

Fifty-nine per cent (n=61) received academic or emotional support from a parent, guardian, or sibling. Notably, 35% (n=36) reported another household member was also studying, creating intergenerational learning environments. As one learner noted: "My mother woke me up at 5 am every day to revise… I did not want to let her down."

Tutor Engagement and Institutional Responsiveness

Eighty-eight per cent (n=92) rated their tutors as "supportive" or "very supportive," with 81% (n=84) saying tutor relationships motivated them to remain committed. Institutionally, 70% (n=73) found the timetable manageable, and 65% (n=68) would recommend the programme.

Collectively, these five themes reveal how PETE's design addresses both the academic and socio-emotional dimensions of learner success. Quantitative data show clear improvements in admission rates, subject mastery, and learner confidence, while qualitative accounts highlight the personal transformations, collaborative networks, and support structures that underpin these gains. The consistency between statistical trends and participants' narratives reinforces the robustness of the results and underscores the value of PETE's integrated approach.

The following table distils these key findings, pairing core statistics with representative learner voices to illustrate not only the measurable outcomes but also the lived experiences behind them. These indicators provide a concise yet powerful snapshot of the programme's overall impact.

Summary of Key Findings

Theme	Key Statistic	Illustrative Quote
Academic Progression	69% admitted to tertiary education (n=72)	"I would not have qualified without PETE."
Confidence Building	91% improved confidence (n=95)	"PETE gave me the courage to try again."
Peer Learning	74% engaged in study groups (n=77)	"Our WhatsApp group was my lifeline."
Family Support	59% had active family involvement (n=61)	"My mother woke me up at 5 am every day to revise."
Tutor Support	88% rated tutors highly supportive (n=92)	"My tutor motivated me to keep going."

Together, these results illustrate how PETE nurtures sustainable communities of learning through the combined power of academic preparation, psychosocial support, and inclusive ODL practices. The following discussion situates these outcomes within broader research and policy frameworks, highlighting their relevance to the PCF11 theme of sustaining communities of learning and practice in innovative open education.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that the PETE Programme at NAMCOL represents more than a remedial academic intervention. Nonetheless, while outcomes are mainly positive, it is essential to examine the accompanying challenges. Some learners struggled with consistent attendance due to financial hardship, caregiving duties, or psychological distress conditions that worsened during COVID-19. Others faced difficulties with core subjects such as Mathematics and English due to foundational gaps. A small subset, despite motivation, did not improve their grades or gain university admission. These realities underscore the need for targeted support for high-risk learners and the implementation of differentiated instructional strategies.

The study's focus on the NAMCOL Head Office Centre limits generalisability across Namibia or the wider Commonwealth. However, PETE's outcomes compare favourably with similar bridging programmes in South Africa and Botswana, where admission rates for underprepared students often range between 55–65% (Mphahlele & Maphalala, 2023). PETE's 69% admission rate, combined with its low-tech OEP strategies, positions it as both cost-effective and contextually adaptable.

The PETE Programme represents a transformative learning ecosystem. Learners, tutors, peers, and families come together to foster inclusion, resilience, and access to higher education. Consistent with Tinto's theory, the data confirm that students thrive in environments promoting both academic and social integration. Structured tutorials, tutor engagement, and accessible materials nurture confidence, while peer and family networks offer essential support scaffolds. This mirrors Moore's principle that reducing transactional distance enhances learner autonomy without sacrificing support.

Beyond Namibia, the PETE model offers valuable insights for Commonwealth countries with high youth populations and significant educational barriers. Its emphasis on flexible ODL delivery, peer mentoring, and family engagement could be replicated in other low-resource contexts, aligning with Agenda 2063's and COL's goals for inclusive education.

The 69% higher education admission rate among PETE completers underscores its legitimacy as a bridging pathway for marginalised youth. The programme holistically addresses cognitive, emotional, and social development, providing a model for inclusive, contextualised bridging education. Peer communities, especially those facilitated via WhatsApp, served as critical mutual support hubs, mirroring Wenger's "communities of practice." Family involvement extended learning beyond classrooms, positioning parents as co-educators, reflecting African communal values and intergenerational learning traditions.

For policymakers, this demonstrates that sustainable learning is a collective pursuit, requiring the integration of families, peers, and institutional support in programme design.

Recommendations

Based on the evidence and insights gained from this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. **Embed bridging interventions such as PETE within national education systems** to ensure sustainable funding and formal recognition. Commonwealth governments should replicate and adapt these models in both urban and rural regions. Evidence from South Africa and Botswana shows that formal integration improves programme stability and student retention rates (Mphahlele & Maphalala, 2023; Botswana Ministry of Tertiary Education, 2022).
2. **Formalise and strengthen peer support networks** by creating institutional frameworks for peer mentoring, group facilitation, and learner-led tutoring for both digital and face-to-face. Peer-to-peer learning is linked to higher retention and confidence in ODL environments (Wenger, 1998).
3. **Integrate family engagement into programme design** through orientation sessions for parents, recognition of family contributions, and the creation of community learning hubs that enable co-study environments. As this study found, 59% of learners benefited from family support, which was a key enabler of persistence.
4. **Promote mobile-first and blended learning approaches** using accessible tools such as WhatsApp, SMS, and printed materials to reach learners in low-connectivity areas.
5. **Enhance tutor-student interaction** by offering professional development in learner-centred support, emotional intelligence, and inclusive pedagogy, beyond subject content delivery.
6. **Implement a longitudinal tracking system** to monitor PETE alumni's tertiary performance, graduation rates, and career outcomes, ensuring evidence-based programme improvements.
7. **Strengthen the application of Open Educational Practices (OEP)** by enabling co-creation of materials, expanding peer-led initiatives, and providing tutors with training in open pedagogy.
8. **Encourage cross-country collaboration within the Commonwealth** to share best practices in bridging programmes, particularly in contexts with high youth populations and significant educational barriers.

Conclusion

The findings confirm that PETE is not merely an academic bridging programme but a holistic model of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) that integrates academic support, emotional restoration, peer collaboration, and family involvement. The programme enabled 69% of participants, many of whom were previously excluded due to systemic barriers, to access higher education. Learners reported improved academic preparedness, self-confidence, motivation, and a strong sense of belonging, supported by the dedication of tutors, families, and peer communities.

However, the study also highlighted limitations, including response bias in self-reported data, the researcher's dual role in delivery and evaluation, and the restricted scope to one PETE centre. These factors limit the generalisability of findings to other regions or Commonwealth contexts.

Despite these limitations, PETE offers a replicable model for inclusive, community-focused bridging education in low-resource settings. Its combination of flexible ODL delivery, integration of Open Educational Practices (OEP), and emphasis on intergenerational support can inform similar initiatives globally.

Future research should explore the longitudinal impacts of PETE alumni's tertiary and career outcomes, as well as comparative studies across multiple PETE centres and similar bridging programmes in other Commonwealth contexts.

In alignment with the PCF11 sub-theme, PETE shows that when educational ecosystems are built on collaboration, equity, and learner empowerment, they can transform lives and sustain communities of learning and practice across the Commonwealth.

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