Identifying Learner Support Services Gaps In Distance Education: Case Study Of A Federal Owned University In Nigeria

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Abstract

A distance education institution must have strategies for success in place, one of which should be the provision of effective learner support services. Compared to that of the traditional/face-to-face mode of teaching and learning, the learner support services needed for distance learning are more critical. The aim of the study was to identify the availability of the components of learner support services and gaps existing in any available system. The study also investigated the level of availability of different support services at the institution for distance learners. It further examined the challenges faced by the institution in the provision of support services. The case institution for this study is the Centre for Distance Learning, University of Benin, Benin City, Nigeria. The study applied qualitative and investigative methods to obtain knowledge by means of observation, interviews and study of official documents. A total of 43 stakeholders participated in the study. The population comprised of management staff, program coordinator, course adviser, E-tutors, technical and administrative staff and learners. The study identified the need for increased funding to upgrade the facilities and sustain the day-to-day operations of the institution. More training and engagements with the learners on how Open and Distance Learning (ODL) works and how to carry out the important tasks required of them on the learning application were also recommended. In order to reduce isolation created by the physical separation between learners and the Centre, there is a need for periodic face to face interaction between learners and the Centre.

Keywords: *open and distance learning, learner support service, e-Learning, ICT-based distance learning*

Introduction

The learner support system comprises all the resources in education that are designed to assist, guide, or facilitate learners in acquiring education (Arifin, 2018; Gurney & Grossi, 2019). These support services include study materials delivery, facilitator/tutor support, library services, ICT services, administrative support services, and guidance/counseling (Munyaradzi & Addae, 2019). In distance teaching and learning mode of education, the teacher and students are at dispersed geographical locations. This mode of education has opened a window of opportunity and widened access to education, enabling those who otherwise would not have been able to have access to education to embrace it. It frees learners from the constraints of time and space, while also offering

them flexible learning opportunities (Mmari, 1999). A great number of those who took advantage of this opportunity are those who are either physically challenged, could not afford to leave their jobs for school, wished to reduce the cost of education, and could not get admitted into the regular institutions or live in remote areas (Shikulo et al., 2020).

Over the years, distance education has progressed from correspondence mode to the adoption of technology as a tool to enhance learning (Morley, 2012; Robison & Huett, 2012). ICT has been introduced into different areas which include the areas of learners assessment (assignments, tests, and examinations), course material delivery (through online learning applications), and communication. In technology-enabled distance education environments, there are systems that need to be in place in order for distance learners to achieve meaningful learning. These systems are important factors in the success of any distance learning program (Mayes, 2006; Richardson et al., 2012).

The research findings by Godson (2007) reveal that there is a lack of basic learner support services and as a result learners face delay in the completion of their study programs, while some drop out of the program completely. Moyo and Mubengegwi (1995) also reported that remote students experienced delay in feedback on assignments and examinations. Some also abandoned their programs for various reasons and no one from their institution contacted them to know why they dropped out. A distance learning program is different from a conventional face to face learning program as the learners face isolation due to their teachers and fellow learners being at different locations from each other. Learner support services to students play a major role in learners' retention.

Objectives

The success of an ODL institution's learners support services positively affects the growth of the institution and the rate of attrition (Govender, 2018). The goal of this study was to investigate the learner support services provided by the institution under study and identify the areas that require improvement.

The specific objectives of the study were:

1. To investigate the learner support services at the Centre for Distance Learning, University of Benin and identify how these processes affect the learners, teaching and learning. The study examined the availability, quality, and effectiveness of learner support services for improving and facilitating distance learning.
2. To examine the managerial challenges faced by the management of the Centre in the provision of learner support services.

Review of Related Literature

For a developing country like Nigeria, with a population of over 200 million people, the regular tertiary institutions have not been able to give admission to the large number of qualified candidates (Alaneme & Olayiwola, 2013). Open and distance learning (ODL) has been found to be a promising and practical

strategy to address this challenge as it is able to increase participation in higher education without sacrificing quality (Adams et al., 2018). It is more cost-effective than setting up a regular university with high expenditure on infrastructure and other necessities. Distance education has experienced different stages, in which at the early stages used correspondence education, from cassette tape, radio, television broadcasts, cassette disk, and finally web-based education as means of providing learning resources (Akintola & Bello, 2021). Modern distance learning institutions employ web-based learning management systems that integrate many functions and processes into a system making it easy to manage their activities (Gatsha, 2020).

The integration of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) into the various learning processes including assessments, communication, course and instruction delivery, email, discussion forum, and chat room are some of the many ways that learning is enhanced (Alaneme & Olayiwola, 2013). In technology-enabled learning environments, the situation is complicated, and many conditions are needed to be in place in order for distance learners to achieve the expected learning outcomes (Mayes, 2006;, Richardson et al., 2012). The advanced ICT itself cannot naturally bring about a quality learning process nor can it on its own lead to the great achievement of students' learning. For students to have a quality learning process and good achievement, there is a need for effective learner support services to reduce the rate of dropout, increase retention, and improve the quality of learning (Gaskell, 2012).

Learner Support

Learner support services are the most important components that drive the success of a distance learning institution (Akintola & Bello, 2021). It constitutes and covers a wide range of processes including the initial enrolment and the teaching and learning program of the course and continues until the examination results are published (Moore, 2003; Tait, 2000). It also provides psychological support for those learners who feel isolated due to their distance from fellow learners. In most cases, learners miss the interaction that is present in face to face mode of learning, and for many, this mode of learning is different from what they were used to. It therefore takes time to get used to.

Components of Learner Support

Distance learning institutions are expected to have in place systems or procedures that monitor their implementation. These procedures should be able to take care of the following (Koul & Kanwar, 2006):

- Admission procedures
- Record keeping and administration
- Information service
- Library service
- E-Tutor support
- Counseling
- ICT Service provision
- Funding/ Financial support

These services encourage students to learn and develop a positive attitude towards distance mode of education provision (Koul & Kanwar, 2006).

Methodology

The case study approach was applied to this study. The study employed a qualitative and interpretive approach to investigate the case distance learning institution in two phases (Best & Khan, 2006). Data was collected by interviews and by direct observation. Direct observation helped to acquire dependable information without influence from the respondents (Kothari, 2008). Secondary data was used to complement the primary data, and relevant documents which included policy documents, and other official records were reviewed. A checklist was used to collect data on the available teaching and learning facilities such as study materials, computer systems, internet services, teaching staff, library service and other support services. The data obtained through observation was used to complement the gathered data through interviews (Yin, 1994). The population of this study comprised the University of Benin Centre for distance learning stakeholders. They were management staff, facilitator/e-tutors, technical, administrative staff members and learners/students of the Centre.

Reliability of Instrument

Reliability refers to the consistency with which repeated measures produce the same results across time and across observers (Engellant, Holland, & Piper, 2016). In order to achieve validity and reliability of the instruments, the researchers used the triangulation technique for data collection. The triangulation method used was to strengthen the data collection method as one method counterchecked the weakness of the other. The main mode of data collection was Interview. This was supplemented by review of documents of the institution. Observation was the third technique used to collect data. The documents from which data were collected were official documents of the communication between the main University and the Distance Learning Centre, and from the regulatory body of Universities. These documents include policies of the regulatory body on higher education; policy documents, documents on admission, inventory document on the available resources, and policy document for establishment of the Distance Learning Centre. This review was based on the actual events or factual information of what was going on as far as the learner support services were concerned. The research instruments were also refined in the field based on the reality on ground.

Data Analysis

The respondents of the study comprised the stakeholders of the Centre for Distance Learning of the University of Benin. They included the director, deputy director, e-tutors (lecturers), library, technical and administrative staff members of the Centre. Learners also participated in the study. The director and deputy director through their daily working experiences provided information on the managerial challenges facing the entire process of providing learner support services. Table 1 shows the composition of the study population.

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Table 1
Respondents' Composition

S/N	Respondents	Number
1	Management Staff	2
2	Program Coordinator/Course Adviser	2
3	eTutors/Lecturers Support	17
4	ICT Technical Staff	2
5	E-Library Staff	2
6	Registry	1
7	Helpdesk Office/Learner Support	2
8	Recording Studio	1
9	Learners	1
	Total	**43**

Findings

The findings were obtained through interviews, observation and review of official documents of the Centre. Table 2 and Table 3 show availability checklists of the elements of learner support.

Table 2
Interview Checklist

S/N	Elements of Effective Learner Support	Available	Unavailable	Adequate	Inadequate
A	**Instructional Materials**		✓		
i	Reference Books	✓		✓	
ii	Electronic Books	✓		✓	
iii	Audiobooks		✓		
iv	Audio/visual Books	✓		✓	
v	Videos	✓			✓
vi	Hard Copy Prints	✓			✓
B	**Electronic Library**	✓			✓
C	**eTutor Support**				
i	Tutorials are conducted.	✓			✓
ii	Assignments and mentoring are provided	✓			✓

iii	Learners are given the opportunity to interact with tutors actively in the interpretation of study materials through participatory facilitation techniques	✓			✓
iv	Learners receive timely and constructive feedback from tutors on a regular basis.	✓			✓
v	The tutor-learner ratio is sufficiently small to enable tutors to give learners either individual or group attention.	✓		✓	
vi	Learners have the opportunity to contact tutors regularly, either by phone, email, or other approved means.	✓			✓
vi	Internet access available for teachers.	✓		✓	
viii	Internet service available for staff members.		✓		
D	**Information Service**	✓			✓
E	**Funding**	✓			✓
F	**Counseling Service**	✓			✓
i	Learners have access to counseling support in resolving difficulties (personal or academic).	✓			✓

Adapted from Welch and Reed (Eds) (n.d., 32-34).

Table 3
Availability of elements of effective learner support service

S/N	Elements of Effective Learner Support	Available	Unavailable	Adequate	Inadequate
i	Tutorial and assessment support and counseling activities are regularly monitored and feedback given to learners and tutors for improvement.	✓		✓	

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ii	The number of tutors (most of whom are part-time to the program) is sufficient to provide for individual needs of learners.	✓		✓	
iii	Required learning resources, in the form of libraries, laboratories, and the equipment necessary for successful learning, are accessible to learners.	✓			✓
iv	Learners are provided with technical support (literacy skills) in the technology needed for the program, and equipment is in place to facilitate learning.	✓			✓
v	Procedures and processes for receiving, recording, and dispatching assignments for marking and returning to learners are in place and communicated to tutors and learners.	✓		✓	
vi	ICT/technical equipment are accessible to learners.	✓			✓
vii	Submission of assessment work is monitored, and inactive learners and those at risk are identified, and contacted.	✓		✓	
viii	Tutorial and assessment support and counseling activities are regularly monitored and feedback given to learners and tutors for improvement.	✓		✓	
ix	The number of tutors (most of whom are part-time to the Centre) is sufficient to provide for individual needs of learners.	✓		✓	
x	Correct up-to-date records of learners' profiles and contacts.	✓		✓	

Discussion

Admission Procedures

The processes that lead to being admitted are automated. The Centre has a website with a student portal that takes care of the application, admission processes, admission clearance, and fees payments. This portal makes the application seamless. There are also two staff members on the ground with their phone numbers on the portal for applicants to call when they encounter any challenge. When applicants or admitted learners have issues, there is either a helpdesk officer or on the ground staff that they can contact by phone

or visit at the Centre for assistance.

Information Service

The Centre established a two-way communication system where learners support staff have support telephone lines available to learners. Social media platforms are available where learners interact freely with the e-Tutors and staff members of the Centre. Here the teachers pass on information and get feedback from the learners. The LMS is another medium of communication between the e-Tutors and learners.

Phone calls, social media, the LMS, and emails are all means of communication between the Centre staff and the learners. The only issue here is that the staff members are using their personal phones for this service. The counselors also do not have any official device to reach the learners. Therefore, it was found that on-the-ground-communication was not effective enough, leading to a great challenge in supporting teaching and learning. Although there were systems of communication like the website, letters, phones, used for the daily operations, most of them were done with the personal devices of the personnel in charge.

Library Services

During interviews and interactive sessions with the learners, it was observed that the library had no copy of the study materials for learners to use for reference. Some who visited complained that there were no study materials or other educational materials that they could borrow. The situation would adversely affect learners' academic performance if what they have is limited only to the information on the Centre's online learning platform. Since the quality of library service affects the academic performance of the learners, it is therefore very important that the library services at the Centre should be improved upon to support the learning processes.

The Centre has a space set aside and equipped with three computer systems meant for use as the mini digital library. The library does not offer any library services. The reason is that the components that should enable them to have access to the internet are missing. The systems are also not networked so they are not linked to each other in a network format and therefore cannot communicate with each other or access the internet. Students using their own personal computers can access the main University of Benin library to have access to eBooks online. A link exists from the Centre's website to the University website library. Unfortunately, some of the students complain of not having their own computer systems and as such could not privately access the library. The mini digital library at the Centre would have filled that gap for learners but it cannot because it is not yet functioning as an electronic library. Some of the learners would have wanted to come to the library to use its facilities to go online if it was functioning. This lack of access has resulted in learners not responding to assignments given on the Centre's online learning platform. Even though the instructions/assignments were confirmed to be on the site, the learners claimed not finding them. In addition, some of the learners do not yet know how to use the learning management system (Moodle) adopted by the

institution for learning and teaching. Using phones for some of these activities is frustrating for the learners.

Academic Support Services - Study Materials

In the process of teaching and learning through open and distance learning, adequate availability of study resources was thought to be of paramount importance. One of the characteristics of ODL is the use of mixed media courseware which includes video, audios, hardcopy prints, and electronic books. These study materials in different formats cater to the different learning preferences of learners. The study therefore examined the availability and quality of the study resources at the institution. Study materials were found to be adequately prepared for all the courses. These were prepared by experienced lecturers in the regular arm of the University who had undergone training on ODL. The drawback is that the available materials are in only one format. They are only found in the institution's website in electronic format as ebooks. This will not meet the needs of learners who prefer to read printed books or those who prefer to listen to audio materials (Godson, 2007).

The unavailable financial resource to produce the course materials in hard copy is the reason they were not printed. In the interviews conducted with learners, they would have preferred to have their study materials in multimedia forms: print, electronic copy, audio and on CDs. Multimedia resources offer the learner options for mode of acquiring knowledge and using more than one mode of learning is an effective way to make content more comprehensible, build background knowledge, support students with academic speaking and writing, and bolster student engagement. As some learners stated, "…with more than one mode of learning, it is possible for me to continue to study even when I do not have data or power supply to go online."

Another learner who also preferred the study materials in multimedia format stated, "…I prefer to listen to audio materials, because it helps me to study anywhere…I could just plug my phone to my ear phone and learn. But we were not given in audio course."

The cost of producing learning materials in multimedia forms to give to learners was challenging. The major challenge was finance.

Funding

Adequate finance is very crucial to providing learners support service and lack of it has been found to contribute to very poor support services to learners as the services provided becomes the bare minimum just to get by (Ogbodo & Nwaoku, 2007; Chukwura, 2011). According to literature, a large number of education programmes suffer this fate of just managing to get by due to lack of the needed financial resources to run the learner support system as required or as it should be. This in turn affects the ability to provide adequate learner support services and in the long run affects the objectives of the distance learning institution.

Apart from daily administrative issues, there is the need for adequate finance to produce study/learning materials, communicate with learners through phone calls, place advertisements to create awareness of the existence of the distance learning program that at the moment is at its infant stage. All these need money which is insufficiently provided.

ICT Infrastructure

Concerning the availability of ICT facilities, the Centre has a robust website with two portals. One portal handles students' application processes leading to admission, clearance, and fees payment. The second portal houses the adopted learning management system of the Centre. The learning management system (LMS) adopted by the Centre is the Moodle LMS. Within the LMS, all the course modules (learning materials) are uploaded and from here learners access them. Assignments, quizzes, exam results and news updates can also be passed onto learners from the learning application.

As for physical facilities, the Centre is supposed to have a computer laboratory, conference room, offices for e-Tutors, and an electronic library equipped with computers with internet access at the Centre. These physical resources are vital in enhancing pedagogical orientation as well as school functioning towards quality education. In the absence of these, the Centre temporarily is using the facilities of the main University. However, there needs to be some basic equipment at the Centre for staff and learners to use. The computer systems at the Centre that are meant for staff members to use require upgrade as they are not connected to the internet due to unavailable components; and the systems are not of high performance even though they were newly supplied is a challenge. The ones in the Centre's library are of the same quality. As a result of this, they are not being used to access the website and perform other online tasks that require access to the internet. Besides, they have persistent issues including hard disk failure, keyboard failure, bad monitor etc. The poor quality of the systems is the reason for the frequent breakdown. Qualified ICT personnel for computer maintenance and troubleshooting would help in attending to the systems to prevent a complete breakdown.

Counseling

There is only one counselor to cater for the counseling needs of the learners. The total number of students is currently 14 (fourteen), and though the one counselor can adequately cater for the counseling needs of this number of learners, the learner population is expected to grow as more enroll. By the standard of the regulating body, there are supposed to be at least three counselors, one of whom should be an academic/teaching staff. The Centre has three counseling offices which is adequate as far as counseling offices are concerned but the offices require proper furnishing. For instance, the offices are supposed to be soundproof, with special chairs, mirrors and other items required of a counseling office and these are unavailable.

Conclusion and Recommendations

One great challenge to the Centre was confirmed to be the shortage of space for a proper e-library, conference rooms, computer labs and e-Tutors' offices. In the case of the e-library, the space currently used for e-library can sit only three persons at a time. A bigger space that would take more computer systems and other electronic devices are recommended to cater for both e-tutors and learners needs. The financial resources allocated for funding the daily operations of the Centre are grossly inadequate, resulting in some learner support services being given priority over other equally important ones. Lastly, it was found that there is a poor system of communication whereby students experienced several communication breakdowns. Periodic face-to-face sessions with the students are needed as suggested by the learners themselves. There is a lack of well-established provision of guidance and counseling service to students. This could adversely affect students' progress and confidence in learning since students were lacking daily contact with their tutors.

The study therefore recommends that:

1. Firstly, study materials in different formats should be adequately available and provided in a timely manner. This distribution of different formats can meet the needs of the learners who are likely to have different learning preferences. There is a standing arrangement with a courier company to handle the delivery of materials to learners, but this service was never used because hard copy study materials have so far not been produced by the Centre.

2. In ensuring easy access to library learning materials, the services provided should be upgraded with adequate and up-to-date equipment and materials for improving the learning process.

3. ICT services should be facilitated with equipment like high-powered computers systems, scanners, and printers. The missing internet components should be provided and the faulty systems be promptly fixed to facilitate learning for the learners who may want to visit the library to use its facilities. This would reduce students' dependence on their tutors.

4. A good system of guidance and counseling should be established where learners can freely reach out to their counselor when they have challenges. The Centre should have at least one academic counselor who should counsel them on challenges related to their academics while another counselor handles psychological and emotional challenges. The counselor should be able to reach out to the learners through the online learning platform. There is a counseling form online. Learners should be encouraged to make use of it at any time. Learners should be encouraged to make use of it at any time. With the online form, they have the option to send their messages or complaints without disclosing their identity.

5. Adequate financial resources should be allocated to the Centre for their daily operations to ensure the smooth provision of learner support services to the learners and other administrative functions.

6. The E-tutors need to be motivated to deliver effectively. One way of

doing this is to address issues raised by them which include providing payment for course material development, improving payments for tutoring, and enabling them to participate in distance learning education conferences and seminars.

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