ENHANCING STUDENT DEVELOPMENT THROUGH SUPPORT SERVICES IN AN OPEN DISTANCE LEARNING INSTITUTION: A CASE STUDY IN SOUTH AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

This article sought to investigate the implementation of curriculum through using student support services to enhance teaching and learning among students. The participants for the study were selected from students who registered for the Postgraduate Certificate in Education in Open distance e-Learning institutions. Data was collected from 20 students who were selected, using multi-stage sampling. Data pertaining to the experiences of these students were sought, using semi-structured interviews. The findings reveal that student support services were available but were not accessed by most students. The study reveals numerous student support-related challenges including poor handling of the application and registration process, delays in delivery and receiving of study material and the absence of an effective assignment feedback administration system. The study recommends that ODeL institutions endeavour to strengthen their administrative services to be more responsive to students. Furthermore, the lecturers should be oriented to provide services to students.

Keywords: curriculum, contest, student support, higher education, multicultural, socio-economic imbalances, academic achievement

INTRODUCTION

Education is seen as a driver of the socio-economic advancement of the nation. While education was historically viewed as exclusively for white privilege, the current education is opened to all races and cultures in the country. The current educational transformation, the higher institution curriculum, is geared towards dealing with the past injustices meted out to the majority black population in the country. As an attempt to correct the past gap that existed in education, the department of higher education opened access to university studies to a larger number of students in the country who had previously been deprived of main stream higher education. The traditional university education system was encouraged to introduce online learning to accommodate more students. Online distance e-learning (ODeL) was introduced where students learn outside the normal lecture halls. The system was to be flexible and all-

inclusive to a large extent and to increase participation and a high completion rate. "Student support" is a universal term that is applied to the variety of services that are established by institutions to assist their students in achieving their learning aims; to improve their knowledge to be successful and complete their academic studies

The traditional tertiary institutions in South African were faced with numerous challenges, among which were a large number of enrolments resulting in overcrowded lecture halls and the retention of students. ODeL was introduced to complement the traditional educational system and to accommodate the increasing numbers and growth of higher institutions. Although ODeL is not new in the country, its introduction radically changed the tertiary education landscape. Makoe and Nsamba (2019, 133) describe the introduction and functioning of ODeL as the new face of teaching and learning without lecture halls. Coupled with the existing challenges faced by the traditional universities, it brought about a challenge to the entire higher educational system. The dropout rate was attributed to the increase in tuition fees and the general poor socio-economic background of students in the universities. Some students could not cope with academic work and tended to fail their examinations.

A number of measures were instituted to deal with the challenges of the transformation. Notably, among the measures to curb the numerous challenges faced by the traditional and online learning institutions was the student support system. The student support system was created with a multi-cultural approach so that it could embrace all cultures and races in the country. Simpson (2012, 66) describes student support as activities that assist students in achieving success in their academic studies. The general aim of the multi-cultural student support system is the growth and promotion of higher education contributing to educational development and equity. Student support is an element of learning to promote knowledge acquisition and successful completion of academic studies (Tait 2014, 5). Multi-cultural student support provides elements of learning such as information communication and technology (ICT), academic guidance and tutorials to increase academic achievements (Tait 2014, 6).

However, recent developments at higher educational institutions suggest the increase in the dropout rate among students at traditional and ODeL institutions. (Makoe, and Nsamba 2019, 134). This development points to the fact that the student support services are not adequate. Simpson (2013, 87) suggests that inadequate student support has contributed to students abandoning their studies. Makoe and Nsamba (2019, 135) state that the lack of student support accounts for high dropout rates in ODeL. The above development prompts the researcher to ask: What student support activities are offered by the universities and what constrains students from accessing the student support activities at their institutions?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study is aligned to Moore's Transactional Distance Theory to examine what support services are provided by open distance learning universities; and how students access these support services. Student support at an open distance learning institution is a major challenge of students, parents, politicians and public. Student support at open distance learning institutions is therefore a phenomenon that has multiple causes that need to be researched. Moore's Transactional Distance Theory provides an explanation of how teaching and learning is provided through using information communication technology (ICT). In application of the Transactional Distance Theory, Moore (1993, 25) postulates that physical distance is not an influential learning barrier (Mbwesa 2014, 178). Moore's proposition was that there must be a dialogue between the lecturer and the student; secondly, the course must be structured taking the course objectives, instructional strategies and evaluations into account; thirdly, student autonomy that is associated with student directedness, which indicates the amount of control that the student exerts during the learning process (Huang et al. 2015, 106). I examined the relationship between the three tenets of the theory by expanding to establish three objectives to be examined: 1. the relationship between the institutional administrative systems and students in terms of accessing the student support at an open distance university; 2. the satisfaction level of student support services offered by the open distance learning university; 3. the constrains students undergo in accessing the student support activities from their open distance learning university.

Moore's Transactional Distance Theory serves as the basis on which literature and discussion of the final results on which conclusions are drawn.

LITERATURE REVIEW

"Student support" is a universal term that is applied to the variety of services that are established by universities to assist their students in achieving their learning aims to improve their knowledge and successfully complete their academic studies (Simpson 2012, 54). Simpson (2012, 55) describes student support services as all activities extending beyond the production and delivery of course materials that assist students in their studies. There are several ways to support students in higher learning in order to improve their academic achievements. These student support services come in two forms. Firstly, teaching that leads to the development of student learning skills or assists students in their time management since most of them are employed (Sanchez-Elvira Paniagua, and Simpson 2018, 2). The student support service is further classified as an information phase where enough information on course modules is given to the students, such as the registration process where students are convinced of what course to

study; the learning stage including learning materials, instructions and online learning techniques; student learning support; library resources; student self-assessment; automated assessment; tutor assessment; electronic and manual feedback; student portfolio and finally the result stage (Keegan 2003, 166, in Raphael 2016, 189–190).

Therefore, student support services are very important in student enrolment and for the successful completion of the course in the required time. The student support service must be able to deal with student difficulties in the course of the studies (Raphael 2016, 190). Research identifies some difficulties of students as the use of information technology (ICT), lack of access to telephones, video-conferencing, workshops and face-to-face tutoring (Kamau 2012, 76). Student support services are also necessitated because they assist in collecting the course package which includes teaching and learning materials and assessment instructions (Keegan 2003, 168, in Raphael 2016, 189–190).

However, important as student support services are, they have been underplayed at distance education institutions throughout the world. Tait (2004, 103) argues that most distance education institutions have failed to plan for the incoming students; or that management does not recognise the effects of not providing students with support services. Ravinder (2007, 112) attributes the inadequate provision of student support services to insufficient information on students, especially their knowledge of using ICT. However, Fry, Ketteridge and Marshall (2009, 78) argue that the inadequacy of student support is largely attributed to the lack of relevant skills in ICT usage of lecturers and tutors.

Emphasis has been placed on technology as driver of ODeL. However, the ICT support system has been criticised and frequently considered to be inadequate in preparing students for success (Makoe and Nsamba 2019, 137; Sanchez-Elvira Paniagua and Simpson 2018, 4). Kear et al. (2016, 102) opine that the mere presence of technology is not enough, and institutions must assist students in their academic work, otherwise the quality of technology would be compromised. The availability of quality ICT increases the high academic success rate of students.

The distance education model is based on transactional distance theory that explains the psychological and communication space that separates the lecturer from the student. Makoe and Nsamba (2019, 137) contends that the gap between the lecturer and student is bridged by student support services. However, Tait (2003, 11) contends that the bridge between the lecturer and the student is a strong dialogue.

METHODOLOGY

The focus of the article was to understand the effectiveness of the measures taken by the

university management in achieving student support systems in open distance learning. A qualitative multiple research design was employed to answer the research questions as to how easily students access support from the university and what factors prevent them from accessing such support. The main research questions were divided into five questions on the interview schedule. The qualitative design was used to explore the research items with semi-structured interviews. The choice of the multiple cases was to compare the different cases to have an in-depth understanding of the process and procedures in accessing university support services. The interview themes were generated from the following four research questions:

- Do students have enough information to access the student support at the university?
- What student support activities are offered by the university?
- What constrains students from accessing the student support activities from the university?
- How can the student support structure system be improved?

SAMPLING

Multi-stage sampling techniques were used to select the participants. The cluster and simple random sampling methods were employed. The cluster method was used to select participants to include male and female students (Creswell 2014, 216). The sample frames were derived from students studying the Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) at various ODeL Universities and were residing in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. There were 210 participants who initially volunteered to participate in the interview and they provided their contact details including their phone numbers and e-mail addresses. However, only 20 participants finally agreed to participate in the interviews. Of the 20 volunteers, 13 were males and 7 females. Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) students were chosen because the duration of the programme is one year, and the students need assistance to complete their course within the required period. The students studied varied courses during their undergraduate studies. The sample frame was obtained from the registrar department of the respective institutions.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The participants were contacted via telephone and e-mails and consent was sought. A list of questions was emailed to the participants a few days prior to the interview to prepare them ahead of time. Different focus groups were interviewed at the university on different dates and times. Open-ended semi-structured questions were asked, and each interview session lasted for about 40 minutes. The recorded interviews were later transcribed. Some deletions and additions

were made. However, care was taken to avoid loss of meaning. Member checking were done, and the final transcripts was presented to the participants to check for any misinterpretation or misrepresentation. A Braun and Clarke (2006, 77) thematic analysis method was used to identify the themes and sub-themes. Patterns were identified through data familiarisation, data coding and the necessary themes were searched for and later reviewed and defined and named (Braun and Clarke 2006, 78).

Authenticity and trustworthiness in qualitative research is very important for achieving quality (Creswell 2014, 177). Authenticity of the study was achieved by establishing that the final work and the report presented is of relevance to the research questions (Creswell 2014, 179). Trustworthiness or credibility in qualitative research is used to describe the extent to which all pieces of the study are valid (Creswell 2009, 102). The final work was presented as thick, rich descriptions for the main themes to enhance trustworthiness (Creswell 2009, 102).

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The comments of the students during the interview were structured into four themes: student awareness and sources of support services for administrative and academic support; time with course lecturers; the issuing of study materials and completion of assignments.

ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT

Administrative support refers to services rendered by the institution to support students in course application and registration. The admission process starts with acceptance of application and final registration. Until final registration is complete, students are not accepted to proceed with the course. The registration procedures have been described by the participants as bureaucratic and cumbersome. Most participants complained about the registration procedures adopted by their university as not being helpful and taking almost half a year to complete. However, a few students were satisfied with the registration procedures and claimed they were efficient. In the words of Tom:

> "I sincerely believe that the university authorities deliberately frustrate us. Yes, I did my application through the online system, but it took forever for the admission office to respond. I did a lot of follow up phone calls most of which went unanswered. Some telephone numbers were provided for inquiries but when you try calling, you don't get through and when you do it is not a direct line and you waste your airtime listening to music from the phone. It took me well over four months to complete my application and registration process for a course that supposes to be taken in one year. Ahh, it is frustrating."

The poor service that Tom received is one of the numerous expressed by the majority of the

participants. Meanwhile, Laura agrees that she received some form of delay, but her application generally went through successfully without any hitches. She explained that she received help from the regional office:

> "I know of the online system but because I live not very far from the regional office of my university I just walk in and I got registered. Yes, I did my application online, but the response came very early for me to register on time. Sometimes the staff members are rude, impatient with the students, and difficult to respond to the students' emails and telephone calls."

There was an indication from the participants during the interviews that no effective orientation was given to students before the start of their courses. One of the participants shared the sentiments on the ineffectiveness of orientation:

> "I went to the university during the week-long orientation for students but could not cope because there too many students and I couldn't hear anything".

Even though Laura enjoyed excellent service during her application and registration process, she further explains her encounter with the unfriendly administrative staff. It is arguable that participants had problems with communication between them and the university. This shows that there is no direct telephone line through which students can reach management for administrative services. This means that students have not been receiving any support from the management and academic staff. This is an indication that call centres are available but not servicing students' needs (Raphael 2016, 18). It implies that students have not received sufficient academic support from the university (Tait 2014, 8).

PROVISION OF COURSE MATERIALS

The course materials for students at an ODeL institution are very important since it provides an opportunity for students to study at their own pace (Tait 2004, 218). It is important that these materials arrive on time, right at the beginning of the study programme. The participants complained about the outdated materials in the university e-resources but were satisfied with the level of course material delivery. Sipho expressed concerns about the arrival of the materials:

> "Yeah, the arrival of the study materials depends largely on the time of registration. I must say that it doesn't take long for materials to arrive after registration. In fact, some of the materials such as the tutorial programmes and time tables for examination are given online and as soon as you are registered you can access them."

This suggests that some amount of time is given to students to learn, specifically to do their assignments. However, some students report their inability to receive the study materials on time and cited the lack of access to points of collection. These were a few students who reside in the country's rural areas:

> "The study materials are delivered at a point that is far from me and I do not receive them on time. One will expect that the university will inform you to claim your materials, but they fail to do so. It takes too long after registration to receive your study materials. It delays our study."

The participants revealed that some study materials are outdated and have contained scant information on the course outline. Responding to the interviews, one of the participants stated as follows:

> "The problem is not getting the materials on time but some of the materials are outdated and are not helpful to the assignments given".

The findings indicate that study materials are released early in time for students to collect and plan for their studies. Students not receiving the materials on time cannot be blamed on the university. The study materials are self-learning materials and distributed in accordance with the university policy. The university policy stipulates that materials are handed to students at the time of admission. The few hitches expressed by students are an indication that there are flaws in the delivery system that disadvantage learning.

MODE OF COURSE DELIVERY

The participants expressed diverse comments on the issues of mode of delivery of their courses. Their concerns were related to the contents of the learning materials and the support from their lecturers and among themselves. The participants complained about the contents of the study materials. The majority of participants stated that they sometimes struggled to understand the instructions in the tutorials. Mary indicated the following in this regard:

> "I am aware that long distance learning is different from face-to-face delivery and therefore the course materials must have clear instructions and explanations. Hey, I struggle to understand exactly what the lecturer is trying to say."

The issues of not receiving concise instructions from their tutorials and clarification seeking seem miracle for most participants. There seems to be communication gaps between the students and their lectures. The participants indicated that they tried to reach their lecturers for

clarity to no avail.

> "I have a number of times tried to communicate with my lecturer through the e-mails and the telephone numbers provided in the tutorial letters, but the lecturer has never responded. In fact, what I don't understand is that the phone will ring but no answer and one wonders if they are available or not."

Maurine added that in an attempt to resolve their challenges, they formed social media groups through which they communicated:

> "We try to communicate with one another through the WhatsApp group we created to encourage ourselves and sometimes try to resolve some challenging issues even though we are not sure if we are doing the right thing or not."

The response shows that the students are not receiving support from their lecturers. This development is likely to affect the participants negatively in their courses of study. It means that the students have difficulty in resolving their challenges with their studies.

ADMINISTRATION OF ASSIGNMENTS

The assignments are a means of preparing students for their final examinations. In some modules it is the final means of grading students. Participants comment on the quality of the assignments and the feedback they receive from their lecturers.

> "I try to do my assignments on time. However, the problem is that the assignments are given to us with no explanations from the lecturer. The lecturers only give us assignment without explanations, too bad".

Nana explains that:

> "Lecturers do not give us sufficient feedback on our assignments. They simply show that they do not care about us. Sometimes I have to fall on other friends who have done the course elsewhere to assist me. In fact, it is my friends who are my lecturers."

Apart from the administration of the assignments, these assignments are to be submitted electronically, requiring not only the availability of the technology, but also the skills to use it. The students need adequate internet services and affordable broadband data for downloading and uploading assignments. Fikele's work environment enables her to access internet connectivity for free and she described the situation as follows:

> "I have my personal laptop computer that I bought for the study. I am lucky because I have unlimited data usage at my office and that allows me to download all my study materials for the assignment online and also submit my assignment with ease."

The situation is not the same with most participants who are not lucky enough to have access to unlimited and cheap internet services. John described his situation:

> "Open learning requires that you work online most of the time. However, I have poor internet services where I am currently living. I have to travel to my friends to have access to the network. And again, it is not about the network availability alone I have to buy data all the time which is very expensive. At times I failed to meet due dates for submission."

Most participants expressed their views on the late submission of their assignments. The participants explained that they have challenges with the university management internet services that go offline most of the time. Fikele stated the following in this regard:

> "Sometimes lecturers are not considerate at all when it comes to deadlines for submission. There are times the university system will be offline for days and making it difficult to submit assignments on time."

The submissions by participants indicate their frustration with the administration of assignments. The situation is not the same for all students, since some enjoyed excellent assignment administration, especially free and uninterrupted internet services for downloading and uploading of assignments online as a result of their occupation and place of residence.

DISCUSSION

The students complained about the stressful situations they went through with admission. Admission to open distance education is done through online systems and requires access to computers and the internet. One also needs skills and knowledge of computers for smooth administration. The participants indicated their displeasure in the time taken for administration to respond to their admissions.

The experience of the students illustrates that student support is available but inefficient. Effective student support should benefit all students, regardless of their socio-economic status. The administrative role of the institution is slow when it comes to admission and it affects student enrolment. This finding supports Arifin's (2018, 162) assertion that open university systems tend to provide poor administrative services to distance students who are not on the campus. Poor administrative services result in unnecessary delays in student progress and leads to a high dropout rate among students (Arifin 2018, 162; Sanchez-Elvira Paniagua, and

Simpson 2018, 4). The delay in processing applications and registrations increases the duration of the course from the traditional one year.

The findings reveal that the provision of course material is not only delayed but, the material is also of poor quality. Most participants do not receive their study materials on time because of the delay in postal services. Participants from rural areas with no postal services and no easy access to postal agents suffer the most (Nsamba, and Makoe 2017, 96). The participants were also dissatisfied with the content of the study materials. At times the study material, especially the prescribed textbooks, are found to be outdated or the content is not relevant to the modules they are prescribed for. This finding confirms the assertion made by Raphael (2016, 199) that outdated study materials were uploaded on the online system of the University of Dar es Salam. The results reflect the competence levels of lecturers. Either the lecturers who provided the materials for the uploading are not aware of current versions of the books; or they simply do not know what study materials to prescribe (Raphael 2016, 199; Arifin 2018, 163).

Poor communication between students and lecturers characterises the challenges faced by participants during their journey through the PGCE course. The study revealed that there is a communication breakdown between the students and lecturers. The finding concurs that of with Raphael (2016, 199) and Nsamba and Makoe (2017, 97) who reveal that lecturers from other universities do not respond to telephone calls and e-mails from students. The lack of effective communication is blamed on the lecturers' inability to respond to the queries of students. The lecturers deliberately do not answer their phone calls and e-mails, a behaviour that impacts on the effective delivery of the course and leaves most students frustrated and discourages them from pursuing the course. Raphael (2016, 199) argues that, since a geographical barrier exists between students and lecturers, effective communication will provide the support to bridge the gap and an increase in the communication gap will cause the untimely completion of their studies.

On the delivery of assignments, the participants provided different responses stating poor service for assignment submissions and feedback on the assignments. The participants demonstrated a negative perception about the administration of assignments, citing lack of assignments, poor quality assignments or ambiguous assignments for which they could not contact the lecturers for clarification. This negative development may affect students' ability to continue with their courses. The participants also expressed their frustration with assignment feedback from their lecturers. The participants complained about receiving assignment marks without explanations as to what was expected of them. This finding corroborates the assertion by Nsamba and Makoe (2017, 98) that lecturers at some open distance institutions do not give students feedback. This development can be attributed to lecturers failing to mark the

assignments and then give marks to favour students instead (Nsamba, and Makoe 2017, 98).

One important factor that obstructs the student administration of assignments is poor internet services and data bundles. The participants expressed their inability to finish and submit their assignments on time due to a lack of computers and internet services at their disposal. Participants with personal computers and unlimited free data are able to retrieve study materials and enjoy doing their assignments on time. Raphael (2016, 199) contends that most students in Tanzania do not have computers and internet services are poor, a situation that prevents them from completing their courses. The poor internet services also prevent students from submitting their assignments on time. Makoe and Nsamba (2019, 102) asserts that the internet connectivity of some universities is slow and prevents students from uploading files

RECOMMENDATIONS

The success of the ODeL programmes at institutions requires the implementation of effective student support services. This is because the pedagogy is driven by prompt delivery and an efficient technological system, unlike the traditional face-to-face university system. The ODeL institutions need to ensure that institutional policies translate into effective support services for students. The study recommends an effective administrative support for students. The application and registration should be decentralised, if possible. Application and registration centres could be created at district level to facilitate the proceedings. Administrative staff should be trained to manage online and face-to-face admissions.

Orientation programmes should be provided to PGCE students to help them understand what is ahead of them. Orientation is very important to improve the management-student relationship. In future, technology should be improved to engage students through workshops and videoconferencing to increase communication between lecturers and students.

The management of ODeL institutions should try to recruit the best and most competent lecturers. Lecturers should be trained in human resource management to help them receive students as clients that must be prioritised. The various faculty managers should ensure that e-mails sent to the respective lecturers are copied to them for effective monitoring.

CONCLUSION

The relevance of ODeL in the 21st century cannot be overemphasised. ODeL has come to play a very important role in enhancing higher education in South Africa. However, the current system is faced with many serious challenges. This article provides the experiences of students in sharing some challenges they experienced at the various ODeL universities in the country. The article also highlights some of the best ways to promote teaching and learning through the

current practices.

The current ODeL institutions are faced with problems of providing quality student support services. First-time students are not provided with adequate support to help them navigate the system successfully. Though the universities have provided some forms of student support services, the suitability of these services to the student leaves much to be desired for. It is evident from the study that these poor services emanate from the institutional and course levels. However, the online educational system has come to stay and the success of the programmes will depend largely on institutional reforms. One of such reforms should look at the how open distance e-learning (ODeL) students should be supported mainly through course registration and modes of delivery of modules. Special needs of the students must be prioritised through the administrative and student academic support.

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