



South African Open Distance Elearning Student: The Types, Effectiveness, and Preference of Feedback Support

Les étudiants sud-africains de l'enseignement ouverte et à distance: types, efficacité et préférences en matière de feedback

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
Abstract

Historically feedback is perceived as a unidirectional flow of information from e-tutor to student, however, the feedback mechanisms ecology highlights the significance of establishing links between students and lecturers, as well as students and institutions. This study examines the various types of feedback, their efficacy, and the preferences of students in the context of Open Distance eLearning (ODeL). The study explores the feedback preferences of Open Distance eLearning (ODeL) students in South Africa using a quantitative research methodology. The study included 3842 participants who responded to an online survey. The findings indicate that proactive and prompt feedback significantly enhances student learning, emphasising the need for constructive comments within the ODeL framework. The study also identifies specific feedback forms requested by students to improve their educational experience. The findings suggest that effective feedback mechanisms are crucial in ODeL environments, providing actionable insights for educators to optimise their feedback strategies.

Keywords: *Student feedback, Open Distance eLearning, feedback support, South Africa, feedback preference*

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Résumé

Historiquement, le feedback est perçu comme un flux unidirectionnel d'information de l'e-tuteur à l'étudiant, cependant, l'écologie des mécanismes de feedback souligne l'importance d'établir des liens entre les étudiants et les professeurs, ainsi que les étudiants et les institutions. Cette étude examine les différents types de feedback, leur efficacité et les préférences des étudiants dans le contexte de l'e-learning ouvert et à distance (EOD) L'étude explore les préférences de feedback des étudiants en e-learning ouvert et à distance ouvert (EOD) en Afrique du Sud en utilisant une méthodologie de recherche quantitative. L'étude a inclus 3842 participants qui ont répondu à un sondage en ligne. Les résultats indiquent que le feedback proactif et rapide améliore considérablement l'apprentissage des étudiants, soulignant le besoin de feedback constructifs dans le cadre de l'EOD. L'étude identifie également des formulaires de feedback spécifiques demandés par les étudiants pour améliorer leur expérience éducative. Les résultats suggèrent que des mécanismes de feedback efficaces sont essentiels dans les environnements de l'EOD, fournissant des informations exploitables aux éducateurs pour optimiser leurs stratégies de feedback.

Mots-clés : *Feedback des étudiants, eLearning ouvert et à distance ouvert, soutien au feedback, Afrique du Sud, préférence pour le feedback.*

Introduction

Studying in an Open Distance e-Learning (ODEL) environment comes with unique challenges for students, which need comprehensive student support services. Evidence suggests that students at Open and Distance Learning (ODEL) institutions often encounter challenges when it comes to getting essential support services. These challenges include delays in the distribution of study materials, ineffective feedback systems, and insufficient usage of the services that are provided (Arko-Achemfuor, 2017; Lumadi, 2021). In addition, children with impairments have more significant challenges, since there is a restricted supply of assistive technological equipment and they experience heightened frustrations compared to typical institutional environments (Ditlhale & Johnson, 2022). To tackle these difficulties, ODeL institutions need to expand their administrative responsiveness, improve the accessibility of their services, and offer sufficient training for both academic staff and students on how to successfully use the existing support services and feedback systems (Arko-Achemfuor, 2017; Lumadi, 2021).

Students' support services are essential to the success of the open distance and e-learning (ODEL) system, which is designed to facilitate successful teaching and learning. Student support services refer to a variety of strategies and approaches used in the planning and implementation of courses to provide students with the essential abilities and information needed to complete their studies successfully (Weaver, 2006). Open and Distance Learning (ODEL) utilises a range of tactics, including technological counselling, peer group assistance, administrative support, training, and feedback measures, to attain success (Ukpo, 2006).

Without these services, there will be a significant attrition rate, dropout, etc.

In the past twenty years, research has shown a significant shift in higher education towards prioritising feedback measures over other student support services. In higher education, feedback is described as the process by which students analyse information about their performance

and use it to enhance the quality of their work or learning strategies (Finelli et al., 2018). Feedback plays a crucial role in the evaluation and assessment of student performance in higher education, as per this principle. However, according to more recent definitions, feedback is seen as a way for students to assess their understanding and progress at a particular moment. It also helps students measure their progress in terms of the knowledge, understanding, and skills required to complete their course. The feedback that students receive in education enhances performance, boosts confidence, and signals achievements or areas that need development, but it still requires more empirical research, especially in online classes and programmes, to determine its effect (Al-Ogaili, 2023; Jakobus et al., 2022; Özalp & Kaymakçı, 2022; Scott et al., 2015).

There are informal types of feedback. When it comes to offering feedback in a formal context, professors or lecturers are the exclusive authority in this regard. Conversely, informal feedbacks are the ones that can be provided by classmates, advisors, parents and other members of the public (Carless & Winstone, 2023). Hounsell (2007) suggests that to effectively bridge the gap between the teacher's understanding and expectations and those of the students, the instructor must provide feedback that is both effective and well-stated. Hence, the comments provided by teachers on a student's evaluation should lead to a shared comprehension of the criteria for excellence within that specific context. To provide effective learning and support for students during the course, it is crucial to carefully plan and fully understand the feedback (Sadler, 2010).

The ODeL system in South Africa is undergoing a study to assess its effectiveness in providing high-quality feedback to students. This study aims to determine if the feedback platform adequately meets students' needs, ensuring they receive the necessary support to complete their studies effectively. This is because distance learning provides students with fewer opportunities to ask questions and receive clarification at any given time. This link is revealed both during the planning of feedback comments and during the actual performance of the students. This study examines the importance of the presence of educators in open and distance education, based on the work of (Jaggars & Xu,

2016), who emphasised its crucial influence on student results. The goal is to determine whether the ODeL system's feedback mechanisms meet student needs and provide essential assistance for successful study completion.

According to Abdullah and Said (2022), research feedback is crucial for enhancing instructor-student interaction and enhancing the appeal of open and distant learning (ODL) for adult learners. As stated by (Wong et al., 2021), providing constructive comments may improve the process of information acquisition, particularly among mature individuals. Feedback is crucial in enhancing adult higher education in open and distance learning (ODL). Consequently, Abdullah and Said (2022) study revealed that students' input on the enhancement of adult higher education through Open and Distance Learning (ODL) is crucial, particularly for the educational provider. Consequently, the researcher determines that feedback is a crucial instrument for enhancing the calibre of ODL programmes and guaranteeing their alignment with learners' requirements. Therefore, teachers should contemplate offering comprehensive feedback that directs students towards improvement, stimulates them, and contributes to their academic accomplishments. Teachers should also provide opportunities for student participation to enhance engagement and learning outcomes.

Given this context, the study aims to examine the various types of feedback, their usefulness, and the preferences of students enrolled in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) programmes. To translate this, the researchers formulated the following research objectives:

- To determine the specific type of feedback utilised by teachers in an Open and Distance Learning (ODeL) institution in South Africa.
- To assess the effectiveness of teacher feedback on students in an ODeL institution.
- To ascertain the feedback preference of students in an ODeL educational institution.

Literature Review

The role of feedback in communication

Feedback serves several functions at an Open and Distance Learning (ODeL) institution as well as other higher education institutions, following its intricate definition. It is crucial in Open and Distance Learning (ODeL) as it serves a pedagogical function. It functions as a medium for comprehensive analysis regarding both the organisation and substance to reinforce student comprehension.

Lumadi (2023) asserts that feedback is often regarded as equivalent to assessment. The reason for this is that feedback is designed to serve two main purposes: to convey information about a student's performance and to assess the level of correctness in completing a task. According to Hattie & Timperley, (2007) feedback is a result of a student's performance or understanding of the study materials that have been provided to them. Conversely, Nicol (2010) mentioned that feedback has evolved beyond the mere provision of information regarding the accuracy of a student's responses. It is described as a reciprocal process that entails the exchange of generated information, ultimately benefiting the learner.

Price et al., (2010) highlighted that the purpose of feedback information is to provide a baseline for comparison, as well as to reinforce and correct the information that has been provided. Hounsell et al., (2008) stated that feedback is a process that aids learning and has a feed-forward nature. It is suggested that the primary purpose of feedback, regardless of the format in which it is presented, is to provide the student with information or knowledge that enhances their capacity to learn.

Walker & Humphreys (2009) aver that feedback should be sufficiently stimulating to activate and cultivate critical skills for the student to comprehend the assigned task. Feedback serves to notify students of errors, allowing for their correction, and offers additional information or comprehensive solutions to specific problems. It also indicates how these issues can be addressed in the future. According to Namin et al.,

(2023) researched to examine how feedback from different sources (experts versus peers) and feedback tone (negative versus positive) affect individual motivation. Based on an analysis of more than 300 experimental observations, the study demonstrates that the mere existence of feedback increases the probability of innovation in idea generation, particularly when it originates from an expert rather than peers. The study also highlights that negative feedback from experts serves as a motivation for individuals to generate superior ideas, whereas peer feedback has a lesser impact on innovation (Namin et al., 2023).

The study demonstrates that receiving positive feedback from experts enhances the quality of ideas, whereas positive feedback from peers does not have a substantial influence (Namin et al., 2023). These findings offer valuable insights for managers aiming to enhance feedback processes in crowdsourcing communities, proposing strategies to elicit higher-quality input from external individuals. In a similar vein, (Carless, 2022) examines feedback strategies that are informed by research and require students to actively participate in generating, processing, and responding to feedback. The author presents two essential learning activities that effectively enhance student feedback literacy: student peer review accompanied by a written response, and utilising exemplars as substitutes for teacher feedback. In summary, the research demonstrated the efficacy of student-centred feedback methods in enhancing student learning and growth.

Effectiveness of Feedback

To have any meaningful impact, feedback must be efficacious. Feedback is intended to bolster students' comprehension and assist them in rectifying their errors; but, if it fails to achieve this, it becomes ineffective. High-quality feedback fosters student motivation and yields positive outcomes, while substandard feedback undermines student morale and fails to produce desired results (Hounsell, 2021). According to Walker (2009), research, students perceive feedback as successful when it includes instructive comments that direct them towards areas of enhancement, offer incentives, and assist them in

achieving success in their exams. This was corroborated in the study conducted by (Kreonidou & Kazamia, 2019), which revealed that the majority of students perceived feedback as ineffectual in both encouraging them and directing them towards achieving success in their examinations. According to Segoe (2013), professors typically fail to provide remedial comments to their students and neglect to offer suggestions on how to repair their mistakes. Students therefore disregard the feedback.

Feedback Preference of Students

Standard feedback is provided in open distance and e-learning. (Howard, 1987) suggests that when creating feedback, the e-tutor should take into account the content of the feedback, the level of personalisation, the timeliness, and the structure of the feedback. According to (Wilkinson, 2003) feedback should include comments that enhance students' comprehension of the learning material. According to (Wion, 2008) feedback should prioritise the cognitive growth of the student. On the other hand, Walker (2009) asserts that feedback should provide constructive comments on students' writing to direct and improve their performance and development of writing skills (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). According to Howard (1987) it is recommended to include individual assessments of students' performance as part of feedback. Chung et al. (2006) argue that personalised feedback encourages self-regulated learning in students since they become motivated when they see their grades.

Several academics have emphasised the need for timely feedback, (Segoe, 2013; Styer, 2007) caution that delayed input is not advantageous and does not serve any useful function. Effective feedback facilitates the development of a robust argument in students. Students must demonstrate an increased level of self-assurance in their capacity to provide a compelling argument and defend their own viewpoint concerning their academic subjects. Feedback should offer individualised guidance to facilitate the growth of each learner. The study conducted by Kreonidou & Kazamia (2019) revealed that students have a preference for clearly marked comments on their assignments that offer obvious assistance and direction.

The survey revealed that pupils have a strong appreciation for the proposed answers offered by their e-tutors. A study conducted by Segoe (2013) at the University of South Africa revealed that students have a positive inclination towards criticism that improves their learning experience, provides guidance on how to correct mistakes, and demonstrates respect for them.

Methodology

The study aimed to explore the types, effectiveness and preferences of feedback among ODL-based students. Students who were working toward a bachelor's degree participated in the study which was conducted within the framework of an online degree programme (ODL) institution. A quantitative research approach was adopted with the use of descriptive research. Data for the study was collected through a web-based online survey. This method was adopted to reach out to a wide range of students in the institution and considering it is an ODL-based institution. The implementation of the web-based data-collecting tool was appropriate because the study's participants were open-distance e-learning students (Keusch, 2015). An anonymous web-based questionnaire was designed titled "Teaching and learning through feedback in an Open Distance Learning". The questionnaire was subdivided into sections A and B, while section A is demographic information and section B comprised 30 items that addressed the research objectives. It was designed to be close-ended with a 5 Likert scale format (5-Strongly Agreed, 4-Agreed, 3-Disagreed, 2-Strongly Disagreed, 1-Undecided) and used to collect data from students studying towards a bachelor's degree in an ODL based institution in South Africa. The questionnaire link was successfully sent to a total of 161,908 students and three thousand eight hundred and forty (3842) student respondents across all colleges responded to the anonymous web-based survey which was administered using Microsoft Forms which is over 387 respondents recommended by (Krejcie & Morgan, 1970) and (Akintolu & Letseka, 2023) that equally used a large number of students population for their study also used the survey sample size calculation to determine their sample size.

In consideration of the validity and reliability of the questionnaire, the researchers engaged ODeL experts to validate the self-structured questionnaire, and a pilot test was conducted among students at other public higher education institutions to obtain a Cronbach alpha coefficient of .954.

After designing the questionnaire, the researchers obtained the research ethics certificate ref number 2023/02/08/90474988/23/AM obtained in 2023/02/08 following the research policies and procedures of the ODL institution which mandated a researcher to obtain ethical clearance for any research study involving the use of the institutions' data, students, or staff. Thereafter the link to the online survey was emailed to the ICT department of the chosen ODL institution. The participants in this study were given the assurance that the data collected would be handled with the strictest confidentiality and that the findings would only be utilised for research. Similarly, participants were not obliged to divulge private information like names, addresses, or cell phone numbers to safeguard their safety. The study's findings were also presented in a way that protected the participants' anonymity.

Data Analysis

The data collected from the study through the online survey, was analysed using a descriptive statistic of the percentage and frequency counts.

Findings and Discussion

Research objective 1: The objective is to determine the specific type of feedback utilised by teachers in an Open and Distance Learning (ODeL) institution in South Africa

In addressing this objective Figure 1 is presented below.

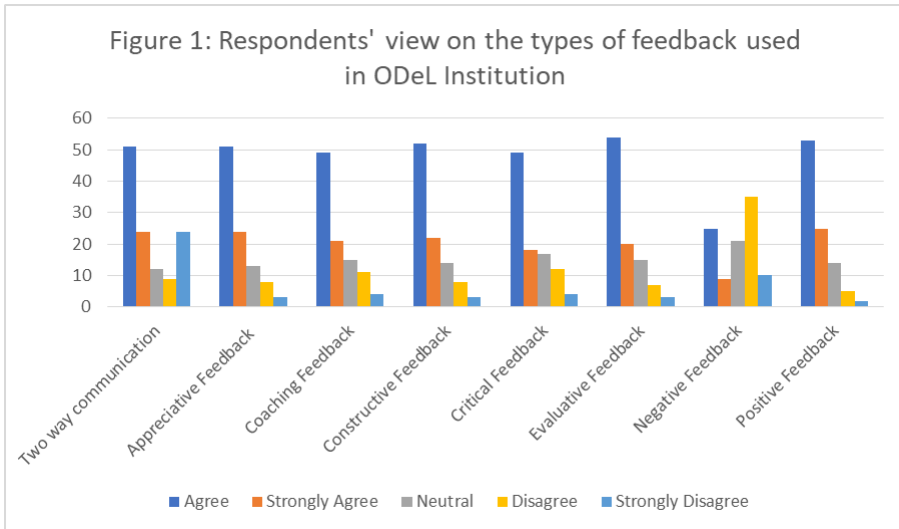
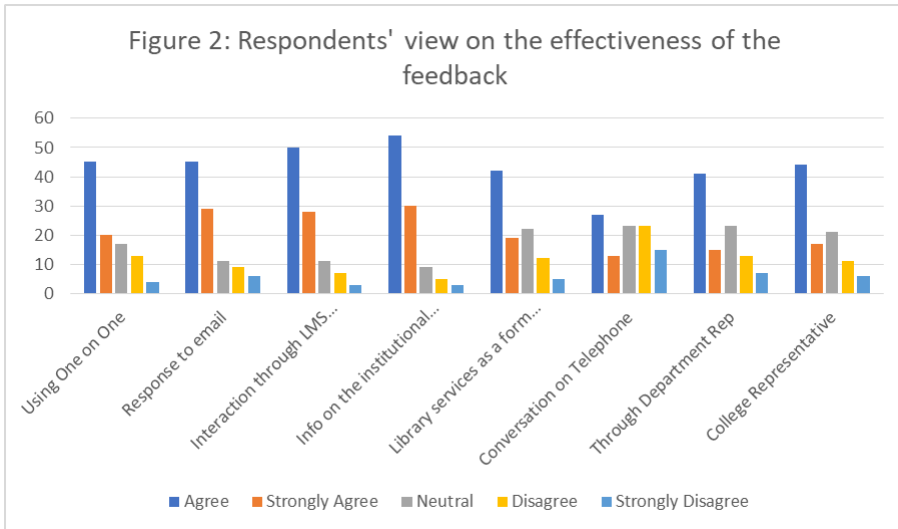


Fig. 1 presents a visual representation of the perspectives expressed by the participants regarding the various forms of feedback at Open and Distance Learning (ODEL) institutions, where Positive feedback and evaluation feedback received the highest levels of agreement, with (53%) and (54%) respectively. From these results, it is clear that students care about receiving positive reinforcement and feedback about their exams (Barboza, 2023; Lin et al., 2023). While the negative feedback garnered lower levels of agreement, with only (25%) agreeing and (9%) strongly agreeing which indicates a possible inclination or hesitancy among students to accept constructive feedback. This is very important to lecturers when they build a positive learning environment while providing necessary feedback for improvement (Hausman et al., 2023; Wiwatowska et al., 2023). Also, on the communication methods, the data highlights a preference for email, with (44%) agreeing and (45%) strongly agreeing. The level of agreement for the institutional website was found to be high, with (52%) agreeing and 35% strongly agreeing. These results suggest that students find these platforms effective for receiving feedback. On the contrary, conversations on the telephone and social media received lower levels of agreement, this suggests that these communication means might be less preferred or effective for feedback in the ODeL context (Bikanga Ada, 2023; Khaoula, 2023; Rossiter, 2023). Over half of those surveyed reported that (two-way communication: 51%)

agreed that having a two-way communication channel for feedback is preferred, and 24% strongly agreed with this preference (Anwar & Asrawijaya, 2023). The response for the appreciative feedback is 51%, the respondents agreed that receiving appreciative feedback is preferred, and 24% strongly agreed with this preference (Ardi et al., 2023). Just a little below half agreed with Coaching feedback: 49% of the respondents agreed that receiving coaching feedback is preferred, and 21% strongly agreed with this preference (Reddy, 2023). Constructive feedback: 52% of the respondents agreed that receiving constructive feedback is preferred, and 22% strongly agreed with this preference (Hwang & Kang, 2023; Rila & Estrapala, 2023). Finally, Critical feedback: 49% of the respondents agreed that receiving critical feedback is preferred, and 18% strongly agreed with this preference (Nieminen & Carless, 2023). Interestingly, this study has revealed the type of feedback ODeL institutions need to recognise and understand the diverse preferences of students regarding feedback. Adapting feedback systems to correspond with these preferences has the potential to improve communication and foster more participation within the OdeL environment for open distance learning. The study highlights the significance of providing positive and evaluative feedback, while also emphasising the necessity of employing a cautious approach when delivering constructive criticism. Furthermore, institutions should consider the effectiveness of different communication channels, giving priority to email and institutional websites, which can guide educators and institutions in refining their feedback strategies to meet the diverse needs of students in the evolving landscape of ODeL.

Research Objective 2: The objective is to assess the effectiveness of teacher feedback on students in an ODeL institution.

To ascertain this objective, it is contained in Figure 2.

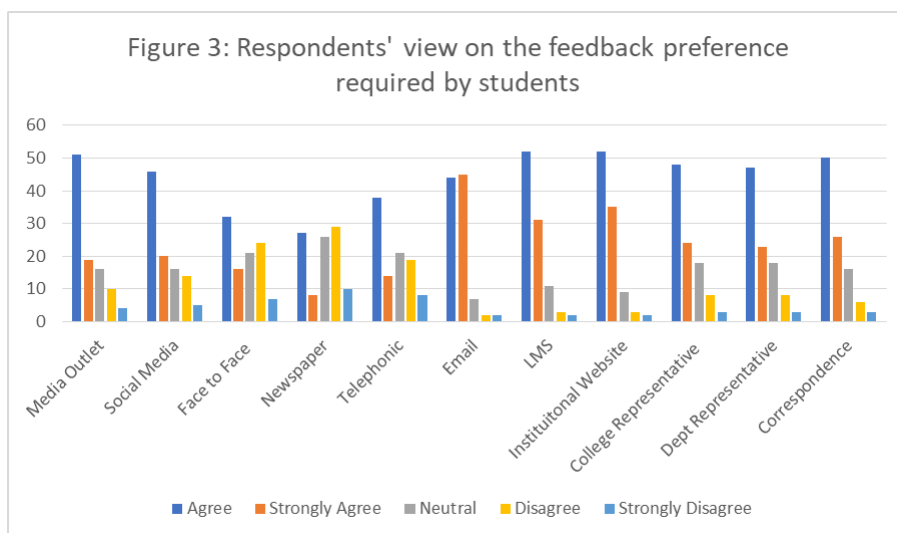


According to the results of the data, most of the participants, accounting for (45%), concurred that the remarks offered by teachers are effective, while (20%) of the participants had a stronger agreement by strongly agreeing with this statement. Conversely, (13%) of participants disagreed, perceiving comments as ineffective, and a smaller percentage, (4%), strongly disagreed. The varied array of responses suggests a multitude of viewpoints among participants about the efficacy of comments as a means of providing feedback within the framework of Open Distance eLearning.

So it is clear that the majority of participants seem to view comments from teachers are effective or generally positive and contributing to their learning experience. At the same time, there is a group that has another view that this feedback is ineffective or has a negative impact, thus emphasising a possible area of concern. So from exploring this data, it's crucial to explore the factors influencing the perceived effectiveness of comments, which will help in refining their feedback approaches to better align with students' needs and preferences. This would allow for a more nuanced understanding of the impact of different feedback styles on students' perception of effectiveness (AlAfnan & dela Cruz-Rudio, 2023; de Kleijn, 2023; Kellermann et al., 2023; Zou et al., 2023).

Research objective 3: The aim is to ascertain the feedback preference of students in an ODeL educational institution.

Fig. 3 addresses this objective.



According to the results of the data, respondents' views on the feedback preference required by students can be summarised as follows: Media Outlets; most of the participants (51%) media outlets to be an effective form of feedback, indicating a recognition of the importance of multimedia elements in the feedback process. However, it's notable that 19% strongly disagreed, suggesting a divergence of opinion on the effectiveness of this medium (Kedia & Mishra, 2023). And about the results of the data on Email; nearly half of the participants (45%) prefer receiving feedback through email, while 29% strongly agree with this preference. This reflects the continued significance of email for feedback in ODeL institutions (AlAfnan & dela Cruz-Rudio, 2023; Bikanga Ada, 2023; Briones & Liwanag, 2023). While the results of the data on Interaction through Learning Management System (LMS) (Moodle/MyUnisa): half of the participants (50%) of the respondents agreed that using the LMS for feedback is preferred, and (28%) strongly agreed with Integrating feedback into digital learning systems is crucial (Attigbe et al., 2023; Kataoka et al., 2023; Qi et al., 2023). However, the results of the data about the Information on the

Institutional Website: (54%) of respondents prefer feedback provided through the institutional website, with (30%) agreeing to support this preference, with a focus on accessible and centralised information (Attigbe et al., 2023). Regarding the Library services as a form of feedback: 42% of the respondents agreed that utilising library services for feedback is preferred, and 19% strongly agreed with this preference. In summary, the respondents' views on the feedback preference required by students vary across different channels and types of feedback. However, there is a general agreement that feedback through email, LMS, institutional websites, and various forms of constructive feedback are preferred by a significant portion of the respondents.

Recommendations and Conclusion

The study aims to arrive at feedback mechanisms to support more effective education, enabling a review of ODeL feedback practices in South Africa. The study concludes that, although feedback is a crucial component of ODeL, only effective feedback engages students and enhances their learning experience. The feedback platform of the ODeL system needs to provide prompt, efficient, and effective feedback to meet students' support needs.

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