



**Assessing Information Distribution Practices Adopted by the
Durban University of Technology and the Central Applications
Office**

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Abstract

Information distribution to prospective students remains crucial for the South African higher education sector and when handled inappropriately, can negatively impact access to universities. Hence, the practices adopted when distributing information are an area that requires serious exploration by HEIs. Considering that accessing information is a primary need in the higher education sector, this study assessed the information distribution practices adopted by the Durban University of Technology (DUT) and the Central Applications Office (CAO) in South Africa.

The study adopted a qualitative research approach. Semi-structured individual interviews with thirteen staff members who are responsible for distributing information at DUT Riverside campus were conducted to collect primary data. Furthermore, primary data was also generated from one focus group discussion comprising six staff members from both academic and support departments. The study further analysed secondary data in the form of DUT and CAO websites, news headlines as well as social media sites of these two organisations. Data were analysed thematically.

The findings illuminate various practices adopted to distribute information to prospective students. Furthermore, it was found that there is use of several information distribution channels. These include distributing information by means of visits to schools and on campus, during registration period. Other channels include manual distributions, the use of digital platforms and traditional media such as radio. Of concern, was the mushrooming of fake social media websites claiming to distribute information on behalf of DUT and CAO. There were also concerns regarding the role of student political organisations and security guards. The findings further indicate factors influencing the practices adopted when distributing information. These include political, economic, social and technological factors. The study further highlights existing confusion in the distribution of information between DUT and CAO. Therefore, HEIs have to pay attention to clarifying this through various policies and communications. There is also a need to clarify what information should be distributed, in order to enhance access.

Key Words

Information distribution, PESTLE factors, digital platforms, misinformation, university applications

Declaration

I wish to declare that this study “Assessing information distribution practices adopted by Central Applications Office and Durban University of Technology” was carried out by me and submitted in fulfilment of the requirement for Master’s Degree in Administration and Information Management at the Durban University of Technology. I hereby confirm that this study is my original work which has not been submitted to any university.

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I hereby approve the submission of this thesis

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Acronyms

CAO	Central Applications Office
CAS	Central Applications Service
CHE	Council for Higher Education
DHET	Department of Higher Education and Training
DUT	Durban University of Technology
HE	Higher Education
HEA	Higher Education Act
HEIs	Higher Education Institutions
HEOA	Higher Education Opportunity Act
HESA	Higher Education South Africa
KZN	Kwa-Zulu Natal
PESTLE	Political, Economic, Social, Technological, Legal and Environmental
PSET	Post School Education Information Policy
SA	South Africa
SAE	School of Audio Engineering
UK	United Kingdom
WHO	World Health Organisation

Outline of Chapters

Chapter 1: Introduction and background to the study

This chapter contains the study's introduction and background information. The research problem is defined, and the chapter discusses the study's significance and purpose. The chapter also indicates the study's objectives and research questions.

Chapter 2: Literature review

Chapter 2 defines information distribution and further introduces ways to distribute information. The chapter also looks at the factors affecting information distribution to prospective students and the information distribution strategies. The chapter further engages in a brief explanation of information distribution tools. Moreover, the chapter explores extant literature on these issues in the international and national contexts.

Chapter 3: Research methodology

The research methodology chapter provides an overview and discussion of the research design and methods utilised to collect data. The chapter also outlines the distinct methods used to gather empirical information. In addition, the chapter looks at the design of the questionnaire used to collect data. Statistical techniques were used to analyse and process data.

Chapter 4: Practices adopted in distributing information and stakeholders involved

This chapter provides the research results by presenting a summary of the conclusions from the existing literature and the empirical study. There is further analysis and discussion/interpretation of collected research data.

Chapter 5: Factors influencing the distribution of information

This chapter presents the findings of the study based on the analysis of the PESTLE factors that affect the distribution of information. It further proposes a framework for distributing information at the HEIs.

Chapter 6: Conclusion and Recommendations

This is the final chapter which summarises the study's findings. The chapter presents the conclusion and recommendations of the study. Research objectives and questions

are revisited in this chapter. The study's contribution to knowledge in its scientific area is presented. In addition, the limitations of the study are addressed and recommendations are made for further research.

Chapter 1

Introduction and Background to the Study

1.1 Introduction

This chapter introduces the thesis and presents the background to the study. The history of universities of Technology in South Africa is provided with the aim to elucidate the role of these institutions in distributing to students from various backgrounds. The problem statement as well as the aim of the study is also discussed in this chapter. The objectives, research questions and motivation for why the study is important are also provided.

1.2 Background of the study

Information distribution in the context of Higher Education is referred to as the process of making information available to students in a timely and effective manner (Ferriera and Erasmus 2016:283). According to a Chinese study, the characteristics of accessing higher education starting at the technical level have a significantly influenced by how effectively information is disseminated (Wang *et al.* 2020:4). HEIs in Sub-Saharan Africa, have many issues hampering the effective dissemination of accurate information to prospective students such as the lack of resources and infrastructure (Lubbe and Petzer 2016: 922). For instance, in the South African context, the White Paper on Post-School Education and Training (1997) stipulates that the main objective is to address and broaden access to information about Higher Education. As such, HEIs alignment with the White paper strategy should ensure that prospective students can access university applications (Ndibuuza and Langa 2020:118).

Noticeably, existing strategies to distribute information in the context of South Africa by HEIs also do not go without challenges – information and other government services are not accessible to other people due to scarce resources (Chawinga and Zozie 2016:13). Hence, it is significant for HEIs to have policies and practices focusing on information distribution. The Department of Higher Education and Training (2014) further states that related regulations and policies on equity should ensure that every South African learner must have access to HE information.

Despite this stipulation, it will seem that the Durban University of Technology (DUT) as an institution, faces challenges related to distributing accurate and reliable information to prospective students. For instance, in 2021 during the peak of COVID-19 lockdowns, DUT was faced with thousands of prospective students who were falsely informed that the institution will be registering prospective students who walk into the campus (Eyewitness 2021). In clarifying this incident, the DUT management asserts that the information was not distributed by the institution but was a false statement (Durban University of Technology 2022). Notably, there is an apparent confusion regarding whose duty it is to disseminate appropriate information to prospective students. For example, according to Durban University of Technology (2022), information about applications is distributed by the Central Applications Office (CAO) but contrarily, the CAO expresses that they only administer applications for DUT (Central Applications Office 2021). Against this backdrop, this study assesses the information distribution practices adopted by CAO and DUT.

1.3 The history of Universities of Technology in South Africa

Many structural transformations have occurred in South Africa's higher education sector over the last two decades, and these have resulted in the establishment of universities of technology (UoT) (Luvalo 2019:187). The role of universities of technology is to contribute towards the development of the country. For instance, DUT was formed in 2002 through the merger of ML Sultan and Technicon Natal (Durban University of Technology 2022). According to (Du Pre *et al.* 2004:6), the focus on technology is the qualifying factor for a UoT, and its purpose is to "make knowledge useful." The distribution of knowledge (or information) in UoT is through the use of technology, hence they continually make efforts to advance their technology systems (Mentz *et al.* 2008:30). Notably also is the fact that the UoT's role is to ensure that digital platforms used by millennials are prioritised in information distribution, using platforms that are suitable considering any conditions they might be living under (Jones *et al.* 2007:1). Thus, if no attention is paid to information distribution by UoTs, this could lead to fewer students being able to access information about these institutions, and further result in a lack of technology development in the country which will hinder economic and social development.

1.4 Problem statement

HEIs in South Africa (SA) face unique debilitating historical factors that need to be addressed. These factors include access, success and the ability of the institutions to contribute to knowledge. Amongst many, the concern with greater participation in HE has become an urgent imperative after the demise of apartheid (Mlambo *et al.* 2021:13). However, there are many challenges faced by South African students in post-apartheid times relating to access to HE information and among these are two prominent challenges: lack of information and resources (Goldman 2019:1). For example, the World Bank Group (2018) statistical report notes that in 2017 a high percentage (51%) of youth between 18-24 in South Africa were not attending educational institutions, and part of the reason given was that prospective students did not have access to information distributed by HEIs. Hence, unpacking spatial differences in access to postsecondary education information can help to strengthen initiatives to reduce such inequalities (Njoko 2018:170).

While the lack of information regarding HE negatively affects all prospective students, students from rural schools in particular are mostly affected due to a lack of resources such as the internet and computer labs (Leibowitz and Bozalek 2014:94). On this, it has been established that prospective students from highly participating groups are more interested in the information about HE than those who are from traditionally underrepresented groups (Njoko 2018:173). Even though many factors contribute to the lack of access to higher education, the lack of information distributed regarding courses offered and the information related to the application process are the main concerns. Information distribution is hence crucial and it is important to assess the various resources put in place to ensure that prospective students have the information they need to apply to higher education institutions (Maila and Ross 2018:3). However, insufficient attention has been given to practices adopted by various stakeholders in distributing much-needed information to prospective students.

This research takes into consideration the context of South Africa, where there is inequality and in which different socio-economic challenges are of major concern (Branson *et al.* 2018:5). These socioeconomic challenges have impacted the lack of information and resulted in hundreds of prospective students standing in queues seeking information regarding courses offered at the DUT during the January intake

period (Durban University of Technology 2022). Hence, studying how the information is disseminated to prospective students becomes essential. Of concern, Vezi (2016:18) highlights that several students do not apply using the CAO because they lack the requisite information. Njoko (2018:170) observes that this has led prospective students to struggle with obtaining the information they need to apply to HEIs in KwaZulu Natal.

It has been noted that there had not been exploratory studies on information distribution at HEIs in South Africa (Zambrano *et al.* 2019:536). Additionally, little is known about the information needs of prospective students while considering which university to apply to (Penceliah *et al.* 2016:277). It is further established that 25 years after South Africa's democratic transition in 1994, the relationship between educational inequality and poverty remains strong (de Clercq 2020:1). There is evidence based on poverty and inequalities measures among demographics in South Africa which indicates that African students, specifically those from socio-economic disadvantaged backgrounds, remain under-represented in enrolment rates at HEIs in the country (Njoko 2018:174). Considering that the lack of requisite information contributes to exacerbating this situation, it becomes pertinent to assess the information distribution practices. Hence, this study assesses the information distribution practices adopted by CAO and DUT.

1.5 The aim of the study

The study aims to assess information distribution practices adopted by the Central Applications Office and the Durban University of Technology to distribute information to prospective students.

1.6 Research Objectives:

- To determine information distribution practices adopted by the DUT.
- To determine information distribution practices adopted by CAO in online platforms.
- To examine PESTLE factors influencing information distribution to prospective students.
- To recommend strategies for enhancing information distribution to prospective students

1.7 Research Questions:

Research questions are based on the above objectives

- What are the information distribution practices adopted by DUT?
- What are the information distribution practices adopted by CAO when using online platforms?
- What are the PESTLE factors that influence information distribution to prospective students?
- What strategies can be recommended for enhancing the distribution of information to prospective students?

1.8 The significance of the study

The study aims to contribute to the growth and advancement of knowledge regarding the significance of distributing information to various stakeholders, such as pre-university students. It explores the current state of information distribution practices adopted. Furthermore, the study endeavours to explore the factors that affect information distribution and envisages making recommendations towards the review and amendments of practices adopted to distribute information to assist prospective students applying to universities for spaces.

1.9 Summary

This chapter provided the background of the study, including a brief history of universities of technology. The research problem was presented and discussed. The objectives and significance of the research were also discussed. The next chapter focuses on the review of existing literature concentrating on key concepts and variables related to the topic of this study.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

The previous chapter introduced the study, presented the research problem, research questions and objectives. The literature review chapter will provide a discussion of the concept of information distribution to prospective students in higher education in South Africa.

2.2 The need to distribute information to prospective students

This section reviews literature related to the need to distribute information to prospective students. It explores literature which focuses on information distribution in the context of HE and effective ways to distribute information to prospective students.

2.2.1 Information distribution in the context of higher education

Information distribution is one of the crucial responsibilities of HEIs which is aimed at ensuring the increased and continuous participation of students in HE (Shawe *et al.* 2019:18). Notably, the success of South Africa HE is dependent on accurate admissions information being disseminated to prospective students which will improve student intake at HEIs (South Africa Department of Higher Education Training 2019). As such, information distribution in the context of HE is referred to as the process of making information available to students in a timely and effective manner (Delale-O'Connor 2019:1011). Nevertheless, HEIs still face many challenges, including expanding and promoting equitable access, cultivating knowledge, and technological challenges (World Bank Group 2018). Whilst distributing relevant information to prospective students, HEIs are guided by information needs (Erdil *et al.* 2021:3).

Bavu (2018:3) emphasises that HEIs must be able to organise and use their operations for information gathering, processing, and distribution. As a result, it is significant for HEIs to understand the decision-making process of prospective students, for example, the primary information sources, to ensure that students are informed about the HEI (Van Zyl 2015:344). Ürer Erdil *et al.* (2021:3) indicate that higher education institutions are focusing on recruiting more students while also attempting to attract high-calibre prospective students. Consequently, information distribution should be in line with the digital transformation of university processes

worldwide to assist prospective students in making informed choices (Mergel *et al.* 2019:3).

A study conducted in Afghanistan establishes that HE within that context expanded with the number of students at educational institutions growing significantly, and the administration recognised the significance and role played by disseminating accurate information in informing prospective students' decisions (Sana 2020:5). However, in the context of HEIs in Sub-Saharan Africa, many issues are hampering the effective dissemination of accurate information to prospective students (Lubbe and Petzer 2016:925). On this, a study conducted in Malawi indicates that equitable information distributed to students ensures that they can enrol in and understand higher education (Chawinga and Zozie 2016:13). Moreover, a study conducted in South Africa by Njoko (2018:187) reveals that the dissemination of sufficient, useable information to rural and other disadvantaged schools in townships and urban areas, is another factor that affects learners who wish to access HEIs.

Furthermore, Palvia *et al.* (2018:235) note that Higher Education has become increasingly commercialised because of increased public access to university information. Students engage in information search about HE to be better informed and to discover viable solutions to their problems (Seretse *et al.* 2018:220). Hence, students rely on HEIs to distribute relevant and accurate information (Greenbank 2011:260). Literature review reveals that few studies have been conducted to assess high school learners' information needs towards further studies (Bonnema 2007:45). This is to say that the effectiveness of information distributed by HEIs determines prospective students' participation in HE.

2.2.2 Effective information distribution to prospective students

Higher Education in South Africa has been faced with many challenges in the past few years (Tankou epse Nukunah *et al.* 2019:285). Effective Information to access HE amongst many is identified as a challenge affecting prospective students. This has also occasioned some challenges in the admissions information process, considering that it can be quite complex for prospective students, educators, and parents to access such information. This confusion is exacerbated when the information varies throughout the website, brochures, handbooks and other material used by HEIs

(Beard 2019:21). Enrolment of prospective students, therefore, relies on the information that is available to them (Hestermann and Pistolessi 2017:181). While the effectiveness of a dissemination strategy is imperative for HEIs, they must also determine factors that affect distribution such as the nature of the innovation, the target audience, and the information channel (Njoko 2018:4).

Knowledge about which characteristics influence prospective applicants' choice of study enables HEI administrators to focus more on developing different promotional approaches and conducting relevant recruitment programmes (Kilfoil *et al.* 2021:11). Prospective students that are mostly affected are those from "disadvantaged" rural and township communities, who seek admission to universities. Notably, these demographics come from backgrounds characterised by poverty, lack of sufficient resources, dysfunctional schools, poor education, a lack of information and distance from urban educational institutions (Jones *et al.* 2007:1). For example, it is observed that by the time the information about university applications reaches prospective students, it would be late for them to apply (Walker 2022:544). This is also linked to the fact that their high schools are in areas that lack resources and hence their inability to access information about university admission on time (Njoko 2018:189).

It is evident that when HEIs distribute information they fail to appropriately target rural schools and to consider the issues that may constitute challenges to the effectiveness of distributed information (Maila and Ross 2018:3). It is pertinent that HEIs consider these issues and implement relevant policies and tailor the information to prospective students to meet their needs and address possible challenges (Lubbe and Petzer 2016:923). This is important considering that prospective students that have sufficient information can make informed judgments on career choices (Van Zyl 2015:344). Consequently, HEIs need to evaluate if the information they distribute is effective and accessible (Seretse *et al.* 2018:220). It is observed that university applications at institutions open early and prospective students use their grade 11 results to apply (Central Applications Office 2021). The early applications are aimed at ensuring that prospective students secure spaces, and universities have the time to ensure that they capture all new students before the matric results are published. While CAO aims to alleviate the pressure of long queues at HEIs by encouraging early applications, late applications remain an issue (Jumo *et al.* 2012:1). On this, it is noticed that students

flock to university gates without applying through CAO which results in long queues that could be avoided through earlier dissemination of proper information (Vezi 2016:18).

The lack of information can cause and generate irrational worries among prospective learners who must make career decisions. According to Oeppen Hill (2020:90), prospective students' most frequently requested information focuses on majors, costs, rankings of schools, and size and geographical information. Hence, the HEIs must engage with prospective students regularly to tailor the information being disseminated to address these information needs (Kilfoil *et al.* 2021:11). There is a gap in the literature about information distributed to prospective students, this is so considering that most of the literature focuses on the marketing of HEIs (as illustrated in Figure 1 below). Although Garwe (2014:56) avows that marketing and promotion efforts, as well as marketing channels, have a significant impact on student choice, there is also a need to distribute information with the aim to enhance access, not to focus on marketing the institution. Gajić (2012:32) also indicates that the implementation of a marketing strategy allows for quality improvement in the higher education system, by enabling better decision-making by prospective students. Armstrong *et al.* (2014:104) states that HEI's reputation is built through the promotion and dissemination of accurate information that is required by prospective students. Hence, it is suggested that HEIs must improve their information dissemination methods to match the media habits of their audiences (Bodine 2018:6). This need prompted engagement in the current research inquiry.

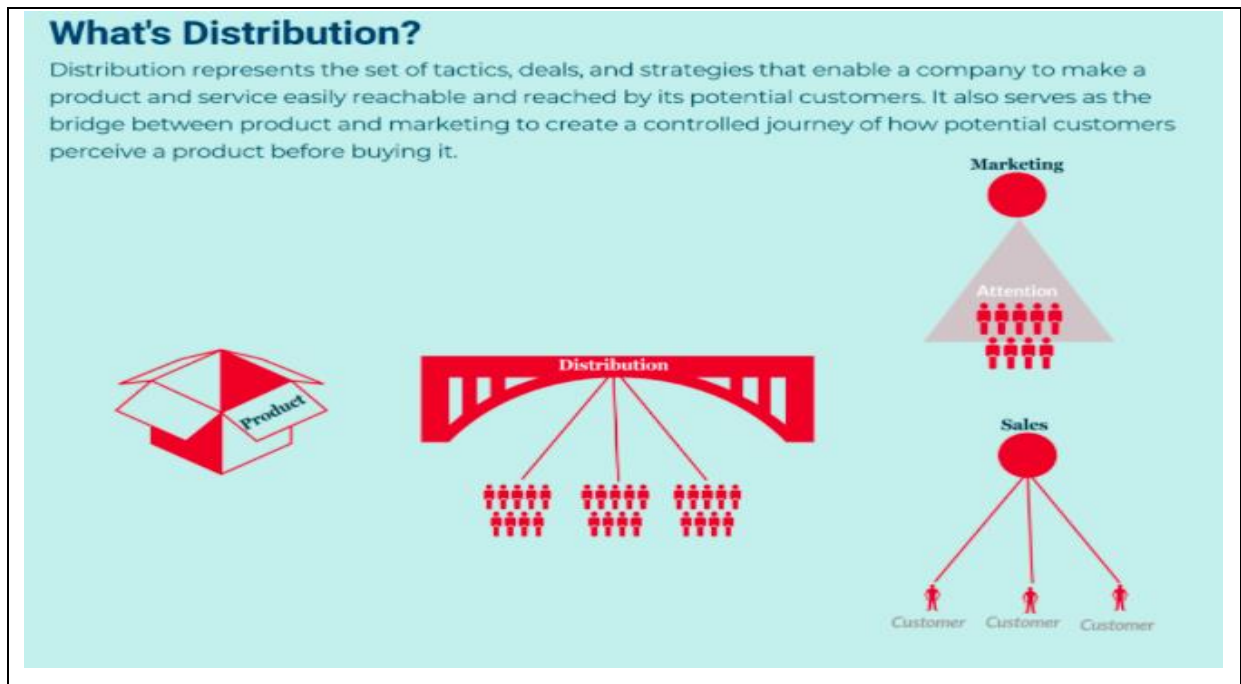


Figure 1: The significance of distribution (FourWeekMBA 2022)

2.3 Different ways of distributing information to prospective students adopted by the higher education sector.

This section highlights different ways in which universities distribute information to prospective students. Four mediums will be presented: 1) print media, 2) high school visits 3) digital platforms and 4) social media.

2.3.1 Use of print media to distribute information to prospective students.

The traditional print media in HE such as newspapers influence and shape educational news and information, enabling a better understanding and enhancing the engagement of education stakeholders (Mabunda and McKay 2021:496). Print media in HE education includes newspaper, television ads, radio and print media (Kango 2021:16). As a result, advertisements in periodicals and newspapers were the most important sources of knowledge in local studies (Tankou epse Nukunah *et al.* 2019:285). An accurate and open approach to information exchange is, therefore, manifested in the form of effective communication (Wahyuni 2018:93). Although the information is not limited to one type of need for the entire target market, it is recognised that subgroups value certain types of information to make decisions about further studies (Van der Waldt 2010:2).

This is also prompted by the fact that students from disadvantaged communities that lack access to technology rely on print media to gain access to information distributed by institutions (Njoko 2018:170). Hence, HEIs have the obligation of considering information requirements for different types of prospective students (Diamond *et al.* 2014:6). High school learners prefer receiving information directly from a university and this is considered the most important source of information (Cosser and Du Toit 2002:22). Even with this provision, prospective students highlight the challenges related to the late arrival of CAO forms, hence they apply late (late (Njoko 2018:189). South Africa also greatly relies on print media as a means of disseminating information (Lembani *et al.* 2020:71).

2.3.2 High school visits to distribute information

Over the years the HEIs have adopted face-to-face interactions with prospective students as a method of information distribution (Harrison and Waller 2018:920). These interactions are in three different categories namely, 1) student campus visits, 2) high school visits by HEIs and 3) career expos in communities (Swanson *et al.* 2021:2). It should be noted that, while face-to-face interaction provides numerous benefits, it is however limited by time and space (Awara *et al.* 2018:57). Schools still lack the necessary physical resources and basic infrastructure for sanitation, water, roads, transport, electricity, and information and communication technology (Du Plessis and Mestry 2019:3). Research indicates that campus visits were also identified as the most impactful source of information for prospective students (Seymour 2000:11). It is however not without challenges since many issues hinder prospective students (Mpungose 2020:2). For example, schools still lack the necessary physical resources and basic infrastructure for accessing information (Du Plessis and Mestry 2019:3). Additionally, prospective students that accessed the information distributed perceived the interactions with HEIs as ineffective (Dlamini 2016:14). In most cases, prospective students indicated that HEIs market themselves and do not give extra information on applying to universities and the requirements (Dlamini 2016:137). In the case of the CAO, Njoko (2018:175) notes that when CAO did a roadshow that was aimed at reaching out to prospective students with information, they advertised on their website and only visited shopping malls and the nearby township of Umlazi, KZN.

Furthermore, scholars argue that students that have access to the relevant information are those who are in urban areas and have access to facilities (Kunene and Barnes 2017:132). The COVID-19 pandemic has also added to the challenges faced by prospective students who require interactions to access information, since the face-to-face interactions by HEIs were stopped (Adnan and Anwar 2020:46). In South Africa, the President ordered that all universities close and find ways to deliver lectures online beginning March 18, 2020, as a precautionary measure to limit the spread of the virus (Department of Higher Education and Training 2020). Prospective students who rely mostly on face-to-face interactions were negatively affected by this new government stipulation since it banned all forms of gathering including face-to-face meetings (Byrnes *et al.* 2021:85).

2.3.3 The use of digital media to distribute information

"New media" have significantly altered the landscape of information dissemination and social mobilisation (Tankou epse Nukunah *et al.* 2019:285). New media in the context of this study is referred to as digital media having content that has been made available online and may be distributed via the internet or computer networks (Fromm and Read 2018:11). The introduction of digital tools and the Internet into the classroom has fundamentally altered how teachers and students' access, create and share information (Nhedzi 2018:19). The most evident impact of the digital age is that access to data and information is significant (Al-Alwani 2014:533). Hence, HEIs must recognise the use of contemporary digital media as an important strategy to interact effectively and efficiently with the current quality of prospective students (Au-Yong-Oliveira *et al.* 2018). The biggest challenge associated with the use of digital platforms is the fact that acquiring digital tools such as laptops and smartphones is prohibitively expensive in much of the developing world (Egielewa *et al.* 2022:956).

A significant number of children in contemporary times have been surrounded by digital technology since their birth; their everyday life and practices have been entwined with social media, smartphones, tablets, and Internet use (Livari *et al.* 2020:2). The use of text, music, video, and images are all examples of what can be included in the category of digitisation. Moreover, digital media creation is one example of the most prominent 21st-century skill that is required in addition to literacy (Reyna *et al.* 2018:174).

Consequently, in the current milieu, it has become crucial to have a smartphone and being connected 24/7 is useful because people can access information at any time of the day or night without interruption (Fromm and Read 2018:11). On this, it is pertinent to underscore that the application of information technology has been enhanced due to its effectiveness and efficiency (Sana 2020:5). Websites were identified as the most important source of information for students by Hoyt and Brown (2003:4). Nonetheless, Egielewa *et al.* (2022:956) indicate that there are shortcomings in the use of digital platforms by staff and students, and further avow that there are much higher cost implications on using digital platforms. Taking into consideration all of this, Bakoğlu *et al.* (2016:37) state that the demands of a knowledge-based economy and new communication technologies are changing all institutions profoundly (Kuey Yu *et al.* 2017). A study conducted by Lim (2018:3) highlights that:

“To help students make informed decisions about where and what to study, the information you present to them should be clear, transparent, and accurate. It should not be deceptive, and terms should be written in clear, plain, and understandable language. It is important to remember that the information you present to prospective students may be considered material to the contract you agree with students at the offer stage. All of the information you provide should be accessible via your website. When presenting information to students, consider the following questions:

- *Are you providing students with the information they need to make an informed decision about where and what to study?*
- *Are you putting it in a location where they can find it?*
- *Are you providing it in the place where they are most likely to look for it?*
- *Have you thought about how best to link information together so students can easily navigate it; are links clear, functional and easy to use”.*

2.3.4 The use of social media to distribute the information

It is critical to consider the quality of the available information channels considering that information needs may be met or not met depending on the information channels used (Reyna *et al.* 2018:175). Social media allows organisations to engage in two-way communication with their audiences (Shareef *et al.* 2019:59). Consequently,

students currently resort to looking for information mostly through social media, search engines, websites, and digital content (Stachowiak-Krzyżan 2019:71). HEI information dissemination impacts students' attitudes and behaviour as students' social media participation increases (Nguyen *et al.* 2021:4).

According to research, social media is an essential resource that prospective and existing students use to communicate with friends, stay up to date on school news, make professional relationships, and generally feel 'in the loop (Stachowiak-Krzyżan 2019:71; Kubiak 2017:1). Sh *et al.* (2018:375) point out the ever-increasing relevance of social media to prospective students in SA, as more than 80% of prospective students utilise social media to investigate their institution choice, making social media one of the most popular information channels for prospective students. Similarly, a study conducted in Vietnam indicates that 81% of potential students in higher education use social media every day (Nguyen *et al.* 2021:4). The platforms used by prospective students can range from well-established platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn and other sites like Snapchat and Instagram (Stachowiak-Krzyżan 2019: 72; Salem 2020:192). Hence using social media to distribute information is convenient since it can be accessed easily (Appel *et al.* 2019:80), and Facebook is utilised more than others (Smutny and Schreiberova 2020:2).

Facebook allows South African students to improve their digital skills (Rambe and Ng'ambi 2020:2). Markedly, social media allows for a more direct and convenient communication system between students, teachers, and parents, who may check-in and request information (Froment *et al.* 2017:126). Recent studies reveal that consumers are increasingly seeking information from social media rather than traditional media channels (Mangold and Faulds 2009:358). In the United States, admissions officials are leveraging social media to study and attract potential students to their institutions. This also indicates that new students can access social media portals as a source of information and to build a feeling of the community before they arrive on campus (Shareef *et al.* 2019:59). While some social media strategies are common across product and service categories, prior research indicates that colleges and universities have unique needs and strategies for reaching their target audience (Constantinides and Stagno 2011:42). Salmi (2020:16) highlights that the role of universities in public information during the pandemic is important because many

people around the world have fallen victim to fake news disseminated on social media, often with dangerous or even fatal consequences.

2.4 Expected information distribution practices in the HE sector as promulgated in the national and institutional policies

National and institutional policies regulate how universities should distribute information. Each policy is described in detail below.

2.4.1 DHET policies on information distribution

Since South Africa became a democratic country in 1994, the democratic government has attempted to revisit and amend higher education policy (Mzangwa and Dede 2019:2). The policy for the promotion of access to Information Act No. 2 of 2000 states that the act seeks to encourage a culture of transparency and accountability in public and private organisations (PSET Information Policy 2019). Hence, HE Act encourages South Africans to actively promote a society in which they can have appropriate access to information. While promoting access to information, the Higher Education Act of 1965 (HEA), amended by the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008 (HEOA), informs HEIs that they must distribute information or make it available to another party, such as students or employees.

The fundamental goal of the White Paper on Post-Secondary Education and Training is to address and widen access to information concerning Higher Education. Many policies seek to widen access to information; however, the Ministerial Committee Report on Post-Compulsory Education in South Africa (2009) points out that youth and adults are hindered by a lack of career information and assistance when navigating the educational system. The policy elaborates that access to information widens opportunities and promotes equality (Department of Higher Education and Training 2019). As a result, HEIs also must adhere to the White Paper stipulations on how students should access university application information (Ndibuuza and Langa 2019). To support this, it is to be noted that prospective students do rely on universities to supply them with reliable information (Central Application Services 2020). Hence, the national policy documents also highlight the significance of recruiting prospective students in HE (Dongwe, 2018).

Amongst many advantages, when HEIs provide prospective students with accurate information, it enables them to make informed decisions about which university to attend and what they want to study (Council on Higher Education 2006). The attempts to generate information standards in the DHET have been hampered by the lack of an appropriate information policy framework that would lay out the structures and procedures to be followed in the generation of such standards (Post-School Education and Training Information Policy 2019). However, the formulation and implementation of the PSET Information Policy (2019) are aided by crucial legislation in South Africa. According to PSET (2019), its purpose is to ensure that all organisations in the PSET system follow agreed-upon standards, procedures, and guidelines for data generation, collection, collation, integration, processing, coordination, dissemination, and quality assurance. In the context of HEIs, the policy guides the decisions of distributing information. Universities' policies allow the public access to accurate information (DHET, 2019). CAS (2019) also argues that many factors influence these policies, hence institutions need to ensure that the information policies about university applications reach everyone that needs it.

2.4.2 Institutional policies on information distribution

As students' expectations change, so must institutional recruitment goals and expectations. The HEIs are guided by the recruitment policies that have been developed by DHET stipulating how distributing information to all prospective students pursuing HE should be carried out. On this, the DUT Policy (2009) stipulates that the primary goal of student recruitment initiatives which includes the distribution of information at the university is to allow applicants to apply from diverse backgrounds and geographical locations. The DUT policy further states that since there is high demand for information on applying to universities, prospective students are encouraged to seek information on the platforms prescribed by the university (Durban University of Technology 2020). To carry out the tasks related to recruitment, different offices including the career resource office, admin office, academic departments, and recruitment office are involved and guided by policies (Durban University of Technology 2020). The policy specifies that these offices should develop and provide promotional material (print and electronic) that is clear, accurate, comprehensive and appropriate, including the range and content of accredited programmes, financial matters such as projected fees, financial aid, scholarships and bursaries, housing

information, contact details within the institution, the application process, guidance and support services (Durban University of Technology 2009). Despite these policies in place, there are still many challenges that are faced by prospective students from different backgrounds which need to be addressed (Kunene and Barnes 2017:132). The challenge amongst many is the failure of prospective students to access the information that is distributed by the university which has led them in flocking to the university gates to seek study spaces (Durban University of Technology newsletter 2018). As a result, it is argued that for the policies to be implemented and effective, the institution has a lot to address.

2.5 PESTLE Factors affecting information distribution

This section focuses on the factors affecting information distribution but specifically on Political, Economic, Social, Technological, Legal, and Environmental (PESTLE) factors.

2.5.1 The impact of PESTLE factors on information distribution

Before 1994, South Africa's higher education system was shaped by political, social, and economic inequalities of race, class, gender, and institutional structures (Badat 2020:33). Taking into consideration all these inequalities scholars have used one of the tools for identifying the factors that affect an organisation called PESTLE (Shatskaya *et al.* 2016:47). PESTLE stands for Political, Economic, Social, Technological, Legal, and Environmental factors (Fosher 2018:3). The information distributed by HEIs can sometimes be ineffective for many reasons, including where the information is and how it is distributed (Diamond *et al.* 2014:6). Hence, the analysis of distributed information using PESTLE factors is critical because it assists HEIs to develop scenarios for strategic planning (Cox 2021:2).

2.5.2 Political factors and information distribution

Politics is concerned with the acquisition of power for the distribution of scarce goods and services, as well as the administration of people to achieve specific goals (Badaru 2019:25). In the global democratic community, SA is a relatively new democracy (Masipa 2018:6). The end of the apartheid system was achieved through a protracted negotiation process, but it granted all South African citizens full political and civil rights in 1994 (Reddy 2018:711). As such, access to resources, for example, information is

a political imperative in present-day South Africa (Akoojee and Nkomo 2007:386). The department of higher education and training must ensure that they provide quality information about HE; however, there have been many different factors affecting the distribution (Beard 2019:5). This has also resulted in system inefficiency (Masipa 2018:6). Prospective students from disadvantaged backgrounds are disproportionately affected by the lack of information available to them to pursue higher education (Njoko 2018:178).

The politics of the country influence higher education (UK Essays 2018). It is also argued that what hinders or impedes the progress and access to HE for black people is the political factors. Moreover, HEIs must be aware of the information they distribute because it is linked to their reputation (Pillay 2019:14). Official pronouncements have ensured that there is a political agenda that requires increased access for disadvantaged groups. The government has established information and communication technology (ICT) structures to create an e-enabled and knowledge-based society by 2015 and move the country to a middle-income level by 2030 (Vision 2030 Blue Print 2008). Politicians have taken over education resources, and as a result, their priorities have shifted away from the system. Additionally, the institutional, policy and implementation go beyond politics (Khelifi 2019:672).

2.5.3 Economic factors and information distribution

Economic factors in SA have shaped the HE environment; and finances are the major contributing factor determining whether the information reaches people, especially communities in rural areas that are poverty-stricken (Njoko 2018:187). For example, the unemployment rate in SA is at a high of 27% which has led to the inability of parents to afford the application fee for their children to get into HEIs in the country (Kunene and Barnes 2017:133). Perhaps most concerning is the fact that SA's data shows that approximately 3.4 million (33.5%) out of 10.2 million young people aged 15-24 years were not in any form of employment, education or training (Stats SA 2022). To corroborate this, Stats SA (2022) report indicates that the General Household Survey 2017 highlighted that just 33.8% of youth aged 18–24 were enrolled in educational institutions, with 22.2% attending school and 11.6% attending post-secondary educational institutions. More than 51% of those who did not attend educational institutions reported not having the financial resources to pay their tuition

costs (Statistics South Africa 2019). Hence, more than 50% of families live in poverty in SA and ways that entail eradication include education which is not easy to access because there is a lack of information, resources, and income (Omarjee 2017).

It is also imperative for HEIs to take cognisance of the distribution of information, access, and opportunity for students (Higher Education South Africa (HESA) 2011:3). Prospective students from poor families are likely to have little or no access to information disseminated by HE (Njoko 2018:17). Nishimwe-Niyimbanira (2021:228) indicates that amongst many, poverty is a social ill that threatens the entire world, particularly developing countries. As a result, a study conducted by Njoko (2018:187) argues the following about the issues related to financing CAO:

The CAO imposes an application fee of R200 or R400 depending on when your application is received. This fee was identified as one of the reasons some do not apply or take long to have their applications posted. The application fee is unaffordable for most and their families. Their families have to take from the already limited grants and other sources of income to pay this fee.

2.5.4 The social factors and COVID-19 impacts on information distribution

Social factors and COVID-19 impacts are a contributor on distributing information. The social factors and COVID-19 impacts are described in detail below:

2.5.4.1. Social Factors and information distribution

In the context of post-apartheid South Africa, over the last decade and a half, the higher education environment has come into sharp focus regarding the need to engender educational transformation (Ramrathan 2018:147). It is observed that there still exist extreme inequalities playing out in many ways across the social landscape, including higher education (Kromydas 2017:2). Most of all, the disparity in social class is also the cause of educational inequalities that exist in the country (Bourdieu 1977:22). Consequently, it is suggested that for the development of the HE to take place, transformation is also one of the areas that should be explored (Akoojee and Nkomo 2007:386). As such, prospective students from disadvantaged communities are affected by many social ills including the reality that they struggle with accessing information distributed by HEIs (Walker *et al.* 2022:544).

Furthermore, studies indicate that the distribution of information in SA HE is crucial because institutions get to retain students that are of high quality (Walker 2022:545). In the United States (US) several studies have reported that many students with high intelligence are unlikely to aspire to a college education or to go to college- especially if they come from families of low socioeconomic status, are females, are members of disadvantaged racial groups, or come from rural backgrounds (Candia *et al.* 2019:1). Other scholars also indicate that parents with less education, poorer income, and less awareness of the college application process had strong and significant information effects, but more advantaged and better-informed parents did not shift their preferences considerably (Kelly and Schneider 2011:5). The population in South Africa is estimated at 57 458 million (Stats SA 2022), while the number of social grant recipients is estimated at 17 509 995 (SASSA 2019). These stats point to the reality of disadvantaged students from rural areas of South Africa who also lack internet and other resources to access information, hence it is not easy for them to access information from HEIs (Kunene and Barnes 2017:133).

2.5.4.2 COVID-19 impacts on information distribution

African universities had been 'caught off guard' by the closures and subsequent shift to online learning necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Dell 2020:1). The move to online learning also prompted the shift to seeking information online due to COVID-19 regulations. The regulations entailed that HEIs must share information through online platforms and not face-to-face to curb the spread of COVID-19 (World Health Organization 2021:10). For example, to adhere to these regulations HEIs in the U.S. relied on online communication with prospective students, such as virtual webinars and yield events. However, in the context of South Africa, this was not easy to execute since COVID-19 made distributing information impossible for prospective students in rural schools or areas that lack the necessary resources (Brown *et al.* 2020:3).

This also resulted in people being victims of misinformation since the sources they used were not credible and some of them were noted for spreading fake news (Salmi 2020:16). All potential students deserve to receive good information, advice, and guidance to make informed choices (Office for Students 2020:1). Similarly, a study conducted by (Brown *et al.* 2020:3) states that countries such as Bulgaria, Georgia,

Ukraine, and Uzbekistan face challenges when integrating technology into HE. The following are some of the global challenges relating to online infrastructure:

- Many countries suffer from internet connection and speed issues.
- A good internet connection is expensive
- There is a notable lack of computers/laptops/tablets/smartphones to support online teaching and learning
- Many online tools, platforms, and websites crashed when an unusually large number of clients connected to them

2.5.5 Technology and information distribution

Technology has transformed the education environment (Mohajan 2018:25). Digital competence is deemed a prominent topic in today's information and knowledge society as technology continuously evolves and pervades our daily lives (Zhao *et al.* 2019:11). For millions of people worldwide, the internet, social media, smartphone apps, and other digital communication technologies have become part of their daily lives (Dwivedi *et al.* 2021:4). This has also impacted information and communication technologies (ICTs) since they are tools for disseminating and sharing information among people (Nwafor *et al.* 2020:19; Kante *et al.* 2016:88). Consequently, ICTs in general, and Web 2.0 technologies, have risen to the top of the priority list for both young people and adults as preferred ICTs (Farinloye *et al.* 2020:98). It is noted that prospective students' choice of university is substantially informed by the material about the university on the university website rather than the information about the university on other websites' (Lubbe and Petzer 2016:924). Exploring the benefits of websites and information technology (IT) in general has led some studies to focus on examining and assessing the influence of technology in higher education than in other areas (Carcary 2010:35). The international development agenda has emphasised digital technologies as development enablers. On this, South Africa's National Development Plan (NDP) has identified ICTs as critical elements in building a more inclusive society through its ability to assist in eliminating poverty and reducing inequality. Hence it is pertinent to see that information distributed by HEIs on technological platforms can play a huge role in realising the NDP plan (National Development Plan 2015).

There are notable challenges that prospective students face which can be linked to the reality of the socio-economic inequalities in South Africa. These have made the implementation and use of digital technologies to disseminate information to these students more challenging. To ameliorate this, there have been efforts to redesign information technologies and some scholars have noted that HEIs have made significant contributions to reshaping future technologies by serving as innovation test laboratories (Yusuf and Ahmad 2020:206). For example, the introduction of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) in the context of higher education is envisaged to allow prospective students to access information distributed mostly through technology. It is also supported by the changes in the global environment where the 4IR is expected to be marked by technological advancement in various sectors and spheres of human endeavour (Mariaye and Samuel 2018:3). However, this can be ineffective in the African context since the issue of preparedness for the 4IR in African institutions of higher learning, rural and urban, remains questionable (Uleanya and Yu Ke 2019:93).

In Africa specifically, it is not easy to advance technologically since there are still inequalities that still need to be addressed (Lembani *et al.* 2020:72). Recent studies also indicate that rural schools in South Africa face challenges of access and insufficient knowledge in using technology assets (Yende 2021:57). It is also significant to note that students' decision-making process includes essential characteristics such as information sources and variables influencing their choices (Soares 2021:26). Since many daily activities have now been affected by COVID-19, it is also pertinent to note that information searching to knowledge sharing can now be done very efficiently and effectively online with the assistance of technology (Dang and Zhang 2022:3).

2.5.6 Legal factors that influence information distribution

When South Africa became a democratic country, the democratic government attempted to revisit and amend higher education policy; however, the policy amendments have not resulted in material benefits for most of the previously disadvantaged black people in South Africa in terms of access, equity, and participation in higher education (Mzwangwa and Dede 2019:2). On this, it is noted that the policy documents emphasised the need “to redress past inequalities and to

transform the higher education system to serve a new social order, to meet pressing national needs, and to respond to new realities and opportunities” (DoE 1997).

It is established that the legal landscape in higher education continues to change at a tremendous rate (Rosello 2019:1). This is due to university admissions policies, criteria, processes, and practices that have changed because of new social imperatives, goals, and policies. Notwithstanding the highlighted challenges, outreach policies that include active counselling or simplifying the university application process are generally effective in increasing access to disadvantaged students, but not when they only distribute general information on higher education (Herbaut and Geven 2019:4). Amongst many factors, DUT policy on the recruitment of prospective students highlights the role of human resource personnel responsible for the distribution of information. Hence, information distributed to students is guided by the university policies and responsible stakeholders are expected to use this manual to assist students (Durban University of Technology 2021).

Human resources are a vital vein in any organisation and the context of basic education, it is the teachers, support staff in the school, students, parents, community members, and a variety of other interest and social groups that make up the human resource team in the school system (Usman 2016:28). However, Prinsloo (2007:165) indicates that LO instructors in rural South African schools lack career counselling knowledge to carry out the duties of distributing relevant and reliable information to prospective students. On another issue, considering that most prospective African students may access the internet and related educational content on their mobile devices, it is critical that the negative consequences, such as smartphone addiction, be considered when the policy is being developed (Palvia *et al.* 2018:235).

2.5.7 Environmental factors that impact information distribution

Amongst many factors, environmental aspects play a huge role in the success or failure of prospective students to get the resources needed to access information (Njoko 2018:4). The term "resources" in the context of education refers to all school facilities, both instructional and non-instructional (Ordu and Amadi 2019:56). Facilities play an important role in realising educational goals and objectives by making it possible to meet the physical and emotional needs of the school's staff, pupils, and

students (Ordu and Amadi 2019:56). However, it is noted in some studies (Louton *et al.* 2015; du Plessis and Mestry 2019:3) that many schools in South Africa lack the necessary physical resources and basic infrastructure for sanitation, water, roads, transport, electricity, information and communication technology.

These issues are consequent on the colonial and apartheid history of South Africa. This history has engendered socio-political and economic inequality, as well as inequities in class, race, and gender, which had a significant impact on South African higher education, resulting in patterns of systemic inclusion and marginalisation of specific socioeconomic classes and groups (Badat 2020:33). Markedly, the majority group that was affected is black people who were the basis of the implementation of the equity and affirmative action policies in South Africa. The policies were aimed at decolonising or attempting to deal with colonised principles like exclusion, however, their effect is questionable (Walton 2018:32). This has also affected schools that are in rural areas that are educationally under-resourced and lack specialist life orientation teachers and it has been highlighted that they have minimal access to disseminated information regarding applications to HEIs through CAO (Du Plessis and Mestry 2019:3). The school administration and the state government must ensure that adequate material resources are made available to concerned schools (Adeogun and Osifila 2013:59).

Moreover, prospective students in rural schools or underprivileged communities without educated family members are likely to have little or no knowledge about higher education. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD 2012), the chances of a 20-34-year-old attending HE is slim, if his or her parents did not complete upper secondary education (which is often the case in rural areas). As a result, rural and urban residents as well as members of different socio-economic categories have different levels of access to information about postsecondary education in South Africa (Njoko 2018:178); hence the information distributed by HEIs may not reach them. As such, the availability of facilities to access available information has a direct link to the participation and performance of pupils and prospective students (Ayoo 2000:55).

2.6 Theoretical Framework: Distribution Channels

This study will use Distribution Channels as a theoretical framework. Distribution channels are defined as the organisation (or group of organisations) that participates in the process of making a product or service available for use by an individual or business user (Al-Abdallah *et al.* 2014:83). Also, distribution channels can be understood as consisting of one or more companies or individuals who participate (amongst many other functions) in the flow of information (Coyle *et al.* 2003:106). This definition is more applicable in this study since it focuses on two organisations CAO and DUT and pays more attention to individuals working at DUT as a Higher Education Institution. Since the goal of distribution channels is to bridge the gap, the flow of information is crucial in ensuring that any organisation reaches their consumers (Singh 2016). As a result, the distribution channel can also illustrate a series of steps that are required for service in this context to reach its end-users which are prospective students (Munoz 2019:16).

Amazon is the perfect company to contextualise distribution channels since, the company is one of the most powerful tech brands today, and it employs a hybrid strategy in which hundreds of millions of users access the Amazon brand directly via its website and apps; the company also relies on digital distribution to boost its visibility (FourWeekMBA 2022). For example, Google search is a major contributor to traffic for Amazon and many other digital channels since customers seek information using this channel (FourWeekMBA 2022). Additionally, distribution channels provide time, place, and ownership utility, and this corroborates the view that Google and digital platforms are major contributors (Pahwa 2018:1). Equally, they also make the product or service available when and where needed, which also assists in determining the quantities the end-users require (Choobdar 2016:10). This proves that using the internet as an additional distribution channel provides advantages over traditional channels in terms of cost, time, and efficiency (Hongrichinda *et al.* 2018:246). However, there are also disadvantages of distribution channels which include the costs, human resource personnel and many others associated with the implementation of its strategies especially if the distribution is physical (FourWeekMBA 2022).

The study focuses on the following distribution channel routes extracted from the various channels explained by (Fayyaz and Azizinia 2016:78). Distributing information

using distribution channels comprises three components namely direct, indirect and selective distribution (Iyer and Villas-Boas 2003:82):

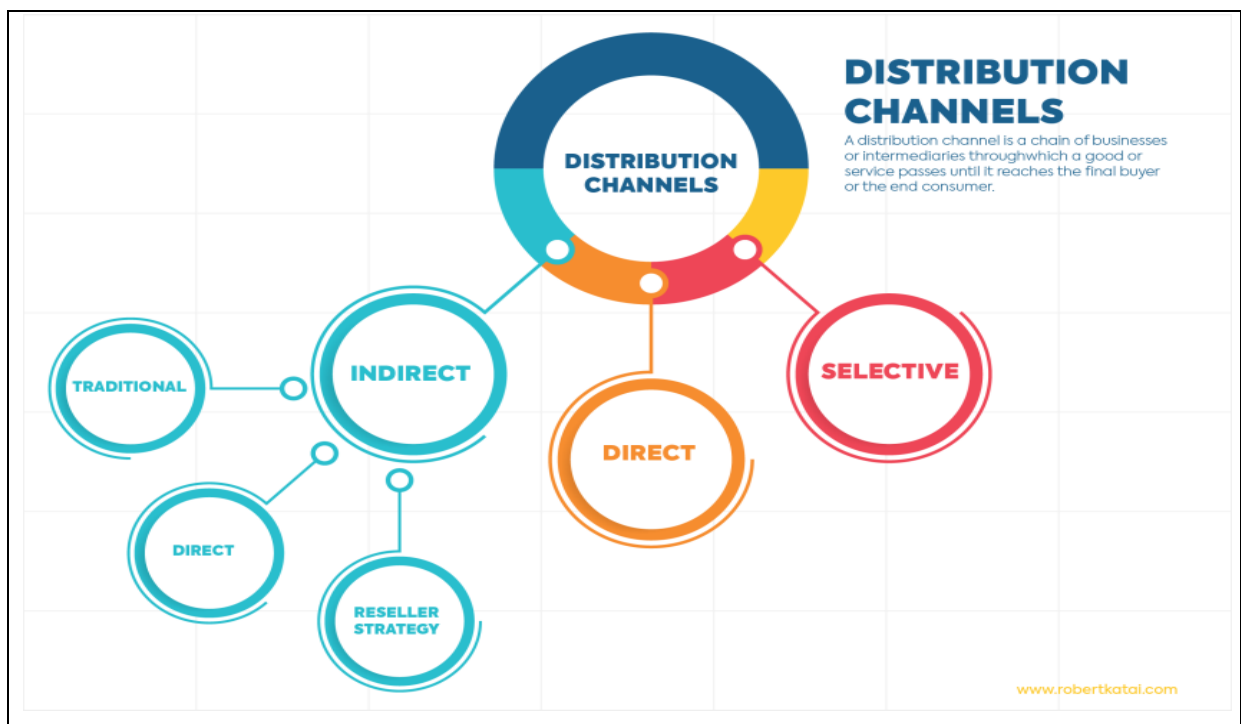


Figure 2: The diagram illustrates the distribution channels (Kai 2019)

2.6.1 Direct distribution

Direct distribution is the process of distributing goods or services directly to the end-user (Pękała and Szopa 2012:145). In the context of this study, prospective students require information to access higher education. Additionally, direct distribution includes obtaining useful information about client purchasing behaviour, setting oneself apart from competitors, responding to product performance and customer feedback, and getting one's products or services to customers faster (Zhao et al 2019:2). Additionally, direct distribution cuts costs and organisations avoid sharing revenues with third-party distributors (Arnold 2020:360). There are two tiers to the direct channel: a provider and the clients. Markedly, without the use of intermediaries, the provider contacts the prospective customers through their personnel, commercial services, or media (Pękała and Szopa 2012:148).

2.6.3 Indirect distribution

Indirect distribution comprises intermediaries and there are three aspects: traditional, reseller strategy, and direct strategy. Pahwa (2018) states that companies can rely on

outside experts to handle their distribution needs through this setup. According to Golopkina (2019), it is preferable to use an indirect distribution channel if consumers are located in different regions. The indirect distribution of information in the context of higher education comprises agencies (Findler *et al.* 2019). However, there have been shortcomings in using external stakeholders to distribute information due to their knowledge of the institution (Alexander *et al.* 2018:382). On this also, Urban *et al.* (2000) state that the third-party distributors of information are not easy to monitor due to their locations.

2.6.4 Selective Distribution

According to Pahwa (2018:1), selective distribution is defined as the process of distribution directed to a selected group of people. Furthermore, Golopkina (2019) argues that selective distribution works with a small number of intermediaries due to a variety of factors. The factors that prompt the decision are the end-users' characteristics, which can include their geographic locations (Frazier and Lassar 1999:227). When dealing with a limited number of distribution channels, having some degree of control allows businesses to control many aspects of the sales process such as how products are displayed or how services are provided. These safeguards ensure that customers have a consistent experience (Gundlach *et al.* 2006:428). End-users perceive products or services to be more special and prestigious when they are not widely available. Lastly, concerning increased reach, it is noted that compared to exclusive distribution, selective distribution puts products or services in front of more consumers (Gundlach *et al.* 2006:428).

2.7 Summary

In the higher education sector, information distribution is critical and determines whether prospective students are retained. The gap in literature reflects the ongoing challenges of long queues of prospective students seeking spaces at universities during the January intake period. Additionally, it highlights the issues related to digital and traditional media for distributing information at HEIs. Recent chaos at DUT during registration was notably caused by a fake social media post which points to the gap in information dissemination. The students in the large group had not applied to university and came from all over South Africa to possibly be accepted, however, most of these students never applied using the CAO. These challenges that afflicted the

institution, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, did not bode well for the institution's image. Furthermore, the university's image may be permanently harmed in the eyes of other community members who may wish to enrol at the university. The study also reviewed literature based on other contexts including other countries and continents besides Africa, comparing the issues as they exist in those contexts to the SA context. Consequent to the views in existing literature as reviewed, it becomes crucial to assess how information is distributed in the HEI context in South Africa and the tools used to distribute information.

Chapter 3

Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the research methodology adopted by the researcher in conducting this study. The chapter further discusses the research design, research approach, research site, population, sampling method, data collection instruments, data analysis and limitations of the study.

3.1 Research design

To address the research questions, the study used the qualitative research approach. The great contribution of qualitative research is the culturally specific and contextually rich data it produces (Mack *et al.* 2005:2). Additionally, qualitative research is associated with a unique way of defining, comprehending, and reporting quality (Stenfors *et al.* 2020:596). Notably, this study envisaged assessing the practices adopted by CAO and DUT to disseminate information to prospective students. The objectives of the study were to determine information distribution practices adopted by the DUT; to determine information distribution practices adopted by CAO; to examine factors affecting information distribution to prospective students, and to recommend strategies for enhancing information distribution to prospective students.

A qualitative approach allows the researcher to undertake a systematic collection, organisation, description and interpretation of textual, verbal and visual data (Hammarburg *et al.* 2016:499). It seeks to understand complex reality and the meaning of actions (Queiros *et al.* 2017:370) and practices adopted. Qualitative research is exploratory (Mohajan 2018:5), and it assists in understanding the reasons, opinions and motivation behind the practices (Cowley *et al.* 2019:2). Furthermore, Aspers and Corte (2019) state that qualitative research helps to understand social life through the study of a particular population. The emphasis of qualitative research is on comprehension through close examination of people's words, actions, and records (Omona 2013:172). These records can be available in a paper-based format or online. The goal of qualitative methods is to generate new perspectives on existing data (Atieno 2009:15). Additionally, qualitative research is interpretive, because the researcher must interpret the data expressed by the participants (Meyer and Willis

2019:579; Saunders *et al.* 2012: 163) after collecting it. This is important considering that in a qualitative study, the researcher becomes the principal instrument in conducting the research (Shozi 2017:27) and is construed to be part of the study. It is also pertinent to indicate that qualitative research gives insights into problems and helps to develop ideas (Yates and Leggett 2016). Moreover, it is noted that qualitative research is more in-depth (Babbie and Mouton 2005), which is a crucial attribute relevant to the current study, which seeks to obtain an in-depth understanding of the practices adopted and factors influencing those practices. However, the qualitative research method has disadvantages including the fact that when conducting qualitative research, a lot of information is frequently gathered and analysed, which can be overwhelming for the researcher (Cowley *et al.* 2019:2).

The interview schedule allows both the interviewer and the interviewee to discuss some topics in greater depth (Mathers *et al.* 2002:10) in a form of a discussion. According to DeJonckheere and Vaugh (2019:2) semi-structured or unstructured, open-ended, informal interviewing is generally preferred because it allows for greater flexibility and responsiveness to emerging themes for both the interviewer and respondent. The interviews were conducted with eight DUT academic support staff and support staff who are well-informed regarding the process of distribution of information to prospective students. The interviews took place at the DUT using an online platform called Microsoft Teams, at the Durban University of Technology. The questions asked during the interview allowed the participant's the freedom to offer whatever information they thought was relevant to the study. The variety of questions also encouraged participants to provide additional feedback, allowing them to expand on their initial responses. The research setting is the location or community where the data is collected (Seppala and Smith 2019:1399).

3.2 Research population

Before conducting any sampling, the researcher must have a clear and well-defined population in mind (Ndebele 2021:60). The research population is referred to as the target audience (participants) of a study (Stratton 2021:374). For this study, a total of 12 participants made up the population; notably according to Shukla (2020:10) this type of population is referred to as a manageable subgroup of a larger population. The target population were staff members of DUT. The characteristics of the population

that were identified were their direct involvement in the recruitment, selection and information distribution process for prospective students. The population size of DUT employees is 3285 as per the HR report in December 2020. This includes both academic and administrative staff, known as academic support staff. Furthermore, as per DUT undergraduate admissions policy (DUT, 2022), the academic support staff and support staff are responsible for information distribution related to prospective students. The study asked for referrals from fellow targeted participants as part of the snowballing technique.

3.3 Sampling method

The sampling plan is appropriate when the selected participants and settings are sufficient to provide the information needed for a full understanding of the phenomenon under study (Moser and Korstjens 2018:10). The sampling method involves the identification and selection of individuals or groups of individuals who are informed and knowledgeable about a phenomenon of interest (Etikan *et al.* 2016:2). The study used a non-probability sampling technique. Nishishiba *et al.* (2013:88) state that in non-probability sampling participants for the sample are chosen by the researcher on purpose. Hence, the study adopted purposive sampling because of its strengths. Purposive sampling is also known as judgment sampling and is the deliberate selection of a participant based on the qualities the participant possesses (Etikan *et al.* 2016:2). The strengths of purposive sampling include the ability to provide the researcher with a wide range of non-probability sampling techniques from which to choose (Sharma 2017:752). The researcher chose participants that are the first in line in the process of distribution of information to prospective students. Notably, a sample is a subset of the population chosen to be a part of the research, taken as a representative of the larger population (Acharya *et al.* 2013:331). Some issues include situations in which the researcher already knows something about the respondents or events and chooses them on purpose because they are likely to produce data relevant to the study (Mabizela 2020:38). Additionally, this is where the researcher uses participants that have similar characteristics to conduct the research. As indicated in table 1, the sample in this study consisted of different participants who are from different academic and support departments. These participants varied in terms of gender, race and age.

According to Rai and Thapa (2015:3), one of the most significant advantages of purposive sampling is the wide range of sampling techniques that can be used across such qualitative research designs; purposive sampling techniques range from homogeneous sampling to critical case sampling, expert sampling, and more. The study adopted a homogeneous sampling approach considering that the research focuses on exploring participants' understanding and description of their role in the distribution of information (Njoko 2019:179). Against this backdrop, thirteen staff members that are directly involved with distributing information were part of the sample.

Table 1: Participants

Pseudonym	Gender	Race
Thandiwe	Female	Black
Sakhe	Female	Black
Linathi	Female	Black
Ntombi	Female	Black
Fikile	Female	Black
Andiswa	Female	Black
Khazimula	Female	Black
FG-Kholwa	Female	Black
FG- Amukela	Female	Black
FG-Nkululeko	Female	Black
FG-Mndeni	Male	Black
FG-Phakamani	Male	Black
FG-Phelelani	Male	Black

The participants were selected based on their role in the distribution of information and interactions with prospective students. They consist of permanent staff members as well as assistants. In the biographical information of participants, the researcher did not specify departments and other information to ensure confidentiality and protect the identities of the participants, considering that the DUT Midlands campuses staff are relatively small and may be easily identifiable. The staff were also identified through the snowballing approach, which is a type of referral method (Naderifar *et al.* 2017:4).

The DUT Midlands campus staff in the Academic Support and support departments staff were sampled in this study. The sampling of the Midlands staff was done guided by both the snowball sampling and the purposive sampling techniques.

3.4 Data collection

In the study, the researcher utilised a qualitative method in the form of interviews and a relevant interview schedule (see appendix C). Notably, data collection methods in qualitative research are usually unstructured or semi-structured, which may involve focus groups or individual interviews and participation (Crossman 2018:1). The data for this study consisted of primary and secondary data. The duration of the interviews was thirty minutes to one hour. Individual and focus group interviews were conducted online using MS Teams. This was the preference of the participants because DUT uses MS Teams for online meetings and gatherings. The MS Teams platform was used due to Covid19 lockdown regulations of the university. Staff members were flexible to be in the location of their choice since the university's regulations allow them to work from home. It is pertinent to however state that some staff members were working from home and some from campus. The secondary data were analysed from January to June 2022. This was considering that they contain crucial information for prospective students.

The interviews were conducted with eight DUT academic support staff and support staff who are well-informed regarding the process of distribution of information to prospective students. The interviews took place at the DUT using an online platform called Microsoft Teams, at the Durban University of Technology. The questions asked during the interview were structured using the interview schedule which allowed the participant's the freedom to offer whatever information they thought was relevant to the study. The variety of questions also encouraged participants to provide additional feedback, allowing them to expand on their initial responses.

3.7.1 Primary data

Primary data included individual and focus groups. Primary data consisted of data generated by the researcher, such as surveys, interviews, and experiments, that were specifically designed to help understand and solve the research problem at hand (Omona 2013:172).

3.7.1.1 Individual interviews

The researcher interviewed DUT academic support staff and support department staff as part of the individual interviews in this study. Semi-informal interviewing was preferred because it allowed for greater flexibility and responsiveness to emerging themes for both the interviewer and respondent (Ronald *et al.* 2007:26). The CAO staff members were invited to participate in the study however, after many attempts the gate keepers' letter was not granted. Hence the researched collected data from DUT staff members and was able to ascertain their perspectives about CAO.

3.7.1.2 Focus group

According to Nyumba *et al.* (2018:21) focus group discussions are a type of data collection method that uses a small group of people to discuss a specific topic. The depth of information discussed is determined by the extent to which focus group participants can stimulate each other in discussing and sharing their perspectives and experiences (Moser and Korstjens 2018:14). This study conducted a focus group with 8 participants that were not in the individual interviews and consisted of registration assistants and DUT staff members in the Midlands campus.

3.7.2 Secondary data

Secondary data is usually easily accessible to researchers and individuals because they are mostly shared publicly on different platforms including online (Lincoln and Guba 1985:16; Moon *et al.* 2019:2). Tracking social media, discussion forums, review sites, blogs, and other online channels are some common secondary data collection methods (Stedman and McLaughlin 2022).

3.7.2.1 Websites and social media pages

In this study, secondary data in the form of information from the DUT and CAO websites and social media were utilised. As such, secondary data for this study was generated through scrutinising and analysing relevant information from both CAO and DUT websites (Jan – June 2022) to further understand the information distributed by these organisations to prospective students.

3.5 Recruitment procedure

Recruitment of research participants can take many forms, including providing potential participants with information about the study before their enrolment to help establish interest and willingness to serve as research subjects. According to Patel *et al.* (2003:231) recruitment is defined as a "dialogue between an investigator and a potential participant before the initiation of the consent process." The researcher used emails to invite participants to participate in the study. The emails which were sent directly to the participants contained a letter of information about the study (see appendix A). Additionally, before the interviews, the researcher shared consent forms and letters of information again for participants to read and understand what the interview is about. Notably, the study envisaged collecting data from both CAO and DUT staff members to ascertain their information distribution practices. However, after many failed attempts with CAO officials the researcher opted for the use of DUT officials only and analysed the online practices of distributing information by CAO which could be found on their website and Facebook page. The researcher set up and conducted interviews with participants depending on their availability. The respondents were informed that participation is voluntary and that they can withdraw anytime from the study (Marshall *et al.* 2006:1989).

3.6 Data analysis

The data collected from both participants and the websites were analysed using NVIVO computer system. According to Allsop *et al.* (2022:143) NVIVO is a software programme that is used to analyse qualitative method research. The program can analyse unstructured texts, audio, image data, interview and focus group transcripts, websites and social media. Content analysis was executed to generate themes emerging from the data in line with the objectives of the study. Content analysis is a research technique used to identify the presence of specific words, themes, or concepts in qualitative data (i.e., text). Researchers can use content analysis to quantify and analyse the presence, meanings, and relationships of certain words, themes, or concepts (Bengtsson 2016:9). The themes were derived from the participant's responses to the questions. The study adopted inductive coding which is a bottom-up approach that derives codes from data (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane 2006:81).

3.7 Validity Reliability and Transferability

Reliability is defined as the degree to which a research method can produce stable and consistent results for the data collected (Golafshani 2003:599). In this study, reliability was ensured by conducting different types of interviews namely, Individual interviews and focus group interviews (Ronald *et al.* 2007:26). Trustworthiness and rigour are pertinent towards ensuring that the reader has trust in the way the researcher conducted the study. According to Golafshani (2003:601), if the issues of reliability, validity, trustworthiness, and rigour are meant to distinguish “good” research from “bad” research, then testing and increasing the reliability, validity, trustworthiness, and rigour will be critical to the research in any paradigm. There was also an effort to minimise bias through a transparent description of the research processes adopted in this research (Creswell and Poth 2017:1). Also, reliability in this qualitative study was enhanced by organising an independent assessment of the interview schedule questions by skilled qualitative researchers (Belloto and Lauderdale 2018). The main supervisor of the study played a crucial role in this area, together with Faculty Research Committee (FRC) and Faculty Research Ethics Committee (FREC) reviewers.

Furthermore, validity was ensured through triangulation which is referred to as an approach to data collection in which evidence is purposefully sought from different, independent sources and often by different means, for example, comparing oral testimony with written records, and information available on websites (Muhammad and Kabir 2016:203). Triangulation has also been viewed as a qualitative research strategy for testing validity through the convergence of information from various sources (Carter *et al.* 2014:546). The study utilised the transcripts, websites of DUT and CAO websites and social media pages as data sets, to ensure reliability and validity. According to Hammarberg *et al.* (2016:499), qualitative research in the 21st century is described as a method that can increase the diversity of samples and improve the transferability of findings. Transferability, a type of external validity, refers to the degree to which the phenomenon or findings described in the study are utilised in theory, practice, and future research that is, the transferability of the research findings to other contexts (Lincoln and Guba 1985:12; Moon *et al.* 2019:2). The findings in this

study will not be generalisable but they can be transferred to other similar contexts interested in how to improve information distribution processes.

3.8 Pilot study

The general application of pilot studies can be divided into four categories: 1) identifying problems and barriers to participant recruitment; 2) conducting research as a qualitative researcher; 3) determining the acceptability of an observation or interview protocol; and 4) determining the research methodology (Janghorban *et al.* 2013:3). A pilot study was conducted with two participants who were from the target population but not sampled participants to test the interview questions reliability and validity. Furthermore, it was conducted to identify any misrepresentation of questions during the data collection phase. The results thereof showed that there was a repetition of questions on the interview schedule, and two questions were removed. Initially, interviews were to be conducted with 12 participants from CAO and DUT but due to the unavailability of participants who were mainly HODs, it was not feasible. However, the researcher used other participants including the department's secretaries and academic staff who knew about the distribution of information processes.

3.9 Ethical Considerations

The researcher complied with the regulations of the DUT ethics committee. Furthermore, the participants remained anonymous when presenting data, to protect their identities. The use of pseudonyms was adopted to ensure confidentiality. Participants were informed that they are allowed to pull out of the interview should they wish to do so. This study's preparation included the writing of a research proposal outlining all anticipated plans and procedures for the study. The proposal included all the templates of the gate-keepers letter sent to DUT, as well as the information letters and the informed consent form (see appendix B) for the research participants. The proposal was then approved by different bodies within the institution.

The IREC approved and granted Ethical Clearance for the research study, with a condition that a pilot study was done. The researcher carried out the pilot study (see section 3.8) using two participants to make necessary adjustments to the interview schedule before the actual data collection process. Before the collection of data, the researcher obtained the approval of the ethical clearance and obtained the

gatekeeper's letter (see appendix E) to conduct the research at the DUT. The researcher commenced with the data collection after all the permission was granted and the participants were ready. The reporting and the sharing and storing of data were done appropriately and adhered to the Ethics Guidelines thus promoting research integrity. The data collected through the interviews will be stored on google cloud for 15 years after which it will be deleted. Only the researcher and the supervisor will have access to the collected data, which will be discarded in a manner that protects the participants' privacy. After the study is completed and analysed results will be shared with participants and other crucial stakeholders responsible for distributing information to prospective students.

3.10 Limitations

Limitations of qualitative studies include access to research participants, including geographic locations, time zone differences, and gatekeepers (Crossman 2018:10). The researcher had challenges with the literature that is available for this study; most of the literature was based on HE. Other challenges were related to the recruitment of participants. They were mitigated by the fact that the researcher is also an employee in the institution, therefore gaining access to HoDs was easy and interviews were facilitated via departmental secretaries. Notably, the benefits of being an insider researcher include having a better understanding of the culture being studied (Bonner and Tolhurst 2002:8). Also, insider researchers generally understand the institution's politics, not only the formal hierarchy but also how it "really works (Unluer 2012:3); this assisted the researcher to gain access to participants through snowballing.

3.11 Summary

The study adopted a qualitative research approach. This chapter furnished the data collection method that was adopted by the study. To carry out the collection of data, purposive sampling was initially used and later the snowballing sampling approach was also used. The study data which were collected and transcribed consisted of recorded interviews with individuals and a focus group. After the transcription of the data, the researcher translated it for analysis. Analysis of websites and social media pages was also undertaken. The researcher further ensured that all the ethical principles were adhered to as explained in the literature and as per the guidelines of

the institution. The study also outlined the objectives of the study. The next chapter will present the findings of this study.

Chapter 4

Practices adopted in distributing information and stakeholders involved

4.1 Introduction

The previous chapter focused on the methodology of the study. This chapter presents the findings of the study based on the data collected. The qualitative method guided the generation of data for the study, involving the use of individual interviews and focus groups, as well as an analysis of the DUT and CAO websites and social media pages. Notably, the study's goal was to evaluate the information distribution practices used by CAO and DUT. The findings of the study are presented using themes, which also assisted in thematically discussing the practices adopted as shared by participants. The first presentation focuses on the participants' demographics.

4.2 Participants

The participants of the study were chosen based on their role in distributing information to prospective students. The individual interviews were conducted with a total of seven participants and there was only one focus group that consisted of six participants. These participants comprised staff members from DUT, namely, the administration department, orientation helpers, career resource office and secretaries of departments. The participants were all based in the Midlands campuses. Table 1 represents the characteristics of the participants, such as the number of years they worked in the institution, as well as the gender of the participants. Pseudonyms were used and the job titles of the participants have been hidden to ensure confidentiality (Belenkiy *et al.* 2009:108). Table 1 and Table 2 present the geographical information of participants:

Table 2: Individual Interviews

Pseudonym	Number of years at DUT	Gender
Thandiwe	5 Years	Female
Sakhe	3 Years	Female
Linathi	6 months	Female
Ntombi	2 Years	Female
Fikile	20 Years	Female
Andiswa	1 Year	Female
Khazimula	4 Years	Female

Table 3: Focus Group Interview

Pseudonym	Number of years at DUT	Gender
FG- Kholwa	4 Years	Female
FG- Amukela	2 Years	Female
FG- Nkululeko	2 Years	Female
FG- Mndeni	3 Years	Male
FG- Phakamani	2 years	Male
FG- Phelelani	3 Years	Male

4.4 Themes

The table below (Table 3) presents the themes which emerged from the data. The themes will be discussed in this chapter, to answer the research questions as presented in chapter one. The table will be followed by a discussion of the themes and extracts from the transcripts, which were presented to ensure that the voices of the participants are captured correctly (Lingard and Watling 2021). Some extracts are lengthy and they were captured as they are to ensure that they do not lose meaning (Reay *et al.* 2019:10).

Table 4: Table of Findings

Themes	Sub-themes	Summary of the key findings per theme
Theme 1: Confusion regarding who is responsible for distributing information (Objective 1)	The role of DUT The role of CAO	DUT Stakeholders The perspective of DUT staff members regarding how CAO distributes information. Student Representative Council First-year orientation
Theme 2: Platforms for distributing information. (Objective 2)	Digital Media Print Media	Handbooks Websites Social media platforms
Theme 3: Factors affecting distributing information. (Objective 3) Chapter five	PESTLE factors	Political factors Economic Factors Social factors Technological Factors Legal Factors Environmental Factors

4.4.1 Theme 1 Confusion regarding who is responsible for distributing information

Findings from the study reveal that there is confusion regarding who is responsible for distributing information to prospective students. Participants alluded to a concerning confusion about the role of DUT staff members and CAO staff members in distributing information. The findings show that different stakeholders are involved in this process comprising DUT staff members, CAO staff members, the Student recruitment office, the Student Admissions Office, Administrative staff in departments, Academics, SRC and substructures, Student helpers, and outsourced personnel such as security guards.

4.4.1.1 Confusion about which DUT staff members are responsible for distributing information within the institution.

The findings indicate that DUT stakeholders have a role to play in distributing information. Participants believed that the stakeholders that distributed information to prospective students were important towards ensuring accuracy and quality. Notably, the Lim (2018:8) highlighted that to help students make informed decisions about where and what to study, the information presented to them should be clear, transparent, and accurate. However, from the participants' views, there is notable confusion regarding whose responsibility it is to distribute the information and associated practices in the current study's context. For instance, Fikile questioned the whole process in this manner:

Prospective students are not informed about university applications. Is that the job of the department or the university? (Fikile)

Despite the above observations, the DUT recruitment policies suggest that the human resource personnel responsible for distributing information are the recruitment office and other relevant university stakeholders (Durban University of Technology 2022). But it is evident from their responses that the participants from DUT are confused about these. On this, it is noted that according to Beard (2019:21) confusion also prompts challenges in the admissions information, since it can be quite complex for prospective students, educators, and parents. This confusion is exacerbated when the information on the website, brochures, handbooks and other materials are not consistent.

In terms of communicating with new students, there's nothing that I know of from my department that's it does specifically to communicate with students out there except the fact that it would be the PR doing that on the behalf of each and every department. (Ntombi)

Participants were of the view that outsourced personnel especially security officers should also be responsible for information distribution. But it has been established that there have been shortcomings in the use of external stakeholders to distribute information due to their limited knowledge (or lack thereof) of the institution (Brown *et al.* 2018:58). On this, the participants were of the view that the security officers can be trained on how to distribute the information.

For example, we can also distribute (a DUT information guide on how can students apply to DUT, they also do share CAO handbooks) to security guards at the gate. (FG- Mndeni)

But if we're to train securities to carry out such a task of assisting prospective students with information. (FG- Mndeni)

Considering this confusion, it was suggested that certain stakeholders be used for distributing information. Security guards were identified to be crucial stakeholders to assist in distributing information. This is because security guards are stationed at the entrances of the institution. Against the backdrop of these findings, the institutions need to determine who must be responsible for the distribution of information.

4.4.1.2 Confusion on the role of CAO in distributing information

Participants in this study indicated that the role of the CAO is to receive the application information and forward it to HEIs listed on their websites. Notably, this approach is expected to assist alleviate the problem of long queues at the entrance of the institution during intake periods. However, participants' responses indicate that prospective students still form queues at the gates of DUT without applying at CAO. Some of the participants' responses on this issue are presented below:

DUT is dependent on CAO, to like, ensure that they put out every information about that, that specific course that students might need. (Sakhe)

Over the years, students have flocked the university gates in the quest for spaces to study without sending the application to CAO as per requirement. Students with no information on how to fill in the CAO application do not receive any assistance. (Ntombi)

Not because they did not want to apply but it's because they didn't have any knowledge about CAO. (FG-Amukela)

From the responses, it is evident that prospective students still lack information about the CAO and the application process to access HEIs. Hence, the study's findings corroborate the view from extant literature (Jumo *et al.* 2012:1) that while CAO aims to alleviate the pressure of long lines at colleges by encouraging early applications, late applications remain an issue.

Furthermore, participants in this study were of the view that the CAO has a role to play in the distribution of the information. However, indicators are pointing to the misalignment of the responsibilities of distributing information. It was revealed that prospective students were referred to CAO when they sought information; but notably, the CAO website distributes information related to entrance requirements once the student has selected prospective universities. These are reflected in participants' views;

And from that students that whenever, on that system on that online system, as soon as you pick up the course that you want, or you're interested in, it will then give you the points. (Sakhe)

So sometimes we find that our students don't even know how to apply using CAO. (FG-Amukela)

The findings also reveal that DUT staff members who were interviewed in this study hold the view that CAO forms were delivered late in high schools that requested them. This alludes to Njoko (2018:187) views that even with this provision, prospective students complain about the challenges related to the late arrival of CAO forms. Walker (2022:544) affirms this view and further notes that by the time information about university applications reaches prospective students from rural schools, it would be late for them to apply.

4.4.1.3 Confusion regarding the role of the Student Representative Council, political clubs and orientation helpers when distributing information and concerns regarding their values.

Findings also reveal confusion concerning the distribution of information to prospective students by different stakeholders including the SRC and its substructures as well as the political clubs. It is found that there seems to be confusion and misinformation regarding what is shared on the social media platforms belonging to the SRC and their substructures as well as political clubs.

The prospective students get confused with the information that is shared by the SRC. (Khazimula)

The existing confusion emanating from the different stakeholders responsible for disseminating information has been exacerbated by the spreading of fake news to prospective students. Notably, there was a chaotic incident at the DUT during the 2022 intake period which was occasioned by the spread of false information. Figure 3 depicts the false statement that was shared on social media and the official DUT statement that condemned the false information disseminated to students.

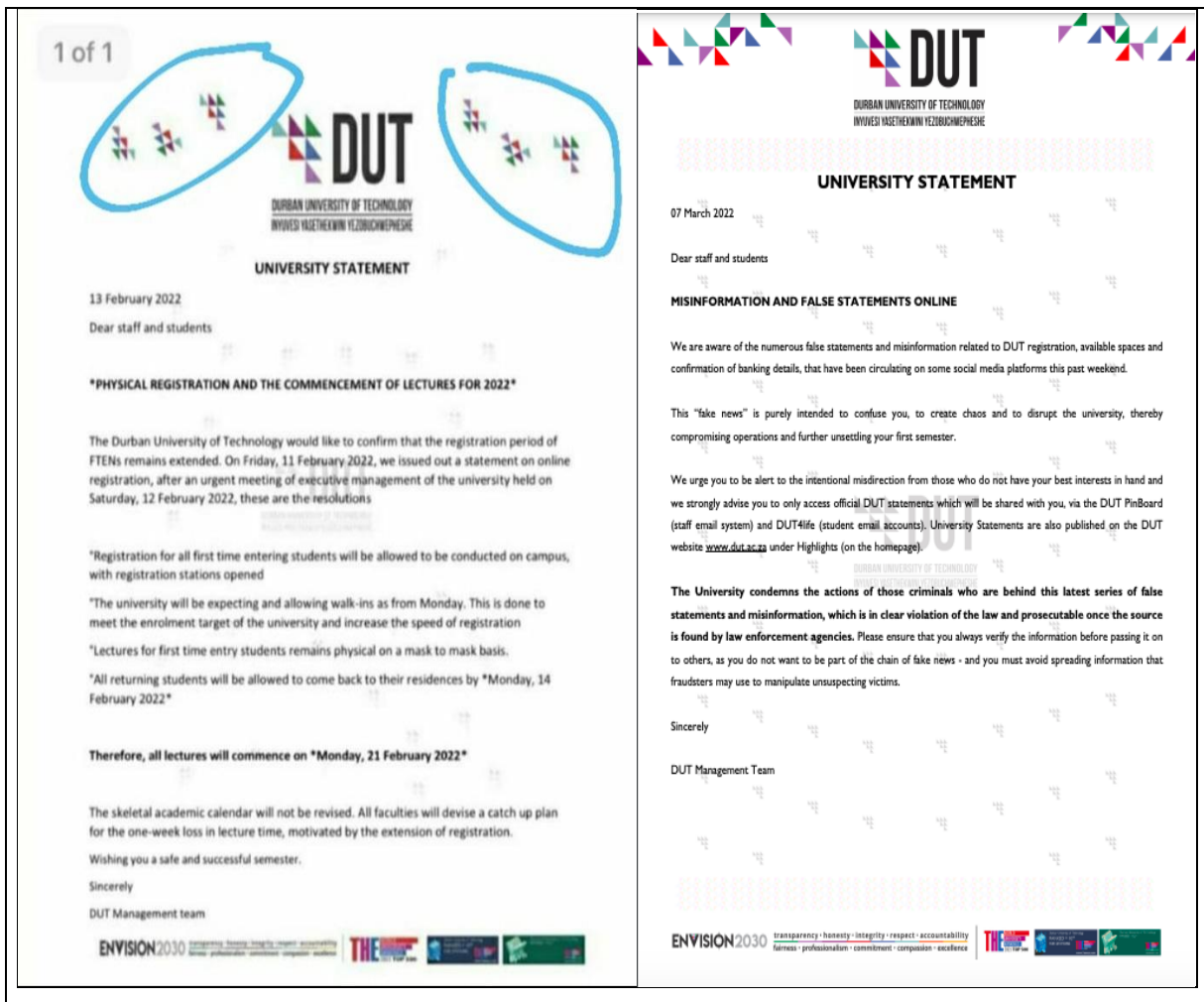


Figure 3: DUT official Statement vs fake statement

Salmi (2020:16) highlights that the role of universities in public information during the pandemic is important because many people around the world have fallen victim to fake news disseminated on social media, often with dangerous or even fatal consequences. The findings in this study, corroborate that the university is no stranger to this havoc, also experienced during the 2021 registration period in which crowds of students inundated the institution, some of whom had not successfully applied for admission to the institution.

DUT BLAMES MASS STUDENT GATHERING ON FAKE SOCIAL MEDIA POSTS, HOAX MESSAGES

Thousands of students, many of them not wearing their face masks properly, converged on the university's Durban and Pietermaritzburg campuses on Tuesday, overwhelming security officers. They were trying to secure admission and register for the current academic year.



Figure 4: Overcrowding at DUT Steve Biko Campus (Eyewitness 2021)

Following this incident, the SRC blamed poor leadership by university management, whilst the institution blamed the chaotic scenes on unauthorised social media posts and hoax messages (Eye witness news 2021). On this, some participants made their views known:

I don't think it is safe for political parties (SRC substructures and opposition) to share information with students because you (DUT) cannot verify the information that they distribute to prospective students. (Khazumula)

Participants also indicated that the confusion was exacerbated by the unverified informant. Confusion can be caused by the increased amount of information provided by different brands and stakeholders (Mitchell and Papavassiliou 1999:320). They further alluded to the issues of the quality of the information that is distributed.

The quality of information that is being distributed to our prospective students is biased. The SRC is trying to juggle information that the institution is providing for prospective students but coming from a political club they will want to brainwash prospective students to believe that they wouldn't have gotten help if it wasn't for a particular political organisation. (FG- Mndeni)

On the other hand, other participants indicated that there are issues with the quality of the information that is distributed to prospective students. There seem to be those who take advantage of prospective students, in the guise of giving them information. Another element is that other groups are created by the student bodies that are politically aligned. This is reflected in the participant's view below:

We get students (In Pietermaritzburg Campuses) who are taken advantage of by the SRC (substructures and political clubs) because they are naïve. (Ntombi)

The identified relevant stakeholder in the context of this study is the DUT staff members and CAO staff members. However, findings indicate that there was also the involvement of the SRC and their subcommittees together with different political clubs. Regarding these, the participants were concerned based on the quality of information that the SRC and their subcommittees together with clubs and societies distribute to prospective students. The findings show that when politically affiliated students distribute information, it is with the purpose of recruitment for their political clubs. The findings also suggest that this has confused prospective students. It is understood that this confusion can be a major contributor to the problem of non-retention of students. Also, findings in this study reveal that when there is a gap in information distribution students look for alternative ways to obtain the information.

4.4.1.4 Existing teamwork despite the confusion

Irrespective of the confusion on the role of different stakeholders in distributing information, found in this study, there was surprisingly existing teamwork, particularly during high school visits. Over the years the HEIs have adopted face-to-face interactions with prospective students as a method to distribute information (Harrison and Waller 2018:920). Participants indicated that high school visits are implemented by different stakeholders, namely, DUT staff members and SRC together with substructures. The participants were also of the view that the information distribution in schools mainly targets feeder schools that have requested the university to visit them. Participants' views are presented below:

We go to a school; we partner with a few departments of student services then we would go. (Ntombi)

We work in collaboration with the recruitment office, where they'll go visit different schools. The schools they visit are our feeder schools, if I may put it that way, where they will be recruiting students and telling them about DUT what we offer, how to go about in terms of applications. (Fikile)

As the department, I don't believe that we sent out information to students to be specific, it would only be when we're doing school visits. (Ntombi)

We do career outreach whereby we go to different schools in and within UMsunduzi Municipality where we deliver career-related workshops and there we are also able to deliver fancy word information that is related to the institution, requirements for all different. (Fikile)

The participants indicated that there are schools that they have on their database where they distribute information. On this, Dlamini (2016:137) notes that prospective students perceived the interactions with HEIs as ineffective in most cases since they only market their institutions and do not give information on ways and requirements for applying at the university. This is reflected in the participant's view below:

I know the DUT recruitment office at Steve Biko that usually goes to high schools in order to market DUT. I can say maybe they're also involved in distributing information to students because when they go to high schools who have the duty, they do distribute this information about how to apply to DUT. (FG-Amukela)

Against the backdrop of the above responses, there is a need to properly delineate the stakeholders' responsibility to distribute information.

4.4.2 Theme 2: Print and digital media platforms

Findings in this study further reveal that different media platforms are being used by DUT to distribute information which includes print and digital media.

4.4.2.1 The use of print media to distribute information

The participants reported that the printed handbooks and pamphlets are distributed in high schools and prospective students could also obtain them from the DUT campuses. Participants indicated that prospective students who required CAO forms can obtain them on campus and the forms are also delivered to various schools as

discussed in section 4.4.1.4. On this, literature (Kim and Johnson 2009:284) has established that print media have traditionally been the storage medium of choice, but electronic media platforms are gaining traction due to the increased use of technology. Notably, the distribution of handbooks was a commonly used method to disseminate information at HEIs, and the exchange of the information required a facilitator to deliver the information (Durban University of Technology 2021). For the printed information to reach prospective students the participants reported that they used different ways to reach out to them as per the views expressed below:

If we can't go there physically we would have to be able to give the Principals pamphlets. (Ntombi)

We also do distribute prospectus in hard copies to the different schools. (Fikile)

DUT communication departments work with communicating with students, but usually, they do give us pamphlets. (FG- Amukela)

Findings further indicate that the print media has a negative impact on the distribution of information. There were indications from the findings that it may be difficult to distribute print media due to a lack of resources such as pamphlets. The distribution of handbooks was a commonly used method to distribute information at HEIs and the exchange of the information required a facilitator to deliver information (Durban University of Technology 2021). There was the need to utilise pamphlets, but it was found that pamphlets were oftentimes sent late to prospective students. On this, it is established that the inequalities factor negatively affects prospective students from rural schools, resulting in their not being able to access the pamphlets timely, since they lack infrastructure and resources (Soudien *et al.* 2021:312). The findings hence suggest the need to distribute pamphlets earlier utilising different means to ensure that prospective students have access to the information they need to apply at DUT timely.

4.4.2.2 Using digital platforms to distribute information

Participants indicated that the information is distributed on different digital platforms; it was revealed that the institution adopted online platforms to distribute information to prospective students. These online platforms include DUT and CAO websites and

social media pages. Additionally, there are designated platforms that the school uses to distribute information that students are trained to use.

4.4.2.2.1 The DUT website

Another practice adopted by DUT to distribute information is the use of the university website as one of the digital platforms. Websites were identified as the most important source of information for students (Hoyt and Brown 2003:4). Findings in this study affirm the view that websites are an important source of information:

We would obviously, as I've said they would visit us in our department and we will obviously share information but for now, they are more reliant on online tools, which is obviously the official DUT website. (Sakhe)

Nonetheless, Sakhe and Thandiwe indicated that the information on the DUT website was outdated. For example, the handbooks on the website are outdated, especially the Public Management and economics handbook for 2021 (16 August 2022 @ 12:29) (Durban University of Technology 2022). But on more recent observation, other handbooks that are available on the website have been updated to 2022. However, it is pertinent to suggest that information on the websites be generally updated considering that outdated information on the website has the potential of misleading students. This is noted in Sakhe's views below:

There is outdated information on the university website and it may hinder prospective students from getting accurate information" (Sakhe)

According to Lubbe and Petzer (2016:924) in South Africa, prospective students' university decision is influenced by the information about the university accessed from the university website' rather than by reading information about the university on other websites. This suggests the need for constant updating of the information on the HEI websites. On this, participants noted the following:

Some of the information could be outdated. (Thandiwe)

We need to have information from the website being changed because I've checked some of the faculties the department still has old information on our website, so we need to be as updated as possible. (Sakhe)

Notably, the contents of the DUT websites include information on the processes of applying to the university but notably redirect students to the CAO website to apply. This is seen in figure 4 below:

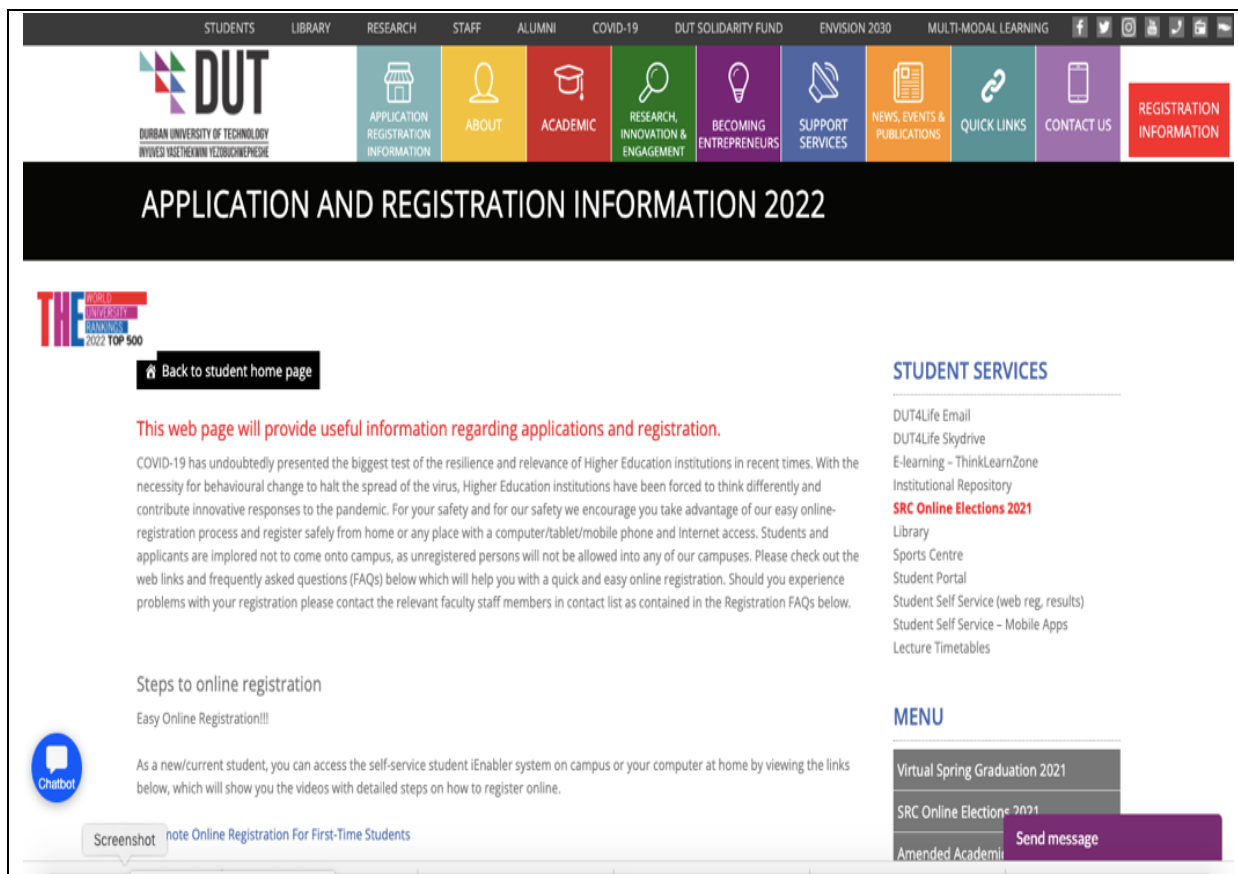


Figure 5: Application and registration information (Durban University of Technology 2022)

The findings also indicate that there were concerns with the information that is distributed on these platforms. According to the findings, the institutions are also liable to ensure that they update their websites to ensure that prospective students are not misinformed. The accuracy in the distribution of the information allows prospective students to make decisions based on credible information (Njoko 2018); hence the website must be updated.

4.4.2.2.2 The CAO website

Findings reveal that information distribution by CAO is through their website. As depicted under 4.4.1.2 websites are important digital tools to distribute information.

CAO website assists in distributing information. The study participants also indicated that they refer prospective students to the CAO website:

What I normally did during the registration period was referred people to the CAO website (FG- Phakama)

This finding is in line with Lubbe and Petzer (2016:924) who suggest that the prospective students' university decision is influenced substantially more by searching information about the university on the university website than by reading information on the university on other websites.

The analysis of the CAO website reveals that the information about the application process, courses available, and which institution offers them are indicated on the website. In addition, the website advises prospective students to understand the points system before they apply on the website. The information that is distributed on the website is illustrated in the figure and transcripts below:



Figure 6: Information about the applications process (Central Applications Office 2022)

Findings further reveal that the website is a major medium for the distribution of information to prospective students relating to how to upload required documents; the process involved should they change their mind regarding the course they applied for;

and other important notices. It is also noted on the website that prospective students have to undergo a test to determine which course they qualify for. The result of this test shows multiple courses that they can choose from. This finding of the study suggests that it is crucial for the information on websites to be clearer to provide prospective students with an opportunity to apply with accurate information.

4.4.2.2.3 The DUT social media platforms

It has been established in the literature (Stachowiak-Krzyżan 2019:68) that students currently seek information mostly through social media, it is then crucial for institutions to distribute information using social media. Notably, the DUT has an official Facebook page which has approximately 99 300 followers administered by a staff member of DUT. As per figure 6, the analysis of the DUT Facebook page indicates that when there is a post on the page, related to the applications opening or closing dates, prospective students get an opportunity to ask for assistance and they are often referred to relevant departments. This reveals that the website does guide prospective students, in addition to just distributing information. Figure 6 shows a conversation between a prospective student and the admin of the page:

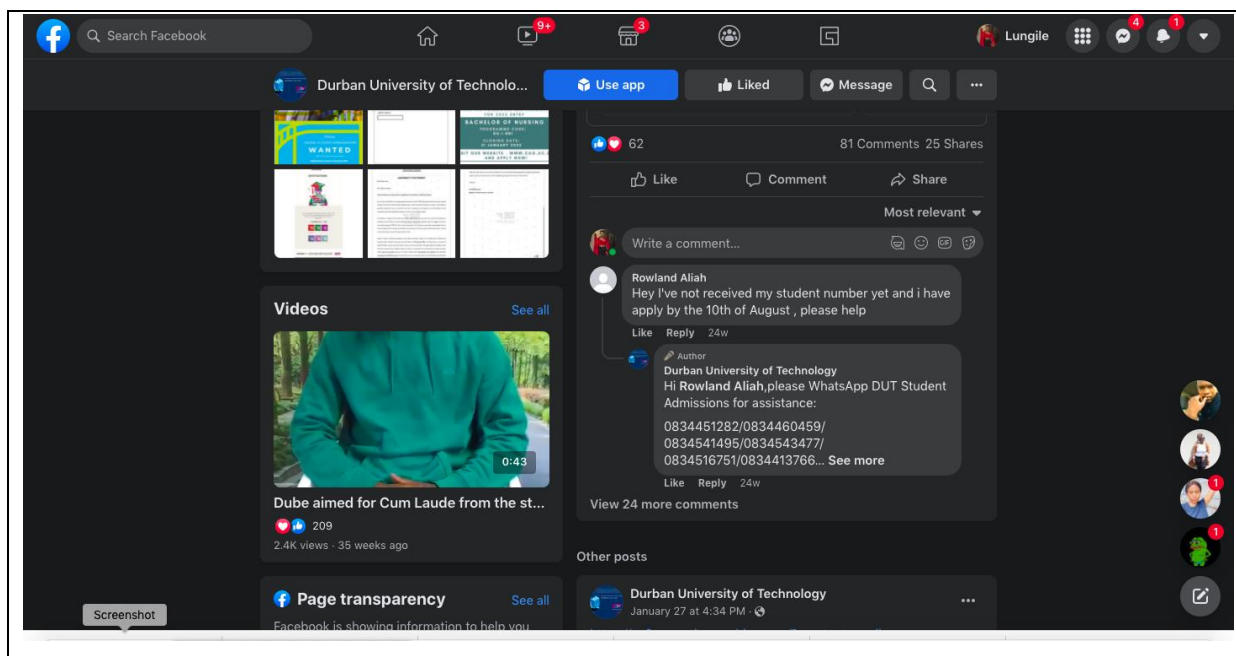


Figure 7: DUT Responses on social media on the prospective students requests for information (Facebook 2022)

The PR lady puts out information on social media platforms. (Fikile)

*Online wise, I know that we do have a Facebook and a Twitter page and I believe all of that would be done by the PR ****. Prior to that, I think that would be done by Durban. The PR **** puts out information to social media platforms.*

So, since Covid-19 as you know we have been adjusting to like a 'new normal' way of doing things because there are no contact sessions. Well, there's been a decrease but sometimes we do get walk-ins in our office and we attend to those right? Obviously with the observation of the Covid-19 regulations and protocols to be observed what we use is your social media platforms (Fikile)

The findings also reveal that there is a lack of social media presence for academic departments. Sakhe in the response below noted that the department does not have a social media presence:

We don't even have a social media presence as a department (Sakhe)

In the absence of social media pages created by either staff members or relevant stakeholders, the study found that there is an unexpected emergence of a vast number of unofficial digital platforms used to distribute information to prospective students.

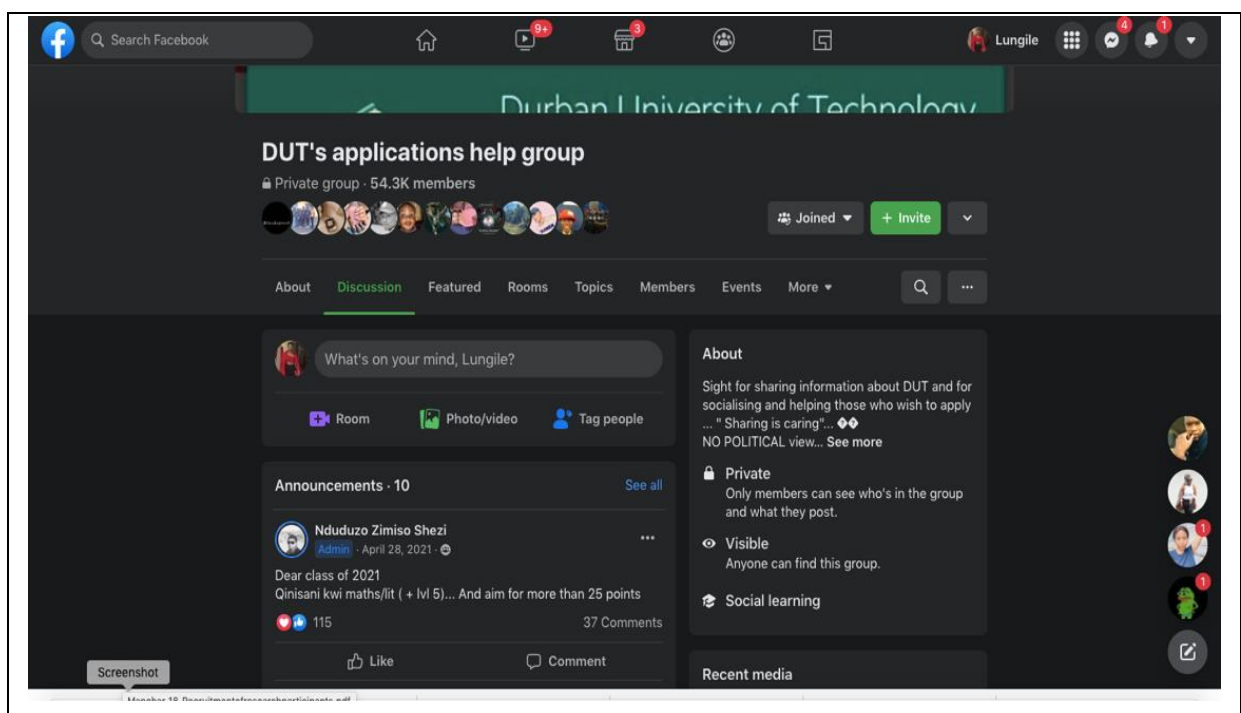


Figure 8: DUT Unofficial social media pages (Facebook 2022)

The participants reported that even with the shift to the use of digital platforms, there are still students who are not able to access the information, including prospective students from rural areas, those from disadvantaged backgrounds, and those with special needs.

4.4.2.2.4 CAO social media platforms

Further investigation regarding the information distributing practices adopted by CAO, reveals that similar to DUT, CAO has an official Facebook page, which has more than 45 000 members. Regarding this finding, Sh *et al.* (2018:374) note the ever-increasing relevance of social media to prospective students in SA, as more than 80% of prospective students utilise social media to investigate their institution choice, making social media one of the most popular information channels for prospective students.



Figure 9: Official CAO Facebook page (Facebook 2022)

Of concern is the fact that the analysis of CAO social media pages indicates that some of the information distributed on these platforms is not directly from the CAO but from certain individuals and may not contain information related to the CAO only. Below is the illustration of the official page and the unofficial pages and groups:

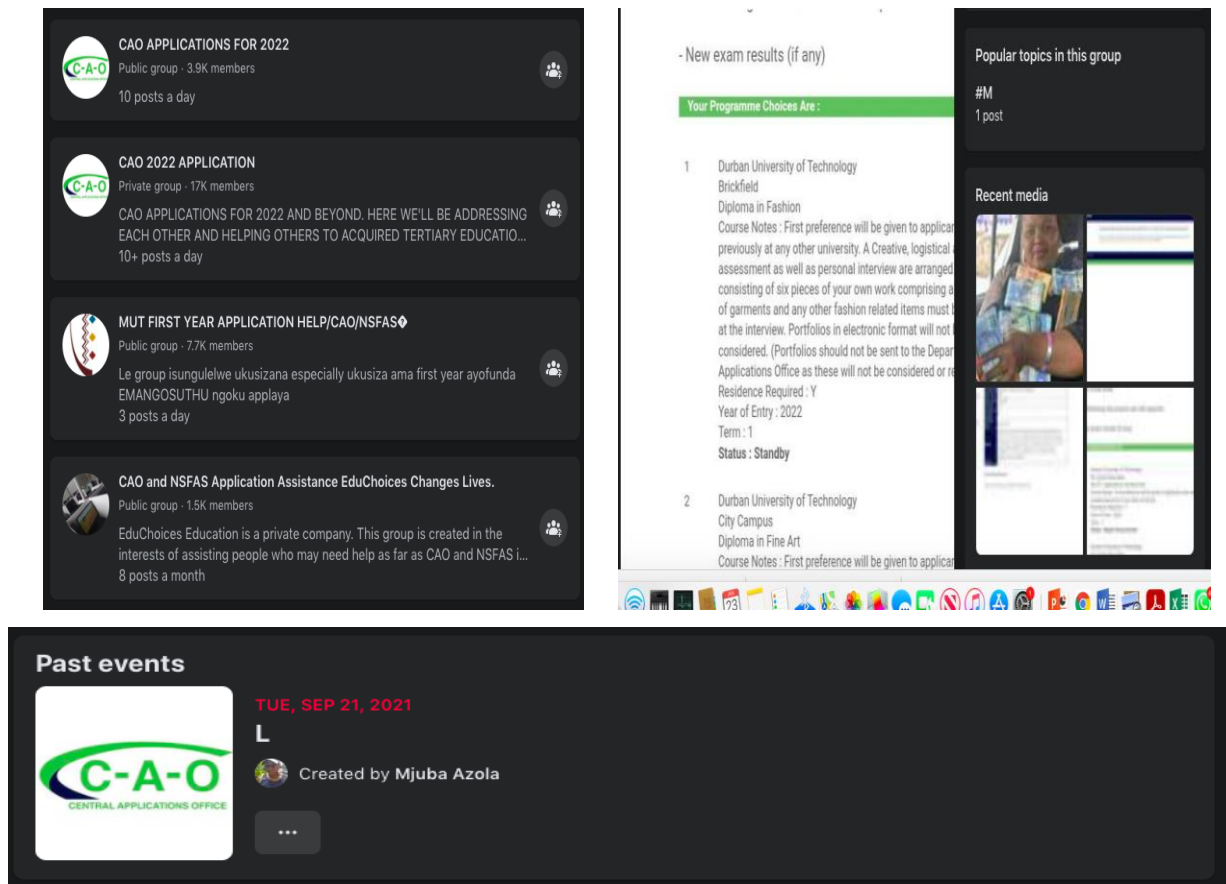


Figure 10: CAO unofficial social media pages and groups (Facebook 2022)

The Facebook platform shows that there are several groups created in the name of CAO. The findings, further indicate that contents not related to CAO core business are included on these unofficial sites. It seems the creation of these unofficial pages is not for information distribution, but for the personal gains of individuals. In addition, the findings suggest that there is a high number of people who join these groups which could result in the prospective students being misinformed. Literature depicts that people are victims of misinformation since the sources they used were not credible and some of them were noted for spreading fake news (Salmi 2020:16). Moreover, it is also evident that these unofficial groups are created by general members of the community and not staff members of DUT or CAO, thus this could negatively impact the quality of information distributed to prospective students.

4.5 Summary

The findings in this study indicated that there was confusion regarding the stakeholders responsible for distributing information. It was further revealed that the confusion is exacerbated by the stakeholders that may have interests beyond assisting prospective students. The stakeholders causing this confusion were identified as the SRC and political clubs. There was an indication that these stakeholders politicise the process of information distribution at HEIs. Findings in the research also revealed that there are different platforms used to distribute information including digital, print media and high school visits.

Chapter 5

Factors influencing the distribution of information

5.1 introduction

The previous chapter discussed the confusion who is responsible for distribute information and the print media together with digital media to distribute information. This chapter will focus on the summary of the results through PESTLE factors. Participants were of the view that different factors affect the distribution of information to prospective students. In addition, there are also cases of prospective students who require information but are unable to obtain it. The findings indicate that the factors that affect the distribution of information include political organisations, application fees, finances for data purchase and scanning of documents, digital exclusion, digital skills, special needs (disability and language needs), awareness regarding policies associated with information distribution and distribution channels used.

5.2 Political Factors

The findings in this study suggest that politics in its nature has a substantial effect on the distribution of information to prospective students. From the participants' perceptions, there are many issues associated with the influence of politics in the distribution of information. The SRC and political clubs were found to have an impact on the distribution of information.

5.2.1. SRC and Political Clubs

The participants indicated that politics also have an impact on the information that is distributed to prospective students. The nature of South Africa's political history and the resulting levels of the socioeconomic circumstance of different South Africans have created a marketplace in which student recruitment practitioners are required to produce information that is quality heterogeneous (Mzimela 2002). The participants indicated that the SRC has a major role in the influence of politics amongst students since they belong to political clubs. It is evident from the findings that the commonly noted phenomenon is that prospective students' first interaction on campus involves the SRC and members of political clubs. Participants views noted that they stand outside university gates during intake periods disseminating information:

When a student approaches the university, the SRC (and political clubs) is the first people prospective student that they meet at the university gates these individuals wear political regalia. (Khazimula)

For instance, when a prospective student comes from a rural area and don't know DUT, they come across several political clubs at the gate ready to assist students coming from eMpangeni for example with no knowledge about the institution and the decision to make with regards to the course they want to do. (Mndeni)

Participants were concerned regarding the involvement of politically affiliated bodies like the SRC and other political clubs, suggesting that they can misinform prospective students coming to the universities. Participant's views indicated the possibility of political clubs distributing false information as a form of revenge or as a plot by SRC members against the management of the university:

The false information that has been shared in the past has been a result of sabotage by different parties. The SRC may distribute fake information to sabotage the management of the university or the other political parties sabotaging the current SRC to make them look incompetent. (Khazimula).

Findings hence suggest that the distribution of information by SRC and political clubs may negatively impact the quality of information distributed to students. It is suggested that the government must ensure that they provide quality information about HE; however, there have been many different factors affecting the distribution of such information (Longo *et al.* 2006:7). The participants indicated that prospective students that have information do apply earlier and can secure spaces; whereas students that lack the information do not apply and the repercussions of walk-ins to the campus premises are that they may not be offered spaces to study and walk out with inaccurate information. Hence, it is important to interrogate the political factors that affect the distribution of information at HEIs.

5.3 Economic Factors

Findings also reveal that there are economic factors that affect the distribution of information including lack of application fees, lack of data fees and fees to scan documents. These issues are explored in the following sections.

5.3.1. Application fee

Participants indicated that there are financial obligations associated with applying through CAO, as prospective students are expected to pay an application fee. On this, a recent study conducted by Gaspar and Soares (2021) highlights that finances play a huge role in ensuring that the information reaches or does not reach people, especially in communities in rural areas that are poverty-stricken. According to this study's findings, financial capabilities play a significant role in prospective students access to higher education. The findings also reveal that the application cannot be processed without payment.

Central Applications Office (CAO): Ayanda M. Guzmán you can visit our website www.cao.ac.za to apply online. Select 'Apply' to the right-hand side and select ' Apply Now. Enter ID/ passport No', complete details required and submit. Thereafter follow the instructions. Kindly note that once you have paid the late administration fee of R470 your application will be made available to the institutions.

The above suggests that the CAO requires prospective students to pay the application fee to process their applications. CAO on their official Facebook page reports that the late application costs R470, meaning that it would be cheaper for prospective students to apply earlier.

Furthermore, financial challenges are also associated with the use of digital platforms, as prospective students need to acquire digital tools such as laptops and smartphones. However, these are prohibitively expensive in much of the developing world (Egielewa *et al.* 2022). In addition, the CAO indicates that for one to be able to submit the document, they must first be scanned and saved and upon submission, to ensure that each document is sent through individually all these are additional costs apart from the expected application fee. As such, financial challenges constitute a constraint to students' ability to access the information distributed. This agrees with

literature (Kiel and Layton, 1981; Simoes and Soares, 2010) which has established that students' decision-making processes are influenced by economic factors among other variables.

5.3.2. Finances for data purchase and scanning of documents

The participants further indicated that finance is another factor that affects information distribution to prospective students. These factors include the lack of financial means to afford data purchase and the scanning of documents needed for applications. Participants' perceptions indicated that the prevailing inequalities amongst certain racial groups in South Africa are a factor hampering prospective students' access to HEIs. Notably, Higher Education South Africa (HESA 2011) states that the distribution of information, access, and opportunity for students and staff is unequally dispersed based on class among many. On this issue, the participants indicated the following:

Sometimes when we administer the workshops online, the attendance is very poor. I don't if it's because of data or the location or what. (Fikile)

Despite the above reality, participants were of the perception that the distribution of information should be targeted to all prospective students since they are deserving notwithstanding their social status.

We understand the dynamics of our country the inequalities that exist. We are saying in our information dissemination, we want to also apply some principle of equality. (Thandiwe)

The information must reach each and every student, no matter which area of South Africa or cases in or anywhere in the world. And we are not targeting a particular class of students, but we're targeting any deserving students be it in rural areas, in urban areas, or in affluent areas. (Thandiwe)

Furthermore, the findings reveal that prospective students' family background influenced their decision. Participants were of the view that with their limited resources, they cannot reach out to everyone. The below responses reflect CAOs' views:

****** Before you upload, make sure that you have scanned and saved your documents in a file on your computer or memory stick/flash drive". (Central Applications Office (CAO)) (Facebook, 2022)*

Findings indicate that there are prospective students that are from deep rural areas which lack access to resources in accessing information. It is established that prospective students from disadvantaged backgrounds are likely to be the ones who do not have access to information due to many associated issues. Thandiwe reported that there are many things to consider when distributing information to prospective students, such as the inequality dynamics that exist in the country, which may hinder students to gain access to the information distributed by the university.

5.4. Social Factors

Some social factors relating to the practices adopted to distribute information were found to be major contributors to the issues hindering prospective students' access to information. Findings reveal that special needs (disability and language needs) and digital exclusion are some of these factors. The next sections explore these issues.

5.4.1 Special needs

5.4.1.1 Disability needs

The findings reveal that information distribution can also be influenced by prospective students that have special needs which include disabilities and language. Participants' views indicated that the information distribution to prospective students with special needs is an area that needs to be explored. It is noted that prospective students with disabilities face the realities and struggle of accessing information distributed by HEIs (Walker *et al.*, 2020). Participants expressed the following views:

We lack capacity that caters for students with special needs hence why we have the challenge of distributing information and other tools used to distribute information to students with special needs". (Sakhe)

I believe that the issue of servicing students with special needs is not catered for institutionally without looking at it in a departmental point of view. So, if the institution as a whole, lacks the capacity, then as departments, we suffer the most because we deal with different students on a daily basis, we deal with

them most of the time, so the institution itself, I feel like does not provide or cater for students with special needs. That also includes distributing information. (Sakhe)

However, Sakhe contradicts Khazimula's assertion and states that the institution is not capacitated to deal with students with special needs. She further mentions that there is a lot to be done to ensure inclusivity for all students. Participants indicated that DUT may not be the first choice for students with special needs because of the lack of information distributed to them and the lack of facilities.

Disability, disabled people should be given a chance to be carted for without really needing assistance from another person when applying. They themselves find information for themselves without the institution coming to them. CAO must-have applications for people with different disabilities so that they are given a chance also to excel in what they do. Applications channels should improve. (Mndeni)

Participants were of the view that there are issues with channels to communicate or distribute information to prospective students who have special needs. Further to that the participants also indicated that the language barrier is another issue that constrains the distribution of information to prospective students. To corroborate these findings, (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education in the United Kingdom 2018) indicates that to help prospective students make informed decisions about where and what to study, the information you present to them should be in plain, and understandable language. It is evident from the findings that language needs have an impact on the information distributed by HEIs.

5.4.1.2 Language Needs

The findings also reveal that the language barrier is a contributing factor to the problem of information distribution. According to the participants' views, prospective students that are from rural schools had challenges concerning accessing the information they needed to apply to university. Language needs hinder prospective students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Hence, Quality Assurance Agency (2019) indicated that information distributed should not be deceptive, and should be written in clear, plain, and understandable language. Participants were of the following views:

Language is another barrier for prospective students from rural schools. (Linathi)

Students from disadvantaged backgrounds have issues communicating in the English language. (FG- Nkululeko)

Moreover, the participants indicated that there are many issues associated with language barriers. The findings further depict that the information distributed might be confusing for prospective students hence they end up not applying. This confusion was caused by the lack of understanding due to the use of English to distribute information. Participants in their various responses affirmed this and further stated that most prospective students that come from disadvantaged backgrounds have issues with reading and writing in English.

5.4.2 Digital exclusion.

According to the World Health Organisation (2020), face-to-face interactions were stopped and going to school was minimised to curb the spread of COVID-19. It is evident from findings that the COVID-19 pandemic forced HEIs to focus on distributing information. Their practices included high school visits which were the most popular practice used for distributing information before the covid pandemic, which gave rise to the extensive use of digital platforms. Additionally, Castelo (2020) highlights that there has been a transformation in the ways that students seek information due to COVID-19.

In terms of the department before, information used to students would have to come to the office to get certain information. So, they would come let me just make an example of the forms, they would come to the office to take certain forms and go and fill them out. But because of COVID-19, now that everything is available online, it limits and they no longer need to come, to the department, and there are things like emails and stuff like that, as much as they existed prior to COVID-19. But now they are more effective. (Linathi)

Therefore, institutions had to keep up with these information-seeking behaviours. HEI information dissemination impacts students' attitudes and behaviour as students' social media participation increases (Nguyen *et al.* 2020). As per the findings, it is noted that COVID-19 made distributing information impossible for prospective

students in rural schools that lack digital access. Literature (Egielewa *et al.* 2022) affirms that the biggest challenge associated with the use of digital platforms is the fact that acquiring digital tools such as laptops and smartphones is prohibitively expensive in much of the developing world. In this study, participants indicated that prospective students needing information come from different geographical locations including rural areas, semi-urban areas, and urban areas. Participants expressed the following views:

We cannot ignore the fact that we are also dealing with students who are coming from disadvantageous background where they do not have access to technology, which we know that technology plays a huge role. (FG-Amukela)

Furthermore, school visits were also not encouraged due to the limitations in contact sessions, to curb the spread of COVID-19. Linathi stated that before the COVID-19 pandemic, prospective students were able to visit the institution but that is no longer possible. On this, it was further revealed that digital platforms became the most dominant channels used to distribute information due to COVID-19 regulations.

5.5 Technological factors

Technology is found to be the major contributing factor affecting the adopted practices to distribute information. The findings reveal that digital skills and distribution channels were the most common issues. The next section explores these findings.

5.5.1 Digital skills

Participants indicated that technology has an influence on the distribution of information to prospective students. It is evident that since there are prospective students that are from rural schools who lack internet or means of technology, they are likely to end up with little or no information. On this, recent studies also affirm that rural schools in South Africa face challenges of access and insufficient knowledge in using technology assets (Yende 2021). The finding in this study also reveals that the ability to distribute information is influenced by the availability of resources and access to technology. The following extractions support this finding:

We cannot ignore the fact that we are also dealing with students who are coming from disadvantageous background where they do not have access to technology which we know that technology plays a huge role. Students that are

coming from the desert with this advantage of backgrounds. find it difficult to access these platforms. (FG-Amukela)

Findings also show that to fill out the application the prospective students must have access to technology assets. On this Lembani *et al.* (2019) state that in Africa specifically, it is not easy to advance technologically since there are still inequalities that still need to be addressed. The extract below is taken from the CAO Facebook page:

It's not because we also need to put it at the back of our minds the fact that most students do not have access. We will, you will find that we have students who are from the deep, deep rural areas who do not know anything about internet smartphones and so on, who have only exposed it when they come to us, and then we give it to them. (Sakhe)

The study also reveals the shortcomings that accompany the use of digital media, relating to the fact that students will need to have digital skills to meet the expectations of the CAO. Regarding this issue, it is established that Facebook allows South African students to improve their digital skills (Rambe and Ng'ambi, 2014). Additionally, there are some concerns relating to a lack of information on technology by prospective students which should also be considered. However, it is evident from the findings (see section 4.4.2) that information is distributed mostly through technology. Hence it is crucial to address issues that are related to distributing information through digital platforms such as issues of access and skills.

5.5.2 Distribution channels used

Findings in this study also show that distribution channels affect the distribution of information hence the use of the Distribution Channels theory in this study (see section 2.6). It is evident from the findings that distribution channels are sometimes not effective since participants indicated that the university must find proper channels to distribute information. Since the goal of distribution channels is to bridge the gap, the flow of information is crucial in ensuring that any organisation reaches their consumers (Singh 2016). It is also evident that the distribution is done selectively through schools that are on the database of feeder schools of the institution. According to Pahwa (2018), selective distribution is defined as the process of distribution directed to a

selected group of people. The participants indicated the following about the channels to distribute the information.

We (DUT) use social media, emails, post and we also we use our recruitment office to circulate this information when they go visit the schools. So basically, those are the channels that we use in trying to reach out to the students. And we also try and keep the database of the schools. So that we directly send the information to the schools, principals, so that they know that the process of application has started. (Thandiwe)

Participants also indicated that there should be improvements in the use of the channels. Sakhe was of the following view:

And as we move along as a university, maybe we will one day find proper channels or best channels that will make sure that we reach our target or targeted prospective students. (Sakhe)

It is evident from the findings that it is significant for an organisation to effectively use distribution channels. Participants indicated that the channels are used however there are shortcomings. Since a distribution channel can also illustrate a series of steps that are required for service in this context to reach its end-users (prospective students) (Munoz 2019). It is therefore crucial to understand the channels of distribution considering that it is one of the factors that affect the distribution of information.

5.6 Legal factors

Findings in this study also reveal that policies and legislations are part of the multiple factors that affect information distribution to prospective students. It is evident from the findings that understanding policies has an impact on the practices adopted to distribute information. The awareness regarding policies was noted by participants to be associated with information distribution.

5.6.1 Awareness regarding policies associated with information distribution

participants in this study noted a problem with how and who is responsible for information distribution (as discussed under section 4.4.1). However, in the context of DUT policy for recruiting prospective students, the human resource personnel

responsible for distributing information are the recruitment office and other relevant stakeholders (DUT, 2021). Participants further indicated that there is a social media policy put in place by the university about the information that is distributed, but social media unauthorised groups still exist.

I am aware of the DUT social media policies which clearly states that whatever information gets shared, you must make sure that it is verified by the communications department. (FG- Amukela)

Yes, there is a policy. Unfortunately, I won't lie and say one has read it or came across it but it makes sense that as went through the Era of online learning or online registration, the institution would have a document that speaks into that. (Ntombi)

The finding also indicates that some participants were not aware of policies that guide information distribution, recruitment and admission of students. A study conducted by Central Applications Services (2019) also argues that many factors influence these policies; hence, institutions need to ensure that university application information reaches everyone who needs it. The university policies should allow the public access to accurate information (DHET, 2019) and students are encouraged to seek information on the platforms prescribed by the university (DUT, 2020).

5.7 Environmental factors

Findings indicate that environmental factors have an impact on the distribution of information to prospective students. It is evident from the findings that the location of high schools has an impact on the distribution of information.

5.7.1 Geographic location

Findings suggest that geographic location affects the choice of schools DUT distributes the information to. For example, facilities play an important role in realising educational goals and objectives by meeting the physical and emotional needs of the school's staff, pupils, and students (Amadi 2019). It is evident from the findings that there are schools on the DUT database they focus on distributing information. These schools are highlighted to be in chosen communities. The participants indicated that the location of these schools plays a huge role, as presented below:

Sometimes when we administer the workshops online, the attendance is very poor. I don't if it's because of data or the location or what. (Fikile)

Furthermore, the findings show that the most affected schools are those who are in rural areas. Participants expressed the following views on this issue:

The information must reach each and every student, no matter which area of South Africa or cases in or anywhere in the world. And we are not targeting a particular class of students, but we're targeting any deserving students be it in rural areas, in urban areas, or in affluent areas. (Thandiwe)

It's not because we also need to put it at the back of our minds the fact that most students do not have access. We will, you will find that we have students who are from the deep, deep rural areas who do not know anything about internet smartphones and so on, who have only exposed it when they come to us, and then we give it to them. (Sakhe)

Sakhe indicated that there are prospective students that are from deep rural areas and lack the resources needed to access information. It was revealed that the print and digital platforms are there but are not 100% effective because there are certain groups of prospective students who do not have access to the information that is distributed. In corroboration with the findings, Jones *et al.* (2008) affirm that many of the prospective students who seek admission to universities come from "disadvantaged" rural and township communities characterised by poverty, under-resourced and dysfunctional schools, poor education, lack of information, and distance from urban educational institutions. Hence, HEIs must re-evaluate the practices they use to distribute information and revise them to address these constraints.

5.8 Summary

The findings further elaborated that there are factors that affect the distribution of information, which include the PESTLE factors. Regarding the political factor, it was found that the SRC and political clubs influenced the practices adopted by CAO and DUT to distribute information. Concerning the economic factors, findings indicated that the finances for data and scanning of documents affected prospective students

seeking information. Social factors were found to be another contributor towards the hindrances of distributing information. The social factors included the reality of students with disability needs, language needs and digital exclusion. In terms of technological needs, the findings distinguished that digital skills and distribution channels influenced information distribution. Whereas the legal factors were found to be the awareness and adherence to existing policies and legislations guiding information distribution. Finally, regarding environmental factors, it was found that geographic locations influence the distribution of information. These findings prompted the researcher to propose a framework to be used for distributing information to prospective university students (see section 5.6.1).

5.8.1 Researchers own proposed framework for information distribution to prospective university students

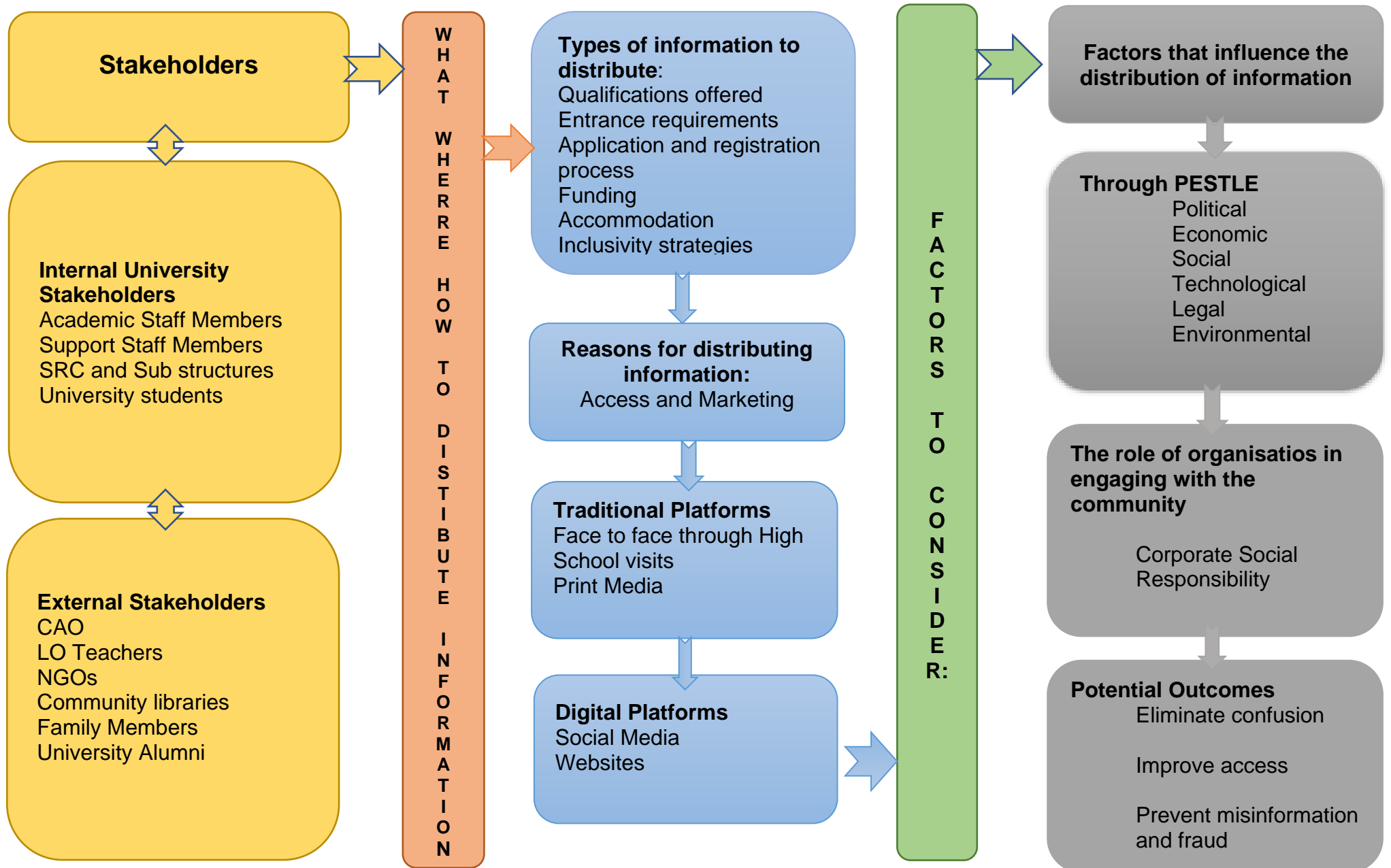


Figure 11: Diagram illustrates the researchers own proposed framework for information distribution by universities and other stakeholders to prospective students.

The proposed framework aims to assist in ensuring that the information distributed to prospective students is relevant, effective and is of good quality. The findings in this study suggest that there is a need to improve the practices currently adopted to distribute information. Hence there is a need for an extended focus on:

- Who distributes the information?
- How the information is distributed and where is it distributed?
- What type of information is distributed and for what purpose?

The framework illustrates the stakeholders that are involved in the distribution of information, it further indicates that the stakeholders are crucial in the distribution of the information and that they need to work collaboratively (double sided arrows). Candia (2019:39) states that a stakeholder is “any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organisation’s objectives.” The framework suggests that the university needs to be made aware of the existing fuzziness of the existing roles of various stakeholders and formulate strategies to improve information distribution. The framework further suggests focus on the type of information that is disseminated, to avoid over focusing on the marketing of the university at the expense of crucial issues such as the application process, qualifications offered and entrance requirements.

The channels used to distribute information are also significant to promote inclusivity. In addition, the framework advocates for attention to the factors that can enhance or impede the distribution of information. There is also a need to focus on the responsibilities of individuals and organisations to community engagement programs. This should take into consideration various geographic proximities of the community, to address issues affecting them (Redding 2011:30). The next chapter will conclude the thesis, provide recommendations and suggest future research.

Chapter 6

Conclusion and Recommendations

6.1 Introduction

This chapter provides the conclusions of this research focusing on how the study has responded to the stated objectives. The chapter will further make recommendations for DUT and CAO pertaining to the distribution of information to prospective students. The chapter further makes some proposals for future research based on the findings and conclusions from this study.

6.2 Achievements of the objectives of the study

The study aimed to assess the information distribution practices adopted by CAO and DUT. Qualitative data relating to information distribution practices adopted by these organisations were analysed based on themes emerging from the data. It was crucial to identify themes and categories that emerge from the data to clearly outline how the study responded to its stated objectives. Presentation of data was carried out using information directly extracted from various publicly available digital platforms and direct quotations of statements from participants and the websites of the case study organisations (DUT and CAO). Generated primary data in this study was also supported by secondary data sourced through social media and other websites.

6.2.1 Objective one: To determine information distribution practices adopted by DUT

There are many elements to be considered when distributing information, and they include stakeholders that are responsible or may be involved in implementing the practices. Surprisingly, the study found that there is confusion regarding who is responsible for distributing information. Within the DUT, there was confusion regarding who should distribute the information between these university units:

- Student admissions
- Career resource centre
- Departmental Secretaries
- Security Officers

The confusion has persisted despite the existence of the admissions policy which clearly states that the stakeholders of the university can disseminate information. In addition, the perceptions of staff members regarding information distribution reveal concerns over the participation of the SRC in distributing information. The concerns were based on the fear of the quality of information distributed by the SRC and how such information affects students. These findings are corroborated by the literature as reviewed in this study which was crucial in assessing the importance of clarification of the roles of various stakeholders in the distribution of information. Findings indicate that the practices adopted include:

- Visiting schools
- Compiling and distributing print media such as handbooks, pamphlets, prospectus and many others.
- Communicating using radio stations
- Using websites

It is concluded that the type of information distributed as well as when and where the information is distributed can play a crucial role.

6.2.2 Objective two: To determine information distribution practices adopted by CAO when using online platforms.

Regarding this objective, it was found in this study that there exist different platforms and practices used by the CAO to distribute information. The platforms were indicated as traditional and digital and this finding is further supported by the literature. However, it is also found that there is evidence of a shortfall in how these platforms are utilised. In addition to this, it is observed that accessing these platforms has proven to be challenging for prospective students who are from certain social groups. The findings hence suggest that even though these platforms exist, there are still amendments that need to be made. For instance, it was noted that both the traditional and the digital platforms were relatively challenging to be utilised considering the recent COVID19 regulations. On this, it was evident from the findings that the existing digital platforms were constrained by several issues making it difficult to be utilised to distribute the information required by prospective students. The repercussions of using these

platforms were noted to be detrimental since the social media platforms were misused by certain stakeholders. These findings were also supported by the literature.

6.2.3 Objective three: To examine PESTLE factors affecting information distribution to prospective students.

With regards to the third objective of this study, it was found that there exist different factors that can be grouped under PESTLE that impact information distribution to prospective students to HEIs. As such, the identified factors as per the findings included:

- Political factors
- Economic factors
- Social factors
- Technological factors
- Legal factors
- Environmental factors

These factors were explored and findings noted that they contribute in different ways to the (in)effectiveness of the information distributed to prospective students. The findings further indicated that there were many common contributors (linked to the above PESTLE factors) to the inefficiencies in information distribution. Conclusions under this theme hence suggested the need to continuously monitor the impact of these factors on information distribution to prospective students in the study's context to improve the practices.

6.2.4 Objective four: To recommend strategies for enhancing information distribution to prospective students

To achieve this objective, a framework was proposed in the previous chapter, taking into consideration the literature reviewed in this study as well as the findings. In this section, recommended strategies that can be utilised by CAO and DUT to improve information distribution to prospective students. The recommendations are also envisaged to assist both organisations to amend policies and enhance practices. The recommendations align with the objectives of the study and they are as follows:

6.3 Recommendations for DUT and CAO

The findings of this study highlighted that there are practices adopted by the case study organisations to distribute information to prospective students, however, these practices have loopholes. Based on the findings, the study suggests the following recommendations for DUT and CAO

It was found that the stakeholders wield the most significant influence in the distribution of information. The findings depicted that there is confusion about the responsibility of stakeholders in distributing information. The area of concern was mostly the SRC and political clubs. For example, the information that they distribute to prospective may be untrustworthy. Hence the study recommends that the stakeholders should properly understand their role in the distribution of information. Training workshops and general sensitisation campaigns should be arranged for the staff to inform them of their role and mandate regarding information distribution to assist prospective students.

Also, it would be useful for the stakeholders to be aware of the concerns regarding information gaps as indicated by the participants in this study. These include the selective distribution of information. The findings indicated that information is distributed to feeder schools that are on the database. On this, the study recommends that the information should be targeted to all prospective students that require access to information.

Direct distribution through digital platforms and school visits is another area of concern. The digital platforms were found to have loopholes considering that there exist online pseudo accounts of the organisations used to disseminate false information to prospective students. There is also the issue of outdated information found on the official websites of the organisations. Consequent to these findings, it is recommended that the organisations endeavour to verify their official online accounts and endeavour to advise students on how to identify these official accounts. It is also recommended that the websites be constantly updated to ensure that the information is accurate and not complicated for prospective students. Personnel should be hired and tasked with updating information on the official websites of the organisations.

According to the findings, there were no indicators of the existence of information distributed indirectly to prospective students. Consequently, the researcher recommends that indirect channels to distribute information be explored; for example, the use of external stakeholders to distribute information. It may be useful for this information to enhance the adopted strategies to distribute information so that the information reaches a greater number of prospective students.

6.4 Recommendations for DUT and CAO based on factors

According to the findings in this study, there are several factors affecting effective information distribution to prospective students. Following the identified PESTLE factors this study makes the following recommendations:

Regarding the issue of political meddling on the part of the SRC and other political clubs that impact information distribution, the study recommends that the SRC and political clubs' role should be clearly outlined. Proper policies must be enacted to regulate the role of politically affiliated bodies who assist in information distribution at the universities. It is also important that measures are put in place to ensure that proper information not politically motivated messages is given to prospective students.

Economic factors were identified as being among the factors that negatively affect the distribution of information to prospective students. Some of the issues under this factor include the lack of funds to purchase data to access information on digital platforms and the lack of fees to scan documents. The students who are from rural schools were indicated to be the most affected due to the inequalities that still exist. Following this finding, it is recommended that the websites and social media platforms be set to be accessed without using data and to be in free mode.

On the other hand, social factors also played a crucial role in the lack of access to the information distributed. The social ills that affect students were highlighted to have an impact on information-seeking behaviours. The recommendation is that there should be an investment in ensuring that disabled students have access to information. For example, braille can be made available to the stakeholders tasked with distributing information to students that are blind. Another issue pertains to language-related challenges which can be addressed by providing easy-to-read information and signs.

This study further discovered that technology influences the way information are distributed to prospective students. On this, it was revealed that resources and infrastructure influenced prospective students' choices, access and use of digital platforms. Hence it is recommended that a range of information distribution channels, not just digital platforms only be used for information dissemination to prospective students.

Some legal factors were also identified through findings, as hampering the effectiveness of information distribution to prospective students. It was also evident that there is a lack of awareness regarding the policies regulating information distribution. The study recommends creating awareness regarding the policies and legislations that guide the distribution of information, to guide practices.

Notably environmental factors were found in this study to have influenced the practices adopted to distribute information. For example, it was revealed that it may be difficult for students from certain geographical locations without requisite infrastructure and technological advancement to access information needed to apply to HEIs. Based on this finding, the study recommends that in the case of schools located where there is no infrastructure and which have network issues, the stakeholders should use local municipalities and libraries to reach prospective students. This will mean that those facilities themselves are properly equipped. It is here that government has a role to play to ensure the availability of such needed facilities in rural areas and townships.

Finally, the study recommends the proposed framework to distribute information (see figure 5.6.1) towards enhancing information distribution to prospective students to HEIs by the case study organisations in this study. Notably, the framework seeks to address the confusion about the responsibility of stakeholders. It also seeks to suggest the types of information that prospective students may require and potential outcomes for distributing information.

6.5 Recommendations for future research

There is a need to understand what influences students' information seeking behaviour and decisions to enrol for a particular qualification. Based on the current study, it appears that more work and research are required regarding the information needs of students and the role universities play in fulfilling these needs, particularly in

the context of KZN where HEIs use CAO to administer applications. It is the responsibility of the institutions to distribute effective information and to abide by DHET policies on how to recruit prospective students. The focus of this study was primarily on the information distributed to all prospective students, but what emerged was the shortcomings of the information that was distributed to those that are from disadvantaged schools.

6.6 Summary

This chapter has presented the conclusion, recommendations, and proposal for future research. Finally, as part of its original contribution to scholarship on the topic.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Letter of Information



Dear Participant

I am currently enrolled in the Faculty of Accounting and Informatics at Durban University of Technology (DUT) in Pietermaritzburg South Africa. I am in the process of writing my Master's Thesis. As part of my studies and to qualify for Master of Management Sciences in Administration and Information Management Degree I have to complete a dissertation, therefore I am conducting research study entitled: **Assessing information distribution practices adopted by the Durban University of Technology and the Central Applications Office**

Principal Researcher: Miss Lungile Ngcobo

Supervisor: Dr K Dongwe

Co-Supervisor: Dr S Parbanath

Purpose of the study: The aim of the study is to assess information distribution practices adopted by the Durban University of Technology and the Central Applications Office. This is the information distributed to prospective students.

Outline of the procedures:

If you choose to take participate in this study you will be required to participate in online individual semi-structured interviews. All data collected will be used for the purpose of this study. The interview should take approximately *30 - 45 minutes* to complete and your participation in this research project is completely voluntary.

Confidentiality:

Your responses will remain confidential and anonymous. No one other than the researcher will know your individual answers to this interview.

Risks or discomfort to the participant:

There are no known risks to the participant chosen for this study.

Benefits: The benefit of this study will be to enable the institution to distribute information effectively to prospective students and to highlight the factors influencing information distribution. The potential benefit to the researcher will be publishing articles in accredited journals as well as conference proceedings.

Remuneration: Please note that there are no monetary gain or other type of remuneration for your participation in this study

Reasons why participant may be withdrawn from the study:

Should you no longer wish to participate, you can withdraw yourself from this study by informing the researcher. You can be fully assured that there will be no negative effects

Persons to contact in the event of any problems or queries:

You may raise any concerns you might have, by contacting my main Supervisor Dr Khethiwe Dongwe 082 3903375 or Co – Supervisor Dr Steven Parbanath 0845055278. Institutional Research Ethics Administrator on 031 373 2375. Complaints can be reported to the Director: Research and Postgraduate Support Dr L Linganiso on 031 373 2577 or researchdirector@dut.ac.za.

Appendix B: Letter of Consent



LETTER OF CONSENT

Statement of Agreement to Participate in the Research Study

- I hereby confirm that I have been informed by the researcher, Lungile Ngcobo, about purpose, benefits and risks of this study.
- I have also received, read and understood the above written information, (participant letter of information) regarding the study.
- I understand that I am free to contact any of the people involved in the research to seek further clarification and information.
- I understand that I will not benefit directly from participating in this research and I understand that all information I provide for this study will be treated confidentially.
- I have had sufficient opportunity to ask questions and declare my self-prepared to participate in the study.
- In view of requirements of research, I agree that the data collected during this study can be processed in a computerised system by the researcher.
- I understand that significant new findings developed during the course of this research which may relate to my participation will be made available to me.

.....
Name of the participant Date Time signature

I, Lungile Ngcobo herewith confirm that the above participant has been fully informed about the purpose, benefits and risks of the study.

.....
Name of the researcher Date Signature

.....
Name of the witness Date Signature

Appendix A: Interview Schedule

Assessing information distribution practices adopted by Durban University of Technology.

Semi- structured interview schedule for Admissions office staff, Career Resource Officers, Recruitment Officers, HOD's and Departmental representatives at Durban University of Technology Riverside campus responsible for distribution information to prospective students

A. Biographical information

1. Faculty:
2. Department:
3. Programme:.....
4. What is your current designation?.....

B. Information distribution practices adopted by DUT

5. Please, explain how you distribute information to prospective students?
6. What is your involvement in distributing information?
7. Are you aware of any policy or strategy in the institution for distributing information to prospective?
8. Are you in line or not in line with this policy or strategy?
Probe: please elaborate your answer
9. Which information do you distribute to students?
Probe: Why do you distribute this information?
10. Which distribution channels are you using to reach prospective students?
11. Why do you distribute information in this manner?
12. Has the COVID-19 pandemic changed ways to distribute information to prospective students?
Probe: Please elaborate
13. In your view, do you think that information distribution methods and channels used are effective?
Probe: Please elaborate
14. Anything you would like to add regarding how you currently distributes information to prospective students?

C. Factors influencing information distribution practices by staff members at DUT

8. What is influencing your ability to distribute information effectively to prospective students?

Probe: Motivate your answer

9. Have you or any other staff received proper training to distribute information to prospective students?

10. What additional support that can be offered to assist in distributing information to students?

11. Are there any other barriers affecting you to distribute information to prospective students?

12. Are there any challenges you face when distributing information to prospective students?

13. Has the university offered any support to expedite the distribution of information?

14. In your opinion, what is the current state of the quality of information distributed to students?

15. Do you think prospective students access the information you have distributed?

Probe: How do you know this?

D. Suggested strategies for improving information distribution to prospective students

16. What is your view about the information that is distributed to prospective students regarding university applications?

17. In your opinion, does the information distributed to student's impact decisions made by prospective students in terms of the process of applying and registration?

18. What lessons can we learn from this year's registration process regarding information distribution to students?

19. In your opinion, are there areas of improvement in terms of distributing information to prospective students? If yes, please elaborate your answer

20. Is there anything further you would like to add?

Appendix D: Ethics Approval



Faculty Research Office
Durban University of Technology
29 July 2021

Student: Lungile Ngcobo
Student Number: 21233560
Degree: Master of Management Sciences in Administration and Information Management
Email: 21233560 @dut4life.ac.za
Supervisor: Dr CK Dongwe
Supervisor email: cynthiaz@dut.ac.za

Dear Ms Ngcobo

ETHICAL APPROVAL: LEVEL 2

I am pleased to inform you that the Faculty Research Ethics Committee (FREC) following feedback from two reviewers, has granted preliminary permission for you to conduct your research "Assessing information distribution practices adopted by Central Applications Office and Durban University of Technology".

When ethics approval is granted:

You are required to present the letter at your research site(s) for permission to gather data. Please also note that your research instruments must be accompanied by the letter of information and the letter of consent for each participant, as per your research proposal.

This ethics clearance is valid from the date of provisional approval on this letter for one year. A student must apply for recertification 3 months before the date of this expiry.

Recertification is required every year until after corrections are made, after examination, and the thesis is submitted to the Faculty Registrar.

A summary of your key research findings must be submitted to the FRC on completion of your studies.

Kindest regards.

Yours sincerely

Dr Mogiveny Rajkoomar
FREC Chair
Faculty of Accounting and Informatics
Durban University of Technology
Ritson Campus
Durban, South Africa
4001

Appendix E: Gatekeepers Letter



*Directorate for Research and Postgraduate Support
Durban University of Technology
Tromso Annexe, Steve Biko Campus
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19th August 2021
Ms Lungile P Ngcobo
c/o Department of Finance and Information Management
Faculty of Accounting and Informatics
Durban University of Technology

Dear Ms Ngcobo

PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH AT THE DUT

Your email correspondence in respect of the above refers. I am pleased to inform you that the Institutional Research and Innovation Committee (IRIC) has granted **Full Permission** for you to conduct your research "Assessing information distribution practices adopted by the Central Applications Office and Durban University of Technology" at the Durban University of Technology.

The DUT may impose any other condition it deems appropriate in the circumstances having regard to nature and extent of access to and use of information requested.

We would be grateful if a summary of your key research findings would be submitted to the IRIC on completion of your studies.

Kindest regards.
Yours sincerely

DR LINDA ZIKHONA LINGANISO
DIRECTOR: RESEARCH AND POSTGRADUATE SUPPORT DIRECTORATE