

Learner Support Services as a Factor of Students' Performance in Open and Distance Learning Centres at Institute of Adult Education

Shabani Nyaburiri Maijo

Department of Mass Education and Open Schooling, Institute of Adult Education, Tanzania

Abstract: *The purpose of this paper was to investigate the provision of learner support services and its impact on students' performance in open and distance learning centres at the Institute of Adult Education. The study conducted in ODL district learning centres. An exploratory research design was applied. A sample size of 135 respondents was selected by using simple random and purposive sampling techniques. Data collected by the use of questionnaires and interview techniques. The SPSS software was applied in descriptive statistical to get frequencies and percents. The study findings revealed that learner support services are of significance in students' academic performance. It concludes that learner support services if coordinated effectively, could contribute greatly to students' academic achievement and other learning opportunities. The study recommended that the institute should prepare and implement learner support services policy and empower student in open and distance learning.*

Keywords: learner/student support services, performance, open and distance learning

1. Introduction

Globally, an effective student support service remains a major asset in the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) programme. Therefore, for understanding on the students' academic performance in open and distance learning, it is important to study comprehensively about the provision of learner support services. Like other institutions, the Institute of Adult Education has the power vested in the Parliamentary Act. No.12 of 1975 to offers education by open and distance learning. In recent years, there has been a significant growth of students' enrollment in ODL programme at the Institute of Adult Education, Tanzania. The programme is offered in the designated district training centers through Adult and Continuing Education Department (IAE, 2018). However, it has been observed that students enrolled in ODL programme have different educational background and different needs. Hence, the appropriate learner support system to accommodate these diverse learners is urgent for them to enhance their academic opportunities (Maimane, 2016).

It is in this context that, this study sought to investigate the provision of learner support services as a factor of student' academic performance in open and distance learning centres at the Institute of Adult Education, Tanzania. Sanchez-Elvira Paniagua and Simpson, (2018) pointed out that learner support services are the key ingredients for students' academic success in open and distance learning. ODL institutions, particularly the Institute of Adult Education requires to provide effective support services that meet the unique needs of learners, enhance their learning experience and academic success, and empower them to be self-directed lifelong learners. Each individual learner have own life, his person goals, which no magic spontaneously puts equal with the learning aim and style. Therefore, learner support service is a search more to the students' academic performance. Shikulo and Lekhetho, (2020) assumes that the provision of learner support services is vibrant since it brings conscious

to know what the institution does to them, and it will activate effectively at its upper limit.

An effective learner support service in ODL is crucial, particularly in the ever-changing landscape of distance education. The institutions convey education through blended learning should publish learner support services framework and implement it (Steyn *et al.*, 2014). This is imperative because blended learning is becoming increasingly competitive, and to keep on successful in the marketplace, they should provide quality education. Quality education in distance education can be achieved through the provision of effective support services to the learners (Cooper, 2010). In order to stay longer in the education business, the institutions should provide quality services to clientele, adopt a client led approach and not expect their "product" or service to sell itself (Herman *et al.*; 2015). The justification for learners support services is to equip the learners' adjustment to institution and enhance their retention success and to reduce dropout rates.

In the provision of education through open and distance learning, institutions face challenges regarding to the learner support services. The most vital challenges which the institutions had to encounter are; deficient of study materials, higher level of cognitive demand in new programs and thus a wide range of academic support needs, unclear learner support services guidelines, learners' dropout rate and incompetent facilitators. To lighten this, institutions needs to provide proper and effective learner support services as it motivate, reduce the attrition rate, improves the quality of education and learner achievement (Pratt, 2015). Ironically, distance learners receive significantly less support than full time learners which adds to their low performance rate (Warrender *et al.*; 2005).

Learner support services as administrative, academic and counseling services intends to provide motivational support, individual attention and tutorial classes to students in order

to improve their academic achievement (Shikulo, 2018). The range of learner support services in ODL which had impact on learner retention includes pre- entry information, preparation and admission processes, induction, learning progresses and transition support (Crosling, Heagney & Thomas, 2009). Therefore, learners' satisfaction helps institutions to magnetize new learners and preserve the current ones, improve their overall performance, and increase learners' progression rates and employability (Burns, 2013).

Open and distance learning is the unique method of learning since instructions and learning take place in an environment where the instructor and learners are geographically remote from each other most of the time (Burns, 2011). Thus, distance learners need continuous support since their academic routes are shaped by a lot of interrelated factors as learner support services and learner involvement (UNISA, 2010). Studies conducted by (Gil-Jaurena, 2014; Maimane 2016) and Shikub & Lekhetho, (2020) mastered the relationship with learner support services provides a pleasure that leads each student to acquire the necessary skills. Brindley *et al*; (2004) indicated that new technologies have an enormous on the way learner support is implemented. It is asserted that, internet makes it possible for learners to be in touch with other learners and institutional staff such as administrative staff and tutors. The point of attention to all prospective learners is to make career choices that equal to their interests, abilities and aptitude. The institution must have a vision that would make it possible to respond to the needs of its clients. This transfer placed the focus on investigating learner support services on students' academic performance in ODL centres at the institute of adult education.

2. Problem Statement

The problem of the study is that students' academic performance in ODL centres at the institute of adult education continues to be squat in spite of the face to face sessions provided to the learners. The problem to be investigated in this study focuses on the impact made by learner support services on students' academic performance in ODL centers at Institute of Adult Education, Tanzania.

3. Aims and Objectives

The aim of this study is to investigate the provision of learner support services on students' performance in ODL centres at the institute of adult education. The study had two objectives; firstly; to determine to what extent the learner support services contribute to learners' academic performance in ODL centres at the institute of adult education; secondly; to suggest measures to improve the current provision of learner support services at the institute.

3.1 Research Questions

The study sought to fill the gap on investigating the learner support services as a factor of students' academic performance in open and distance learning centres through addressing the following research questions (RQs):

RQ1: To what extent does the learner support service have impact on students' performance in ODL centres at the institute of adult education?

RQ2: What measures could be suggested to improve the current provision of learner support services at the institute?

4. Literature Review

Learner support services are defined as the cognitive, affective and systemic support provided through tutoring, modern information communication technology (ICT), counselling and administrative support. Steyn and Wolhuter, (2008) examined that learners support services are one of the four basic components of any education system. The distance learning learners are expected to be supported at registration, during their studies, and at exit level. Some of the learner support services that need to be provided by the institute are; learner induction programmes, educational advising, library assistant, study skills, examination processes, language assistance, computer assistance, placement, occupational and subject choices, bursaries, entrepreneurial skills training, sport assistance, cultural activities and social adjustment (Maimane, 2016). Identification of academic support needs is crucial as part of the system because learners will be in the position of determining where to find assistance. All learners need academic support and development. Brindley and Paul, (2004) observed that distance learners need considerable support since they do not attend classes on a daily basis like fulltime learners. Yet, one of the substantial challenge facing distance learning institutions is the provision of expedient and active support services for isolated learners. In most of Sub Saharan region, distance learning are designed and implemented based on Commonwealth of Learning (COL) perspective, COL encourage the country members to design and offer open learning and distance education programmes that encourage and promotes meaningful learning (Mowes, 2010).

Open and Distance Learning

It has been noted that, all over the world, access into higher education has noted as the critical problem. Various governments have been to reduce this problem through open and distance learning (Obasi, & Akuchie, 2014). Kyando, (2011) pointed out the development of open and distance learning, it evolved over time into sophisticated fifth eras. The current era has taken the advantages of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) revolution. As asserted by Kyando, (2011), the first era of ODL evolved as the correspondence model, followed by multimedia model, the third Tel-learning model followed by Flexible learning model. The current generation is witnessed in the era of globalization which stresses on lifelong learning and increasing of open learning institutions. Open and distance education is channel for widening access to mass education. It is a field of education that focus on teaching methods and technology which the aim of delivering teaching frequently on an individual's basis to learners who are not physically present in tradition setting such as classroom.

5. Methodology

The study adopted an exploratory research design. A mixed methods research approach was used. This approach is the combination of qualitative and quantitative methods in data collection and analysis (Creswell, 2005). The study was conducted in the academic year 2018/2019. The target population of the study consisted of all open and distance learners and their regional coordinators (resident tutors). Since was not easy to reach all target population whom are about 2000 people. A sampling frame of 200 students was used to obtain a sample size. A simple random sampling and purposive techniques was used to select the sample size of 135 respondents. The Yamane, (1967) formula was used to calculate the sample size. The formula is shown in Equation 1. The regional resident tutors were purposively selected as they were considered as information- rich due to their great experience in learner support services execution.

Equation 1:

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2}$$

- Where **n** is sample size
- **N** is the population
- **e** is margin error at 0.05

Data was collected through the questionnaire and semi structured interview. The questionnaires were distributed to the students by hand in June and December, 2019. The questionnaire contained both closed and open-ended questions. Interview method was used to gather information from regional resident tutors. Respondents were asked to rate the items according to five Likert scale, ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree”. The questionnaires and interview questions were tested by a number of facilitators in order to test reliability and validity of the research tools. Cronbach alpha coefficient and content validity were used respectively. Data from the research instrument were compiled; edited, classified, coded and analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive statistics were used to determine the frequencies and percent. Informed consent and ethical consideration were attained in terms of confidentiality, voluntary participation and anonymity.

6. Results and Discussion

Based on the research approach adopted in this study, the results are organized according to the data generated from research instruments. Results and discussion of collected data were handled to the following sub- heading of the research problems.

Demographic Profile

The demographic profile demonstrates the distribution of respondents' categories in relation to age, gender and occupational as indicated in Table 1. Results in Table 1 shows that 55 (40.7%) of respondents were aged between 30-35 years old, 45 (33.3%) were between 36-45 years old and 35 (25.9%) were between 46-50 years old. Also, results in Table 1 reflects that 85 respondents (62.9%) were female, 50 (37%) were male. This is associated with the fact that the

greater number of learners enrolled in the distance learning programme are in-services teachers who are female. Hence, institute of adult education has good number of female learners as opposed to male. In regard to occupational of respondents, 115 (85.1%) of were ODL learners and 20 (14.8%) were tutors. This shows that majority of respondents were learners who could understand better about the provision of learner support services in open and distance learning programme.

Table1: Characteristics of Respondents

Attributes	Category	Frequency (N)	Percent (%)
Gender	Female	85	62.9
	Male	50	37.0
Age	30-35	55	40.7
	36-45	45	33.3
	46-50	35	25.9
Occupation	Learners	115	85.1
	Tutors	20	14.8

Learners Support Services and Students' Academic Performance

The findings of this study aimed to reveal how learner support services have impact to students' academic performance. The respondents were asked to rate the responses using Likert scale of five categories. The results shows that majority of respondents reported that learner support services have positive impact on learners' academic performance. About 54.0% of respondents strongly agreed that learner support services have impact to their academic performance and progression. The respondents' views on this question were on the quality, accessibility and suitability of the student support services provided by the institute in the learning centres.

It was established that 45% of the respondents had been noted that learner support services are accessible through face-to-face sessions with no limitations. Also, 64% agreed that learner support services influences their academic success because of the nature of the study program and model of learning. In additional, 58% agreed that the learners support services are helpful as they enable them to solicit information regarding of their studies. On the other hand, the implementation of ODL programme was evaluated positively by 70% of the respondents. Indeed, 34% commented that the information about the study programme is better to be available in the website, but, most of the information is not available in the institution website platform.

Also, the study sought to determine the respondent's perception on learners support services provided by the institute. The study analysis based on; learner support services policy, entry orientation and environment of learning centres. The results shows that majority of respondents (70%) strongly disagree that there is a documented policy on learners support services, 65% agreed that the institute conduct entry orientation to ODL students but it is ineffective. Also, respondents (65%) agreed on the learning centres that are conducive. in probing questions they commented on the unavailability of study materials to suit the study programme.

The interview method was used to supplement information gathered from the questionnaires. The interview method used a semi-structured interview with open questions based on research questions. During the interview tutors were asked to explain how learner support services contribute to academic performance using their real experiences of learner support services implementation in their regional centres. The result analysis exposed that, the academic performance of ODL learners are attributed by many factors as background qualifications, involvement of learners themselves and learning environment. One of the respondents said;

“Let me tell you...performance of ODL learners are not influenced by learner support services provided by tutors in their learning centers during face to face sessions,... the academic performance depends on how examination are administered, involvement of students in learning and orientations on examination regulations;”

Respondents continued by saying that;

“One of the learning centres in this semester.... I can't mention it... the students' academic performance is less compared to the previous semester because we had decided to change the modality of administering the examinations” (Respondents' response).

It is acknowledged that the provision of quality education through distance is a challenge for many of institutions (Mahlo, 2011). It was the same for many of respondents in this case. The results revealed that institutions face challenge in the provision of learner support service because of inadequacy fund. One of the respondents during interview said:

“Learner support services mostly are provided during face to face session, time allocated during face to face is not enough to support all learners. A learner needs continuous support services so as to improve their academic performance. Indeed, inadequate fund leads to the minimal provision of services to learners” (Respondents' Response).

In the same vein, another respondent articulated the challenges on the provision of learner support services in relation to face to face, he disclosed that:

“Face-to-face tutorial classes are poorly attended by both students and tutors. Many students do not attend effectively because they use that time to accomplish the assignments given before. The two hours face-to-face sessions are insufficient looking that most of students are admitted as Grade “A” teachers with poor academic performance in secondary level. Learning centres have no library or other learning facilities to equip them in learning” (Respondents' Responses)

Measures to improve the current provision of learner support services

Students' enrollment of ODL students have been increasing, it is therefore significant to improve learner support services. The analysis based on this research question found that; to improve the current student support services at the institute, the following themes should be examined; student

empowerment (internet connection, study materials and orientation), improvement of regional centres infrastructure (learning centers, library and modern technology) increasing staff members in the programme, improve and modernize library service, administrative service, counseling service. Other measures that were suggested include; learner support service policy, effective face to face, use of institution website, academic advisers, and increases awareness on examination regulations.

Discussion

The result of this study shows that learners support services provided by the institute have an impact on students' performance. Majority of respondents values the imperative of learner support services in ODL programme. Junio-Sabio, (2012) suggests that learner support service to ODL learners is important but the provision of the services should consider the learners' profile and aims to attain learner's academic success. Face to face tutorial sessions were reported to be poorly attended by students and tutors. Ludwing-Hardman and Dunlap, (2003) reported that, students low participation rate lead to student dropout. Also, the Tinto's model of institutional departure articulates that when student are less integrated into the academic and social communities of the institutions, they are likely to depart or dropout, and that when they are sufficiently integrated, they are likely to persist (Tinto, 1997). Lack of adequate and relevant study materials in district and regional centres in this study could be some of the challenges in the provision of learner support services. Students are merely relying on printed modules. Tait, (2000) indicated that there has been a shift in many ODL institutions from print-based educational resources and teaching to blended learning carried out through the use of internet and other learning resources.

7. Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate the learner support services as the factor of students' performance in open and distance learning centres at the institute of adult education. The study established that the provision of learner support services have impact on students' performance. Besides, the study articulated the challenges faces the ODL institution as inadequate fund for planning and provision of effective learner support services. The ODL institutions need to establish learner support services framework in order to adjust the needs of the learners during the learning process. Student had limited access to the support. The technology plays significant role in open and distance education. Distance education technique requires student to be independent and self-directed. The utilization of learner support services is imperative for students' academic performance.

8. Recommendations

Based on the study findings, it is recommended that; the institute should; prepare and implement learner support services policy, improve district and regional centre infrastructure, empower student in open and distance learning, enhance collaboration regional resident tutors and facilitators, and; provision of formative feedback.

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Author Profile

Shabani Nyaburiri Maijo received the Master of Project Management from The Open University of Tanzania in 2016, Postgraduate Diploma in Project Planning and Management from Institute of Rural Development Planning –Dodoma in 2012 and the Bachelor of Education in Arts from the University of Dodoma in 2010. During 2004-2012, he worked as tutor and co-researcher in the field of education and community development in Kigoma and Dodoma Municipal Councils respectively. He is now with Institute of Adult Education as Assistant Lecturer and Regional Resident Tutor in Geita Regional in Tanzania.