Learner support for distance learning students' graduation in Public Universities in Kenya: A review study

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Abstract

Learner support services are the most vital component of any open and distance learning (ODL) system. It includes wide range of academic and other related activities. The support services should not only be responsive to the needs of the distance learners but should also be accessible. Monitoring of the support services has to be a continuous and ongoing exercise, which could bring constant improvement through innovations in the support services. This paper analyzes the aim of learner support services, various categories of learner support services, interactive support services at the study centers, staff responsibility for providing the services, ICT facilities and equipment necessary to support distance education learners, mode of service delivery and monitoring mechanism to ensure effective student support services.

Keywords: *Learner support, Distance learning, support services, student's graduation, Monitoring.*

Introduction

Student support refers to the range of services both for individuals and for students in groups which complement the course material or learning resources that are uniform for all learners (Arifin, 2018). The ever increasing demand for university education, overstretched residential facilities and the need for continued learning have led to the emergence of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) in Kenya Anyona (2009). Coupled with the ever decreasing budget for University education, these factors have greatly contributed to the growth of distance learning. Anyona (2009) further opines that higher education is facing a critical challenge to meet new demands for the 21st century. Those seeking access to education at all levels; primary, secondary, and tertiary is on the increase but in spite of this, educational institutions are not expanding fast enough to accommodate the increasing number of students seeking access to higher education through the residential mode. Alternative ways of providing access to higher education via distance learning need to be consistently explored. And indeed, enrollment in distance learning has over the last 20 years consistently grown globally driven by these factors (Mbatha, 2015).

Beyond the effort to increase students' retention or to reduce drop-out in open, distance or online education, support services should facilitate more meaningful learning experiences for all (Gil-jaurena, 2014). There is overwhelming evidence from the research community that there exists great disparity between regular students and distance education students in terms of performance in course work and the rate of graduation. Woodley & Simpson (2014) describe the question of the rate of distance learning student's dropout as the "elephant in the room" with distance learning student retention being a major challenge for most universities globally. In his earlier work, Simpson (2013) suggested that there is a 'distance education deficit' with many distance institutions having less than a quarter of the graduation rates of conventional institutions. This he argued can be traced down the distance education delivery process especially relating to the available facilities for distance learning student support. These opinions are widely supported by Russell (2006) Brinthaupt, Clayton, & Draude (2014) who question the delivery models adopted for distance education by most universities and opine that a gap exists because of the universities failure to conceptualize the distance student and develop intervention mechanisms that can fully engage distance students in every aspect of their studies.

To highlight the challenge of student dropout, Woodley & Simpson (2014) provide the summary of the graduation rates across universities as shown in Figure 1.
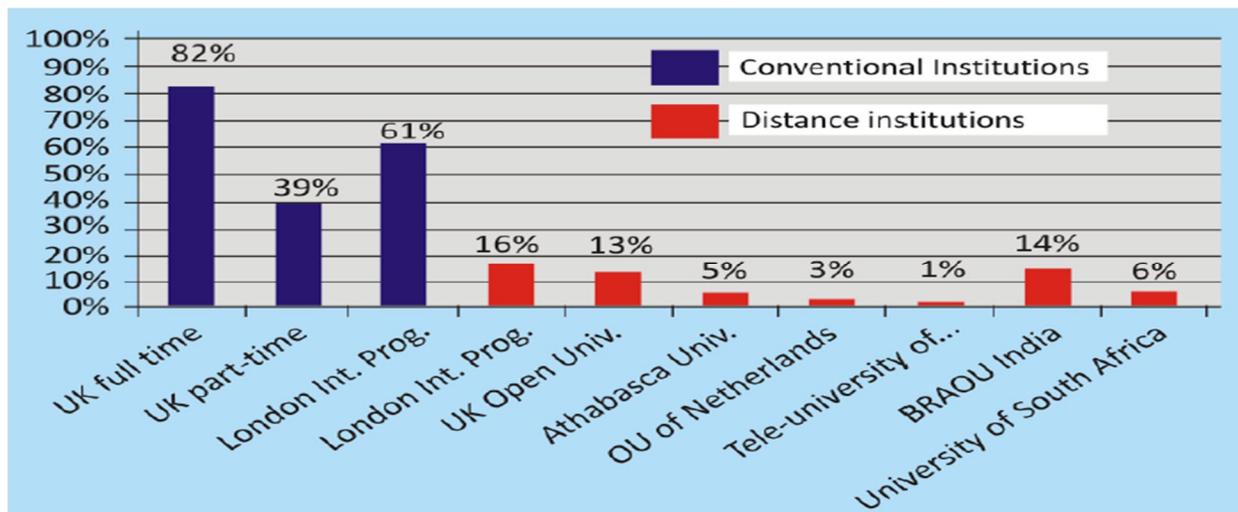
Figure 1: Graduation rates at a selection of distance institutions compared with graduation rate

It can be seen that distance institutions tend to have much lower graduation rates than the full time average - the so-called 'distance education deficit'(Simpson, 2016).

Student graduation in distance learning programs

There are many factors influencing low retention in distance education. Lee & Choi (2011) reveals three significant factors contributing to student graduation: student factors, course/program factors, and environmental factors (Arifin, 2018). Student factors refers to personal reasons encompassing students' characteristics, academic backgrounds, relevant experiences, skills, and psychological attributes. Course/programme factors is related to course design and implementation as well as institutional student supports. Meanwhile, environmental factors talks about supports received by students from others, such as family members, friends, peer group, or colleagues.

The significant role of student support in increasing student persistence in Open University contexts has been acknowledged by prior empirical studies. Fozdar & Kumar (2007) identified student support related reasons as the barriers of student persistence at Indira Gandhi National Open University. These reasons include insufficient academic support from study centers; study centers too far from residence; insufficient counseling sessions; difficulty in attending laboratory session; lack of proper intimation regarding theory and lab counseling sessions; lack of responsiveness from study center, regional center and head quarter; and lack information regarding course material, assignment, and other relevant information. Moreover, Barnett (2011) insisted the importance role of faculty validation in enhancing student persistence. Faculty validation refers to interaction with students initiated by faculty and others in the campus

community, that engender feelings of self-worth and a belief in the students' ability to succeed in the college community. However, student persistence is a complex issue involving changing factors as the needs and expectations of students and institutions change. In other words, student persistence is context dependent or culturally bounded (Astin, 2003; Hagedorn, 2011; Holder, 2007; Rovai, 2003).

By considering the variations in educational and organizational cultures, geography, technology, programmes of the study, and student characteristics, the development of student support system in one institution or country could not simply transfered to another institution or country.

Student support in open and distance learning

The main aim of distance education (DE) is to promote self-study or independent study among distance learners in the absence of regular face-to-face (F2F) teaching. To achieve this, every DLI extends support to its learners, which comprises of a cluster of facilities and activities that are intended to make the teaching - learning process easier and more interesting for the learners. All these activities beyond the production and delivery of course material assist in the progress of students in terms of learning, interacting and effective communication (Simpson, 2000) and, therefore, the support system may range from study center counseling/tutorial support to administrative problem solving (Sharma, 2018).

In this study, the term student support refers to the range of services both for individuals and for students in groups which complement the course material or learning resources that are uniform for all learners (Tait, 2000). Meanwhile, the term of student persistence relates to the behavior of continuing learning in the course programme by continuation of enrolment within four consecutive semesters.

Alan Tait (2000) identified two main factors determining the direction of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) development, and the way how student support is delivered: the revolution of Information Communication Technologies (ICT) and the marketization of education. ICT revolution has provided many options for ODL institutions in offering student support regardless time and place through virtual environments. In the meantime, the marketization of education has shifted the old perspective on how to deal with students in ODL into a new perspective as 'customer'. By admitting a customer culture in ODL inevitably lead to speeding up in delivering student support services.

Learner support services for distance learning students

Currently, when open, distance and flexible education is increasing worldwide, a reflection and analysis of lessons learned about how to support students' learning and which support services could institutions provide seems appropriate (Gil-jaurena, 2014).

In assessing the student support services necessary for the success in distance learning, (Simpson, 2016) poses that support services can be classified into 3 categories. These are cognitive (academic), emotional and organizational support.

Furthermore, Tait (2000) described three primary interdependent functions of student support in an ODL programmes:

- Cognitive: supporting and developing learning through the mediation of the standard and uniform elements of course materials and learning resources for individual students;
- Affective: providing an environment which support students, creates commitment, and enhance self-esteems; and
- Systemic: establishing administrative processes and information management systems which are effective, transparent and overall student-friendly.

In addition, Tait (2000) also recommended considering several core elements to develop student support system in ODL programmes, such as students characteristics; course or Programme demands; geography; technology; scale; and management system. Student characteristics represent a matrix of qualities that need to be assessed when establishing which services particular cohorts of students will need. In assessing student characteristics, it is proposed to include the main feature of student identity: gender; age; employment or unemployment; disposable income; educational background; geographical situation; special needs; language; ethnic and cultural characteristics; communication technology connectedness.

Technological infrastructure, scale and geography are also important in developing student support system. To know which technologies used by students is essential in delivering student services. In making any assessment of the use of technologies by students, it is important to distinguish further between three modes: the domestic, the workplace, and social availability of technologies. Further, scale refers to the intended volume of activity, and is a significant determinant of the ways in which systems for student support should be constructed. Meanwhile, the geography represents not only as a geographical distance, the density of population in rural and urban areas but also as social and cultural dimensions (Tait, 2000; 2014).

Academic support

In recent web-based distance education programs, the focus of academic support gears toward facilitating collaborative learning and increasing interactivity between distance students and instructors or among distance students. Some of the examples of such services include syndicate or learning groups, support by the instructor on request, workshops to assist students in developing specific skills or bridging skill gaps, supervisory support on research projects, and "learning contracts"

Administrative support

Administrative support services involve maintaining basic program functions such as admissions, registration, course scheduling, student records, and financial transactions Usun, (2004). These services are often taken for granted as Web-based, database systems have become more available and students are given more access to, and control over, the overall administrative process. However, when they are not planned carefully, administrative support services cause the greatest frustration for distance students (Suryawanshi & Suryawanshi, 2015).

Library Support

Access to adequate library services and resources is essential for the attainment of academic excellence in post-secondary education. Thus, distance learners need to be entitled to the library services and resources equivalent to those provided for students in traditional campus settings (Doreen, 2015). However, traditional on-campus library services often fail to stretch themselves to meet the library needs of distance students. For this reason, new measures need to be adopted to ensure that this critical resource is extended to distance education students (Brindley, 2014).

Technical Support

Shaaruddin & Mohamad (2017) defines technical support as monitoring the efficient operation of delivery media and offering technical assistance. While many research studies have been conducted on the use of new technologies in designing and developing distance courses, few of them directly focus on the use of new technologies to provide support services for distance courses. Examples of technical support services include providing a toll-free number for students to contact technical support staff and electronic mail communication tools (Baloyi, 2012).

Counseling Support

Counseling support includes various aspects of guidance and advising. In correspondence studies or other delivery media with more individualistic interfaces, the focus of such services tends to be on how to deal with academic concerns and/or career advising Chaney (2010). In many web-based distance education programs, counseling support services also address ways to improve communication skills and increase interactivity, even helping students network with alumni and build a sense of community (Baloyi, 2012).

Need for student support services in distance learning

Student support services is an important issue associated with the planning and delivery of distance education programs (Farajollahi & Moenikia, 2010). These services are a major component of the distance education system. The success of distance education system largely depends on the effectiveness of its student support services. These services beside their roles in

students' success are important from the emotional perspective. Traditional students have many physical clues of their attachment to the institution. Providing support services to the distance education population is an important part of creating the feeling of belonging for students who do not have access to traditional clues.

Distance education involves the provision of a support system by the institution to fulfill the possible range of needs presented by distance education learners and ensures the ready access to adequate learning resources and services that can stimulate the mind as well as encourage the total growth and development of the students.

The scope of student support services is vast and different authors have presented different definitions and models of students support services. Delgado, Ruiz, Guzman, & Piattini, (2010) described the term student support services as the way and means that provide additional help to distance learner. Doreen (2015) defined a student support services as all activities beyond the production and delivery of course materials that assist in the progress of students in their studies. These include the academic support which deals with supporting students with the cognitive, intellectual and knowledge issues of specific courses or sets of courses. There is also the support of students in the effective and organizational aspects of their studies.

Garrison (1989) observes that in distance education 'support is concerned with a range of human and non-human resources to guide and facilitate the educational transaction. He observes that these resources may be library facilities, various media and software programs, community leaders, or they could be various socio- economic variables such as students' financial, self-sufficiency and capacity to cope with their roles and responsibilities in the family and community. Also he determines that the most important from of support in an educational transaction is the teachers, who through guidance and direction can assist the students to achieve their goals and develop control of the educational process.

Overall for the ODEL sector there is an issue to be addressed of lower rates of student success in ODEL programmes. According to the International Council for open & distance learning (Tait, 2015), If we accept in the first place that rates of student success are an issue for ODEL programmes, care is needed in proposing explanations of cause and effect. There are two main poles of explanation: the strengths and weaknesses of the students who study in these programmes and strengths and weaknesses of ODEL modes of study themselves (Usun, 2004).

At the heart capacity of the teaching system which operates at a physical distance from its students to support them to success lies its capacity to provide personalized support: in other words to recognize and respond to the learner as an individual. It is here in particular that the roles of tutor, counselor, guidance worker, and careers advisor have developed, supported by information systems.

The advent of the web has made possible the potential of much easier student-tutor and student-student communication, through email and electronic conferences. In some ODEL systems student support is enhanced through social clubs and networks. The development of student peer

support through Facebook, wikis and other similar crowd approaches offers much for student support.

While the creation of learning resources is for the most part uniform for all learners, and benefits from the cost-effectiveness of scale, individualized support to students has the opposite cost dynamic, i.e. it increases with the number of students. There will therefore need to be serious consideration given to how much of an overall teaching budget is given to the production of learning resources, and how much to individualize student support. Too often in the institutional histories of ODEL the resources have been allocated to production of learning materials, with individualized support coming into the budget as an afterthought. A holistic and transparent approach that recognizes the importance of both elements is more likely to lead to the most effective outcomes in terms of student success.

Improving student support services can be archived through systematic and comprehensive services as: capacity building of students, independent learning, facilitation in the development of study groups, provision of online, face to- face tutorial, and written tutorials, provision of web system for accessing learning materials, and improved intensity of academic services.

Edinger, Reimer, & Vlies (2013) Findings showed that there is positive and significant relations between students support services and academic achievement in distance education. This implies that, the more the services a distance learning student receives, the higher the likelihood of improved success rate. Success in education has a direct relationship with the rate of graduation (Shaaruddin & Mohamad, 2017).

Cadag (2017) opines that the need for a comprehensive support system of academic and student services that should complement each other is imperative especially for distance education students. Student services being critical components of educational package must provide students the activities that would balance family and work pressures and socio-civic responsibilities in their lives. At present, there are many challenges that confront student service providers Simpson (2016). Among these are the following: (a) increasing cost of higher education due to inevitable tuition fee hike; (b) student demographics; (c) demands for more accountability; and (d) issues on the ethical environment on campus. All these demand due attention.

Summary and conclusions

Many researchers have predicted that advances in technology would make it easier to provide quality support services with increased interactivity. However, for all these dramatic changes in terms of course delivery, from correspondence to audio/video conferencing systems and the Internet, many issues remain the same, with the technology having the potential to add yet another source of trouble.

There is also need for universities to design a distance learning model that has its foundation on learner support and encourages a flexible support for distance learning cost evaluation,

flexibility, motivation, social political suitability as well as effectiveness. This model for distance education delivery should integrate learner-technology interaction, with the opportunity to use new technologies such as computer-assisted education, the Internet, web-based instructions, social media, collaborative learning tools and audio-visual technologies such as teleconferencing as key delivery tools for distance learning content to learners.

The Open Education Faculty across universities should develop modalities to cooperate with established distance education institutions sharing common aims nationally and internationally. This will enable for sharing resources and the reduction of the overall cost of delivering content to distance education learners thus guaranteeing better quality graduates.

For this to be possible there is need for increase in budgetary allocation for the distance learning faculties across universities in order to provide good institutional support.

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