Administrative Support Services and Retention of Distance Learners: The Case of Bachelor of Education Programmes of the University of Nairobi, Kenya

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Abstract: *The purpose of this study was to establish how theprovision of Learner Support Services (LSS), in the form of Administrative Support Services, influence the retention of distance learners at the University of Nairobi. The target population was made up of 1521 undergraduatestudents from two different programs, Bachelor of Education (Arts) and Bachelor of Education (Science). Out of 309 questionnaires administered, 249 questionnaires were filled and returned. Quantitative data was collected through structured self-administered questionnaires while qualitative was collected through focus group discussions. The statistical tools of analysis for descriptive data were arithmetic mean and standard deviation while for inferential statistics were Pearson's Product Moment Correlation (r), and multiple regressions.From the study findings, it was concluded that Administrative Support Services had a statistically significant influence on the retention of distance learners at the University of Nairobi.The study recommended that institutions of higher learning in Kenya that offer distance learning programs need to carefully consider how they offer these support services to enhance learner satisfaction and retention.*

Keywords: Administrative Support Services, Course Information, Course Registration, Learner Support Services, Medical facility, Regional Centres, Retention of distance learners, Supportive Staff

1. Introduction

Various studies have underscored the importance of institutional administrators in higher education. Raisman (2013), in his review of multiple institutions and thousands of students in the United States, found that those who had dropped out of college overwhelmingly gave institutional reasons for doing so. The top two reasons for dropout were one perceived lack of concern for the student and two poor services. Several studies have linked the lack of LSS to learners' withdrawal from college (Tait, 2003; Barrett, Chawla-Duggan, Nikel, & Ukpo, 2006; 2006&Kamau, 2012). Tait (2003) for example attributed the low success rates at the University of Southern Africa (UNISA) to lack of LSS. He argued that the continuing low pass rates at UNISA, which had over 200,000 learners and over 600 study centers were due to inadequate LSS, admission policies which were too open, inadequate course materials, and insufficient formative assessment and feedback processes. He also reported low success and poor completion rates in external programmes of the University of London, which were attributed to a lack of LSS. Barrett, *et al*(2006), in a study carried out to determine the relevance of LSS at the National Teachers' College in Nigeria, reported that students valued the administrative, academic and counselling support they received.Kamau (2012) asserts that academic, advisory, administrative, counselling and infrastructural support, all elements of LSS, could be termed effective if they helped to sustain distance Learners in their studies, and improve retention and completion rates.

2. Statement of the Problem

The retention of learners is regarded as one of the most important aspects of higher education. Whilst distance education has experienced tremendous growth over the years, it still suffers one fundamental weakness, the high drop-out rate experienced by its students as compared with the drop-out rate of students in conventional education. In highly selective universities, this means that 8 per cent of students leave after the first year and 4 per cent after the second year and in less selective universities, these estimates are grater at 35 per cent and 17 per cent respectively. These numbers underscore the continued need for retention efforts in the second year. Indeed studies have shown that the retention needs of students in the second year are different from those of the first year (Ishitani, 2016). The importance of learner support services in overcoming this weakness cannot, therefore, be overestimated. Several studies have demonstrated that learner support services can provide a vital resource for students experiencing difficulties, particularly in the first year and enhance their persistence (Boettcher, 2004; McCracken, 2004; Palloff and Pratt, 2003). These studies have pointed to the fact that there is a strong and positive correlation between learner support services and learner retention.

At the University of Nairobi, the average attrition rate is about 15 per cent for the Bachelor of Education (Arts) Bachelor of education (science) for distance learners in their first and second year. This average is lower than those usually reported in many of the studies that have investigated retention in higher education meaning that the university has put in place some measures that have resulted

in better retention rates. Despite these gains, there still exists a gap in what organizations knowand what they effectively doin terms of improving student progress. In terms of learners' retention, little empirical research has been devoted to the gains of learner support services as it contributes overall in helping learners persist especially during their first and second year of study. Apart from the studies linking learner support with academic success or recruitment (Bowa, 2008; Muchiri, 2012; Getuba, 2012; Gakuu, 2013) there has been relatively scant research specifically focused on how learner support affects student persistence within specific contexts, specifically at the University of Nairobi and also among the distance learning programs offered at the University. This study, therefore, intended to fill this gap by investigating the influence of Learner Support Services on the retention of distance learners at the University. Specifically, the study intended to determine whether learner support services in the form of Administrative Support Services, does assist distance learners' persistence.

3. Specific Objective of the Study

To determine the influence of Administrative Support Services on the retention of distance learners at the University of Nairobi.

Delimitations of the Study

This study focused on distance learners at the University of Nairobi in two programs offered under the ODeL mode and specifically those who are in their first two years of college. These two programs are the Bachelor of Education (Arts) and the Bachelor of Education (Science) mainly focusing on those Learners who use printed materials as their key learning resource and attend residential sessions for limited face-to-face contact with their tutors. These responses, therefore, may differ from those of students in other types of programmes and also students who are in their third and fourth year of study at the University of Nairobi. Sampled learners included those from the main campuses in Nairobi and Chiromo, Kisumu Campus, and four learning centres based in Kisii, Meru, Kakamega and Eldoret.

4. Literature Review

Learner Retention is essentially the function of the learner support services construct. Jones, Edwards & Reid, (2009) observe that learner support services is the management of activities by staff which maximizes the chances of successful completion of the program. The link between learner retention and learner support services is, therefore, is quite apparent. Strengthening learner support services translates into increasing learner retention especially in Open and Distance Learning institutions. He continuous to observe that the university of London Lifelong Learning Institute has experienced a phenomenal growth rate of 30% in learner retention by augmenting its learner support services through strategies such as a comprehensive communication plan with all students; standardization of correspondence; availability of course material; increased access to tutors; review of all course materials, and surveillance of passively withdrawn students. Chakuchichi (2011) also noted that learner support servicestended to enhance women's access and participation in Open and

Distance Learning, and these included: the need for more tutorials and internet access; making relevant reading materials available; increasing reading materials in the Library and attending to students' complaints and rectifying their problems.

College personnel contributing most to a student's social integration into a college setting have already been mentioned. Collectively, they are responsible for creating a campus atmosphere that allows students a sense of security and success (Berger &Braxton, 1998). When new students report for the first time in college certain activities take that place, namely orientation activities. New student orientation programs can take many forms, from online versions, to on, traditional day events, or outdoor experiences. What new student orientations have in common are some desired outcomes. A successful orientation assists students in their transition to the university, generates a higher degree of learning both in and out of the classroom, aids in social integration, and helps students find their niche in the campus community (Robinson, 1996).The orientation program's success has been linked to the positive feeling students have about their personal campus experience (Hodum, 2007). In general, the orientation experience is meant to allow students better gauge and adjust to more reasonable expectations. The importance has been underscored by various studies. Simpson (2004) refers to it as the assistance given to students to help them adjust to the new situation.' It focuses on the reinforcement of successful student behaviour, effective learning strategies and awareness of academic and administrative policies, adjustment to ODL student life and needs assessment. This is mainly conducted at the beginning of the program. Howard (2013) found a significant difference in the retention rates of institutions that have Preterm Orientation and the retention rates of institutions that do not have Preterm Orientation. The literature to date is conclusive that orientation programs have a positive impact on student success.

The provision of the academic calendar, study time table, teaching and learning the unit-by-unit guide and the provision of course models at the beginning of the semester facilitate students' preparedness for effective course work in the semester. It also embeds discipline and orderliness in the conduct of students towards successful learning and teaching. A student portal is an effective tool for communicating and diffusing innovative interventions from administration to students and all stakeholders. The provisions of semester online registration, fee status confirmation, appraisal of supervisors and course tutors, viewing and printing of end-of-semester exams results, online application to patronize institutional products and services including re-sit examination registrations reduces the melanoma of isolation in distance education. Student loan and scholarship facilities are needful in enhancing financial support for distance education students. In Ghana, the Student Loan Trust Fund is available to Ghanaian students in accredited tertiary institutions. A comprehensive student support plan should include conditions necessary to qualify distance education institutions to be enrolled in established loan and scholarship facilities (Harry, Akosua,& Owusu, 2018).

Various studies have underscored the importance of institutional administrators in higher education. Raisman (2013), in his review of multiple institutions and thousands of students in the United States, found that those who had dropped out of college overwhelmingly gave institutional reasons for doing so. Specifically, 84% of the attrition rate observed could be attributed to unsatisfactory institutional support. The top two reasons for dropout were one perceived lack of concern for the student and two poor services. Raisman argues that institutions that are failing to help students progress and graduate are not holding up their end of the deal and therefore, need to take charge of improving outcomes or risk losing federal funding. Simonson, & Crawford, (2006), observed that administrative support in ODL requires coordination of tutorial and assessment functions to ensure effective service delivery and accountability.

Some studies have emphasized the importance of the decentralization of LSS. Melton (2002) underscores this point by arguing that LSS needs to be as close as possible to where distance learners live and work. Considering that distance learners in all DL programs of the University of Nairobi are scattered all over Kenya, there is a need to investigate the nature of the decentralized support they received and how it can contribute to their progress and program completion. The importance of regional centres (Kember and Dekker, 1987; Leach, 1996) has been conceptualized in a notion of the provision of a local human interface of DL. Regional centres have the potential for providing tutorials by faculty members, study group meetings and resources such as the library and ICTs. Similarly, Harry, Akosua, and Owusu (2018) observed that Face-to-face meetings organized regularly at regional and study centres and the use of regional supervisors enhance accessibility and flexibility in distance education. The fluency of face-to-face meetings promotes learning and teaching in purely distance education institutions. The frustration of students and stress is normalized through proper counselling and career guidance enabled through such media.

Through regional centres, learners could address the feeling of isolation (Lowe, 2007), not virtually but physically, as new DL students are usually desperate for human contact, not just for information from others (Biggs, Simpson & Walker, 2006).Kurasha (2003) noted that distance learners at Zimbabwe Open University, though motivated to learn, showed signs of wanting teachers to stand in front of them, probably as a hang-over from the conventional face-to-face system, and advised ODL providers to inculcate appropriate study skills to enable distance learners to help learners judge their progress. At the Open University of Tanzania, Mmari (1998) acknowledged the role of stakeholders in the provision of decentralized learner support services in twenty-two regional centres, situated in major towns in Tanzania, reaching out to students who lived in remote rural areas with limited infrastructure. Komba & Nkumbi, (2008) noted that each study centre in Tanzania required a minimum of forty enrolled learners to make it economically viable.

Universities are always trying to put in place strategies that are targeted towards the first year of college given that it is the period that learners are considered to be most venerable. Successful intervention strategies implemented during the first year of college can have the biggest impact on student grades and retention (Pan, Kwok & Yang, 2008).). Institutions continue to look at ways to reach out to students earlier in their academic year. One such strategy is the early alert warning system that was implemented at Dakota State University. Using a web-based system for referrals, the system allows academic advisors to collect alerts and concerns via a web portal. The information is then used to target specific learners who may be experiencing challenges especially early on in their studies. Hudson, (2006) examined the effectiveness of an intervention based on absenteeism and discovered that 15 per cent of the students at Florida university dropped the courses for which they had been reported for missing. Students were engaged by the process of being contacted and related they were not aware their attendance was being watched so carefully and were pleasantly surprised by the guidance they received.

This study was grounded in Astin'sInput-Environment-Outcome Model(Astin, 1993). Astin proposed that those students who devoted significant energy to academics, spend time on campus, participated actively in student organizations and activities, and interact with faculty were more involved and hence likely to persist. On the other hand, uninvolved students neglect their studies, spend little time on campus, and abstain from extracurricular activities, and rarely initiate contact with faculty or other students. As described, the most persuasive types of involvement are academic involvement, involvement with faculty, and involvement with student peer groups. This theory applies to this study in that the Learner Support Services in the form of Administrative Support Services is geared towards ensuring that learners are both academically and socially involved in college life. Once the learners are involved in various college activities then the feeling of isolation is removed allowing the students to feel more comfortable with their college life, and this enhances persistence.

5. Research Methodology

The study adopted a pragmatic research paradigm as the main philosophical underpinning as opposed to the two prominent research paradigms, such as positivism, and constructivism. Being a descriptive cross-sectional research design, the ontological orientation of the study is that of the realist assumption. In descriptive cross-sectional research, design information is recorded as it is present in the population and the researcher does not manipulate variables (Mohamed & Oso, 2014). This study employed triangulation involving a cross-sectional survey design. The questionnaire was the main tool for collecting data. Focus group discussions (FGDs) were also conducted to provide information about learners' perceptions, feelings, and attitudes towards their academic experiences as distance learners. For descriptive statistics, means and standard deviations were computed for each variable.

Target Population

The target respondents were made up of 1521 undergraduate students from two different programs from the academic years 2015/2016 and 2016/2017 who were the first year and second years. These two programs are the Bachelor of Education (Arts) and Bachelor of Education (Science).

Table 1: Target Population

Program	No. of Students/Gender						
	First Year			Second Year			
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Grand Total
B.Ed. Arts Nairobi	215	126	341	76	67	143	484
Kisumu	24	34	58	34	32	66	124
Kisii	39	25	64	41	32	73	137
Eldoret	27	32	59	22	21	43	102
Kakamega	45	35	80	19	30	49	129
Meru	16	15	31	21	19	40	71
B.Ed. (Science) Nairobi	138	58	196	187	91	278	474
Total	**504**	**325**	**829**	**400**	**292**	**692**	**1521**

Source (Records Office, SODL, ODeL Campus, U.O.N, 2017)

Sample Size

Using the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) formula, the sample size was computed as follows;

$$s = \frac{x^2 \, NP \, (1 - P)}{d^2 (N - 1) + \; x^2 P(1 - P)}$$

Where; s = required sample size.
N = the population size (1521)
P = the population proportion (assumed to be .50 since this would provide the maximum sample size)
d = the degree of accuracy expressed as a proportion (.05)

$$s = \frac{(3.84)(1521)(0.5)(1 - 0.5)}{(0.0025)(1521 - 1) + (3.84)(0.5)(1 - 0.5)}$$

$$n = \frac{1460.16}{3.8 + 0.96};$$

$$n = 308.7563025 \sim 309$$

With the sample size determined, proportional allocations were adopted to distribute the respondents among the students' categories aiming to have at least 20 per cent representation from each stratum as shown in Table 2.

Thus $\frac{309}{1521}$ X 100 = 20.184 = 20%

The total sample size selected was therefore 309.

Table 2: Sample Size

Program	No. of Students/Gender						
	First Year			Second Year			
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Grand Total
B.Ed. Arts Nairobi	43	25	68	15	14	29	97
Kisumu	5	7	12	7	7	14	26
Kisii	8	5	13	8	7	15	28
Eldoret	6	7	13	5	4	9	22
Kakamega	9	7	16	4	6	10	26
Meru	3	3	6	4	4	8	14
B.Ed. (Science) Nairobi	28	12	40	38	18	56	96
Total	102	66	168	**81**	**60**	**141**	**309**

Source (Records Office, SODL, ODeL Campus, U.O.N, 2017)

Questionnaire Return Rate

Out of 309 questionnaires administered, 249 questionnaires were filled and returned which represented a response rate of 81 percent.

Table 3: Response rate and distribution of respondents

Program Location	Sample size	No of Respondents	Percentage
B.Ed. Arts Nairobi	97	91	94%
B.Ed. Arts Kisumu	26	20	77%
B.Ed. Arts Kisii	28	12	43%
B.Ed. Arts Eldoret	22	22	100%
B.Ed. Arts Kakamega	26	18	69%
B.Ed. Arts Meru	14	7	50%
B.Ed. Science	96	79	82%
Total	309	249	81%

6. Data Collection and Data Analysis

A research clearance letter was obtained from the University of Nairobi and later obtained a research permit from the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation. Seven research assistants were identified, recruited and trained for two days on the aspects of handling respondents and the ethical conduct of research. They were also taken through each item on the questionnaire so that they would be able to handle any concerns that may arise from the respondents and also on how to conduct Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). A follow-up schedule for questionnaires was also agreed on with the research assistants to increase the questionnaire return rate. Qualitative data was collected from the seven regions through FGDs administered by the researcher himself. Each FGD was composed of between six and eight students picked randomly. These discussions run for between 60 to 90 minutes. Additional qualitative data were also gathered by the researcher through the observation schedule while conducting the FGDs and also upon a visit to some of the learning centres. Research assistants helped in collecting information from the other learning centres.

This research study collected both quantitative and qualitative and employed both descriptive and inferential data analysis methods in conformity with the pragmatism paradigm. All data were keyed into the statistical package for social sciences (SPSS) version 24.0 specification. For descriptive statistics, means and standard deviations were computed for each variable. Besides, nine separate Analysis of Variance (one-way ANOVA) was conducted to answer the research questions.

6.1 Validity and Reliability of Research Instruments

Validity is regarded to be the most critical criterion of sound measurement and indicates the degree of which an instrument measures what it purports to determine. Evidence of validity is provided by several sources. The main instrument for this study, the questionnaire, was evaluated for content, face and construct validity. The content validity of the questionnaire was determined by the literature review to identify the key indicators as well as by the judgments of my supervisors. Face validity of the instrument was

determined through examination of the questionnaire by research experts from the University of Nairobi, especially those who have researched DL and again with guidance from the researcher's supervisors, both who are experts in the field of distance learning. According to Mugenda (2011), construct validity is concerned with the extent to which a particular measure relates to other measures in a way that is consistent with the theoretically derived hypothesis concerning the concept. The estimation of construct validity requires a researcher to establish a theoretically derived hypothesis involving the concept under consideration. This has been ensured in this study since the hypotheses that have been developed for testing have been derived for the key indicators of the independent variables based on the study objectives which have been developed from the literature review and are also related to the respective questionnaire items.

Cronbach's Alpha is the most commonly used coefficient of measuring the internal consistency of research instruments. The choice of this technique was informed by the fact that the technique does not require either splitting of a scale or the subjects re-taking the test for the given construct. The scale gives positive results ranging from zero to one. The closer the coefficient is to one the greater the internal consistency of the items in the Likert scale and describes the extent to which all the items in the instrument measure the same concept or construct and hence it is connected to the inter-relatedness of the items within the instrument. A test score of 0.7 is prescribed as a cut-off or benchmark for items to be included in the study (Cronbach & Richard, 2004). The results of the Cronbach's Alpha reliability coefficient was 0.817.

7. Study Findings

Descriptive analysis of the influence of Administrative Support Services on the Retention of Distance Learners
Eleven items were developed in the self-administered and respondents were requested to indicate the extent to which they agree with the statement and the results are presented in Table 4. The means and standard deviations were also computed and are presented in Table 5.

Table 4: Frequencies and Percentages for Administrative Support Services

Statement	SA F (%)	A F (%)	N F (%)	D F (%)	SD F (%)
a) The admission information was easily understood	124 (49.8)	105 (42.2)	9 (3.6)	9 (3.6)	2 (0.8)
b) All pertinent information related to the course is available on the university's website.	105 (42.2)	105 (42.2)	30 (12.0)	5 (2.0)	4 (1.6)
c) I got assistance on the selection of subject combination.	91 (36.5)	105 (42.2)	30 (12.0)	11 (4.4)	12 (4.8)
d) Students can register online for courses without having to visit the university.	134 (53.8)	94 (37.8)	14 (5.6)	4 (1.6)	3 (1.2)
e) Students can pay fees without having to visit the university.	146 (58.6)	91 (36.5)	7 (2.8)	5 (2.0)	- (-)
f) The university offers students flexible payment arrangements for tuition fee	92 (36.9)	99 (39.8)	27 (10.8)	15 (6.0)	16 (6.4)
g) Students have access to medical facilities offered by the university	65 (26.1)	73 (29.3)	29 (11.6)	35 (14.1)	47 (18.9)
h) University has established regional centres to offer support to distance learners.	111 (44.6)	110 (44.2)	18 (7.2)	4 (1.6)	6 (2.4)
i) The university arranges fields' visits to allow interactions with staff.	41 (16.5)	78 (31.3)	45 (18.1)	32 (12.9)	53 (21.3)
j) The Regional centre is too far from where I live	45 (18.1)	47 (18.9)	39 (15.7)	76 (30.5)	42 (16.9)
k) Overall I find university staff very supportive	110 (44.2)	104 (41.8)	24 (9.6)	6 (2.4)	5 (2.0)

In item 1a, the respondents were requested to indicate if the admission information was easily understood. Study findings indicate that a majority of the learners 124 (49.8%) strongly agreed while 105 (42.2%) agreed with the statement. The mean score and the standard deviation for this item were 4.365 and 0.7874 respectively. This result implies that learners did SA that admission information was easily understood by the learners.

In item 1b, respondents were requested to indicate if all pertinent information related to the course is available on the university's website. Study findings indicate that a majority of the learners 105 (42.2 %) strongly agreed while 105 (42.2%) agreed with the statement. The mean score and the standard deviation for this item were 4.213 and 0.8513 respectively. This result implies that learners did SA that admission information was easily understood by the learners all pertinent information related to the course is available on the university's website. This result was confirmed by FGDs where one female respondent in her first year in Kisumu Campus said:

"The application procedure was easily understood and I got assistance with an online application from the regional learning centre in Kisumu. I was also able to get all the details concerning the course from the university's website and this was very helpful."

In item 1c, respondents were requested to indicate if they received any assistance on the selection of subject combination. Study findings indicate that a majority of the learners 105 (42.2 %) agreed while 91 (36.5%) strongly agreed with the statement. The mean score and the standard deviation for this item were 4.012 and 1.0491 respectively. This result implies that learners generally agreed that did receive some assistance on the selection of subject combination. This was particularly important for the first-year students in cases where a student was not sure about the subject combination and the requirements for such a combination.

Findings from items 1a, 1b and 1c, agree with those of Curry (2003), who found that distance learners value academic advice sessions which highlight enrolment and orientation procedures before the introduction to course materials. These findings also agree with those of (Robinson, 1996; Simpson, 2004; Hodum, 2007; Howard, 2013) that noted that a successful orientation assists students in their transition to the university, aids in social integration, and helps students find their niche in the campus community. The provision of the academic calendar, study time table, teaching and learning the unit-by-unit guide and the provision of course models at the beginning of the semester facilitate students' preparedness for effective course work in the semester. It

also embeds discipline and orderliness in the conduct of students towards successful learning and teaching.

In item 14, respondents were requested to indicate if they can register online for courses without having to visit the university. Study findings indicate that a majority of the learners 134 (53.8 %) strongly agreed while 94 (37.8%) strongly agreed with the statement. The mean score and the standard deviation for this item were 4.414 and 0.7735 respectively. This result implies that learners strongly agreed that they were able to register online for courses without having to visit the university. The findings agree with those of Harry, Akosua and Owusu (2018), who established that a student portal is an effective tool for communicating and diffusing innovative interventions from administration to students and all stakeholders. The provisions of semester online registration, fee status confirmation, appraisal of supervisors and course tutors, viewing and printing of end-of-semester exams results, online application to patronize institutional products and services including re-sit examination registrations reduces the melanoma of isolation in distance education. Mostly learners at the University of Nairobi were able to register for their courses either using their tablets or mobile phones and these findings were confirmed from FGDs. One male respondent in his first year said:

"*We were taken through a training session on online registration and access to online recourses, and therefore I can register online for all my courses once I have paid the required tuition fee.*"

Another respondent in her second year confirmed this but added:
"*Yes I am indeed able to register all my units online, but sometimes they lock me when I have not registered before the deadline due to some delays in fee payment. No one is allowed to sit examinations without registration since it is from this course registration that one can print their examination card. I am happy that they have allowed me on two occasions to register after the deadline and I did not miss my examinations in both cases after I wrote a letter to the Dean explaining why I was late in paying my tuition fee, and I am very grateful for that.*"

In item 1e, respondents were requested to indicate if they were able to pay tuition fee without having to visit the university. Study findings indicate that a majority of the learners 146 (58.6 %) strongly agreed while 91 (36.5 %) agreed with the statement. The mean score and the standard deviation for this item were 4.518 and 0.6543 respectively. This result implies that learners strongly agreed that they were able to pay their tuition fee without having to visit the university. Results from the FGDs confirmed this was one female learner in her second year said:

"*I can pay my tuition fee in any Barclays bank branch and also by MPESA and I find this to be very convenient and the fee reflects in my student's porthole within one hour and hence I can register online for my courses.*"

In item, 1f respondents were requested to indicate if the University does offer students flexible payment arrangements for tuition fee. Study findings indicate that a majority of the learners 99 (39.8 %) agreed while 92 (36.9 %) strongly agreed with the statement, even though 27 (10.8 %) neither agreed nor disagreed. The mean score and the standard deviation for this item were 3.948 and 1.1400 respectively. This result implies that learners generally agreed that the University does offer students flexible payment arrangements for tuition fee, results confirmed by the FGDs. One respondent who is her second year said:

"*I have a plan to pay for my tuition fee, and this involves me getting a loan from my SACCO. Hence sometimes there are delays with the loans. This means that I can pay a bit of my fee which allows me to register and get a few study modules. Once I get my loan I always request for late registration which the university allows. I have at times managed to get my loan just before the semester examinations and I have been allowed to register and take my examinations.*"

Another respondent, a second-year male student however said:
"*No the university does not offer us with any flexibility, and there is a semester that I missed all my examinations because I had not paid the semester fee even though I had requested to commit to clear the fee once my loan matured. I was forced to defer the semester when my loan was not granted on time. I was able to pay and continue once my loan was approved.*"

In item 1g, respondents were requested to indicate if the students have access to medical facilities offered by the university. Study findings indicate that a majority of the learners 73 (29.3%) agreed while 65 (26.1 %) strongly agreed with the statement. However, 47 (10.8%) strongly disagreed while 35 (14.1%) disagreed with the statement. The mean score and the standard deviation for this item were 3.297 and 1.4674 respectively. This result implies that learners neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement that students have access to medical facilities offered by the university. The variations in responses as indicated by the value of the mean and STD was as a result of responses depending on where the respondents were located. This result was confirmed by results from the FGDs and also from the observation schedule. From the observation schedule, it was confirmed that learning centres that were sampled, Meru, Kisii, Kakamega, and Eldoret did not have a medical facility for the students and that no referral health facility had been identified where learners who fell ill during the residential sessions could be referred to. It is only that was based in Nairobi and Kisumu who had access to such a facility. One respondent, a second-year student based in Eldoret said:

"*We do not have a medical clinic and neither is there a referral health facility that a student can go to in case they are unwell. I know a colleague who fell stick during the last residential session (August 2017) and had to be hospitalized. After discharge, she was told to apply for a refund from the university by surrendering her receipts as evidence of hospitalization. I feel this is not fair to us since we have paid a medical fee of Kshs. 7500. If the university cannot provide us with this facility then let them not charge us for a service that is not being offered.*"

In item 1h, and 1j desired to determine whether the learners were supported by regional centres and if the centres were easily accessible to the learners. In item, 14h respondents were requested to indicate if the University had established regional centres to offer support to distance learners. Study findings indicate that a majority of the learners 111 (44.6 %) strongly agreed while 110 (44.2 %) agreed with the statement. The mean score and the standard deviation for this item were 4.269 and 0.8542 respectively. This result implies that learners strongly agreed with the statement. The findings agree with those of (Primrose & Alexander, 2013; Curry, 2003; Mmari, 1997and Akosua and Owusu, 2018), whose studies emphasized the important role played by regional centres in supporting distance learners. Specifically, Akosua and Owusu (2018) observed that Face-to-face meetings organized regularly at regional and study centres and the use of regional supervisors enhance accessibility and flexibility in distance education.

In item 1j, respondents were requested to indicate if the regional centre was too far from where they lived. Study findings indicate that a majority of the learners 76 (30.5 %) disagreed, 42 (16.9 %) strongly disagreed, 45 (18.1 %) strongly agreed, 47 (18.9 %) agreed while 39 (15.7%) neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement. The mean score and the standard deviation for this item were 2.908 and 1.3750 respectively. This result implies that learners neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement. The conclusion can only be that even though the learners strongly agreed that had to access a regional learning centre, about half of them felt that it was a distance from where they lived.

Item 1i was also closely linked with regional study centres. In item, 14i respondents were requested to indicate if the university arranges fields' visits to allow interactions with staff. Study findings indicate that a majority of the learners 78 (31.8 %) agreed but 53 (21.3 %) strongly disagreed with the statement. At the same time 41 (16.5%) strongly agreed, 32 (12.9 %) disagreed and 45 (18.1%) neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement. The mean score and the standard deviation for this item were 3.088 and 1.3971 respectively. This result implies that learners neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement. Based on FGDs it was established that regional visits were mostly organized for the bachelor of education Arts students and not their science counterparts. One respondent, a male student from the Science program, the second-year said:

"*I have heard about the field visits but I have never attended one since we have never being invited to attend.*"

Another respondent from the Arts program, a male student in his second year said:

"*I have always attended the field visits, especially in Kisumu and I have found them to be informative and I can interact with some of the decision-makers of the program. I can get feedback concerning issues about the previous residential sessions, get answers on missing marks, receive tips on how to study my module and how to write my term paper, get an opportunity to interact with fellow students and shares ideas on assignments, and any new information that the administration feels that learners should know. I have*

personally benefitted a lot from these interactions. My only concern is that these visits are no longer held and we have to wait until the next residential session before we can get any additional information about the course."

In item 1k, the respondents were requested to indicate if they found university staff supportive. Study findings indicate that a majority of the learners 110 (44.2%) strongly agreed while 104 (41.8%) agreed with the statement. The mean score and the standard deviation for this item were 4.237 and 0.8730 respectively. This result implies that learners did SA that they did find university very staff supportive. This result was also confirmed by findings from FGDs where one respondent, a second-year female student from the Nairobi residential centre said:

"*I am about to complete my second year and so far I have encountered staff who have been very supportive in terms of admission processes, course registration, subject selection, online registration, support with study material, term papers among others. I have also received all my first-year marks and I am happy that I performed well and I did not fail any subject.*"

The findings agree with those of (Haughey &Muirhead, 2005; Curry, 2003; and Raisman (2013), whose studies emphasized the important role played by administrators of distance learning programmes in supporting distance learners. Specifically, Raisman (2013) found that 84% of the attrition rate observed could be attributed to unsatisfactory institutional support, more so due to unsupportive staff.

Table 5: Means and Standard Deviations of Administrative Support Services

Statement	N	Mean	SD
1a.The admission information was easily understood	249	4.365	0.7874
1b. All pertinent information related to the course is available on the university's website.	249	4.213	0.8513
1c. I got assistance on the selection of subject combination.	249	4.012	1.0491
1d. Students can register online for courses without having to visit the university.	249	4.414	0.7735
1e. Students can pay fees without having to visit the university.	249	4.518	0.6543
1f.The university offers students flexible payment arrangements for tuition fee	249	3.948	1.1400
14g. Students have access to medical facilities offered by the university	249	3.297	1.4674
1h. University has established regional centres to offer support to distance learners.	249	4.269	0.8542
1i. The university arranges fields' visits to allow interactions with staff.	249	3.088	1.3971
1j. The Regional centre is too far from my house	249	2.908	1.3750
1k. Overall I find university staff very supportive	249	4.237	0.8730
Composite mean and Standard deviation		**3.880**	**0.9720**

Table 5 provides a summary of Means and Standard Deviations of Administrative Support Services and the Composite mean 3.880 and Standard deviation 0.9720

respectively. This result implies that the respondents generally agreed that Administrative Support Services were important to the learners and as was observed by Astin & Scherrei (1980) whose findings noted that the administrative styles of a college are crucial to the success of its retention efforts. The style of the institution gives the student his/her first impression of the institution; it also gives them their first glimpse of how they might fit in, succeed, or fail at the institution. Administrative styles of a college can influence a student's decision to drop out. The findings also agree with those of Raisman (2013), who found that those who had dropped out of college overwhelmingly gave institutional reasons for doing so. Specifically, Raisman noted that 84% of the attrition rate observed multiple institutions in the USA could be attributed to unsatisfactory institutional support. The top two reasons for dropout being perceived lack of concern for the student and poor service.

Relationship between Administrative Support Services and Retention of Distance Learners

Correlation analysis using Pearson's product-moment technique was carried out to determine the relationship between Administrative Support Services and Retention of Distance Learners. Results of the correlation are presented in Table 6.

Table 6: Correlation Administrative Support Services and Retention

		Learner RT	Administrative Support
Learner RT	Pearson Correlation	1	.544**
	Sig. (2- tailed)		.000
	N	249	249
Administrative SS	Pearson Correlation	.544**	1
	Sig. (2- tailed)	.000	
	N	249	249
** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level of significance (2-tailed)			

Results from table 6 show that there is a significant positive relationship between Administrative Support Services and Retention of Distance Learners (r= 0.544, p-value = 0.000. The findings imply that there is a positive and moderate association between Administrative Support Services and Retention of Distance Learners which is significant.

Inferential analysis of Administrative Support Services and Retention of Distance Learners

The following hypothesis was tested using multiple regression analysis to satisfy the objective of the study.

Hypothesis

H_0: Administrative support services has no significant influence on the retention of distance learners at the University of Nairobi.

H_1: Administrative support services has a significant influence on the retention of distance learners at the University of Nairobi.

The null hypothesis was tested using the following multiple regression equation to determine the beta coefficients of all the indicators:

$$Z = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \beta_3 X_3 + \beta_4 X_4 + \beta_5 X_5 + u$$

Where Z = Retention of distance learners
X_1 = Course Information
X_2 = Medical facility
X_3 = Course Registration and Fee Payment
X_4 = Supportive Staff
X_5 = Regional Centres and Distance
u = random error

Results in Table 7 show that r = 0.544, implying a positive and moderate correlation betweenAdministrative Support services and retention of distance learners at the University of Nairobi. The R^2 was 0.282 indicating that Administrative Support services explained 28.3% of the variability in learners' retention. The Durbin-Watson statistic was 1.813 and this was an indication of the absence of the problem of autocorrelation. Significance test at 0.05 indicated that Course Information was (p=0.003); Medical Facility (p=0.003); Registration and Fee payment (p=0.142); Supportive Staff (p=0.000) and Reg Centres (p=0.001) and apart from registration and fee payment all the other four variables are all statistically significant.

The β coefficient ofCourse Information is 0.159 that of Medical Facility is 0.164, Registration and Fee payment 0.153, Supportive Staff is 0.353 and Reg Centres 0.284. The β values tell us that a unit change in Course Information contributes to 15.9% change in learner retention; one unit change in Medical Facilitycontributes to 16.4% change in learner retention; one unit change in Registration and Fee paymentcontributes to 7.3% change in learner retention; one unit change in Supportive Staffcontributes to 35.3% change in learner retention and one unit change in Reg Centres contributes to 28.4% change in learner retention.The ANOVA results indicated that the regression model was significant at F = 40.441 with p-value = 0.000 which is lower than the cut-off p-value of 0.05. This means that the null hypothesis was rejected implying that the Administrative Support services have a significant effect on learners retention.The coefficients provide the necessary information to predict Learners Retention from Administrative Support services.

Table 7: Multiple Regression Analysis Results for Influence of Administrative Support services on the retention of distance learners at the University of Nairobi

a. Model Summary						
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R^2	S.E of Estimate	**Durbin-Watson**	
1	.544[a]	.296	.282	.42070	1.813	
a. Predictors: (Constant), AdminSS_X_5 Reg Centres & Distance, AdminSS_X_3 Registration & Fee , AdminSS_X_1 Course Inform, AdminSS_X_2 , Medical facility ,AdminSS_X_4 Supportive Staff						
b. Dependent Variable: Learner RT Mean						

b. ANOVA

Model		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	18.090	5	3.618	40.441	.000[b]
	Residual	43.008	243	.177		
	Total	61.098	248			

a. Dependent Variable: Learner RT Mean

b. Predictors: (Constant), AdminSS_X_5 Reg Centres & Distance, AdminSS_X_3 Registration & Fee , AdminSS_X_1 Course Inform, AdminSS_X_2 , Medical facility ,AdminSS_X_4 Supportive Staff

c. Coefficients

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		t - Statistic	Sig.
		Beta	Std. Error	Beta	Std. Error		
1	(Constant)	2.803	.219		12.784	.000	2.803
	AdminSS_X_1 Course Inform	.131	.051	.159	2.558	.003	.131
	AdminSS_X_2 Medical Facility	.070	.030	.164	2.328	.003	.070
	AdminSS_X_3 Registration & Fee	.066	.048	.153	2.172	.142	.066
	AdminSS_X_4 Supportive Staff	.211	.050	.353	4.192	.000	.211
	AdminSS_X_5 Reg Centres	.256	.052	.284	1.074	.001	.256

a. Dependent Variable: Learner RT

The β coefficient ofCourse Inform model is 0.159 that of Medical Facility is 0.164, Registration and Fee payment 0. 153, Supportive Staff is 0.353 and Reg Centres 0. 284. The β values tell us that one unit change in Course Informationcontributes to15.9% change in learner retention; one unit change in Medical Facility contributes to 16.4% change in learner retention; one unit change in Registration and Fee payment contributes to 7.3% in learner retention; one unit change in Supportive Staff contributes to 35.3% in learner retention and one unit change in Reg Centres contributes to 28.4% change in learner retention.The ANOVA results indicated that the regression model was significant at F = 40.441 with p-value = 0.000 which is lower than the cut-off p-value of 0.05. This means that the null hypothesis was rejected implying that the Administrative Support services have a significant effect on learners retention.The coefficients provide the necessary information to predict Learners Retention from Administrative Support services. From the statistical findings we can now specify the following equation;

$$Z = 2.803 + 0.159 X_1 + 0.164 X_2 + 0.153 X_3 + 0.353 X_4 + 0.284 X_5$$

The findings from this regression model were confirmed by the FGDs where learners felt that having supportive staff was very important to them since they were critical in facilitating admission processes, course registration, subject selection, online registration, support with study material, term papers among others. Learners outside Nairobi and Kisumu expressed concern about the lack of medical facility and the fact that it was costly when one fell sick and had to pay out of pocket, and this put more strain on their finances. The findings also underscore the importance of institutional administrators in higher education, who are very useful in supporting learners when they perform key functions such as admission and registration support; module dispatch and provision of information among others.

8. Conclusion and Recommendations

Based on the objective which was meant to examine the influence of Administrative Support Services on the retention of distance learners at the UON, the Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient for the twelve items used to describe the indicators of Administrative Support Services was 0.822 indicating good internal consistency. The composite mean (M=3.880) and composite standard deviation (SD= 0.9720) showed that the respondents generally agreed that Administrative Support Services were important in influencing learner retention.

Based on inferential statistics the study tested the null hypothesis that Administrative Support Services has no significant influence on the retention of distance learners at the UON. The R square value was 0.296 and F= (4,248)40.441, P=0.000<0.05. To check for autocorrelation the Durbin-Watson value of 1.813, indicating that the variables were not correlated. The five indicators for Administrative support services were Course Information, Medical Facility, Registration and Fee payment, Supportive Staff and Regional Centres and apart from registration and fee payment, all the other four variables are all statistically significant. One major conclusion is that the findings underscore the importance of institutional administrators in distance learning, who are very useful in supporting learners when they perform functions such as enrolment; admission and registration; record keeping; information provision and delivery of study materials among others. The findings also underscore the importance that learners attach to regional centres. It is from these centres that they receive several services that include valuable advice on general academic matters before enrolment and during the progress of the study, sometimes involving detailed advice on individual subjects, and careers counselling. Hence this study concludes that Administrative Support Services had a statistically significant influence on the retention of distance learners at the UON.

The findings also showed a statistically significant relationship between administrative support services and learner retention. Administrative support services were ranked higher than the other three elements of LSS. Learners outside the three Campuses of Nairobi, Kisumu and Chiromo raised some concerns concerning the quality of services that were being offered in the regional centres sampled in terms of lack of medical facility, inadequate computers, internet connectivity, inadequate reference materials in the libraries and inaccessibility to online resources. There is a need therefore of ensuring that all learning centres have standardised infrastructure or facilities so that all learners irrespective of their learning centre would

have access to the same services.A strong relationship with teaching staff helps students to decide to stay on a course. The findings from this study provide a strong indication that learner retention is influenced by learner support services. This implies that all institutions of higher learning that offer distance learning programs need to carefully consider how they offer these support services to enhance learner satisfaction and retention. In this era of reduced government funding, public universities must ensure that LSS is accessible to their learners if they wish to retain them, especially those learners who are in their first and second year of study.

9. Future Scope

In terms of research methodology, this study used the mixed-mode approach, relying more on a descriptive cross-sectional survey, carried out using the questionnaire; correlational research design and qualitative analysis of data collected through FGDs. An in-depth analysis of the independent variables was carried out using descriptive analysis through the computation of means and standard deviations. Composite means and composite standard deviations were also computed which helped to enrich the analysis. Correlation analysis was carried out to establish the strength of the relationships between the variables. Test of the hypothesis was carried out using multiple regression analysis. Qualitative data analysis was undertaken through FGDs based on the study variables. This complementarity between quantitative and qualitative approaches strengthened the explanatory power of the study findings by allowing researchers to compare results obtained from both descriptive statistics and inferential statistics to provide a detailed interpretation. This study therefore highly recommends the same approach be adopted in any future research on the same area.

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