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Appraising the Organisation and Management of Distance Learners' Support Services: A Study of some Nigerian Universities

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Abstract

In recent time, great emphasis has been placed on the quality of learner support services provided by distance educators. This is as a result of its recognition as an integral and essential component of a distance learning system. Learner support services guide the learners for self-study and serve as a useful interface between the institution and the learner. It is argued that there may not be a provision of learner support services for distance learners in most dual-mode institutions. This paper reports an investigation of the type of learner support services existing for distance learners' in five dual-mode institutions and the only single-mode institution in Nigeria. The learners' perception of the availability and adequacy of such services in one of the dual-mode universities were also studied. The study used the survey method, which involved the use of self-completing questionnaire and observation. Two staff, each of the universities, making a total of twelve, and two hundred and sixteen students formed the sample size of the study. Frequency tables, as well as percentages, were used for the analysis. Findings showed that support services were available though not adequate. Students suggested areas of interest to be improved upon in the learning support provision.

Keywords'. Learners, support services, distance, single-mode, dual-mode

Introduction

Distance education provides greater flexibility for individualized learning. An environment where learning occurs at the time, location, and pace of the individual learner should be the primary goal of distance education providers. Against this background, providers of distance education are expected to offer a minimum set of core services which will assist distance learners in identifying and achieving their educational goals. The assistance and guidance offered to students to enhance enrollment, decrease dropout and contribute to academic success, form the learner support services. In recent time, learner support has gained interest and attention among distance educators given its agreed role as an integral part of most of the great distance learning institutions primarily in the open universities. It is so because distance learners who are separated by time and space from their schools or institutions require adequate support services to help them overcome the feeling of isolation and facilitate good learning outcomes.

There is an assumption that support services are readily available on campus for students of conventional universities; the same can be said of single-mode universities that have structured student support service centres. However, the dual-mode universities may not boast of such adequate services for their distance learners given their plain background and the relegation in most cases (common in Nigeria) of students of distance learning. This oftentimes leads to poor performance and high dropout rates.

Organisation and Management of Distance Education

Sewart (1993) noted that due to large number of students which resulted in mass higher education, there was bureaucratisation which made the approach to education seem like an assembly line in which the product representing students are assembled by a number of specialists, many in narrow academic disciplines but some also in 'support areas' which are at least as critical to the attainment of the final objective of successful completion of undergraduate studies. Mass higher education acquired the characteristics and management approaches of large scale industry because it is an industrialised form of teaching and learning. He also observed that the design and management of an organisation as approached by the classical management theorists in the first half of this century (21st) was seen much in the same way an engineer would approach the design of a machine in which each of the parts is designed to have a particular role and to work together to a strict pattern and as part of the whole. This form of management is strengthened in organisations which can operate in an environment similar to that of a machine. The operation intended must be

straightforward, and inputs and outputs must be constant. Organisations structured in this way were not designed for innovation and may have difficulty adapting themselves to changing circumstances. This was the basis of management theory early in the first half of the 21st century and was also found in the move to mass higher education which began at that time.

If a cue is taken from Sewart (1993)'s postulation, for instance, the earlier correspondence studies for distance learners at that time were structured to adopt the 'teach yourself mode, which packaged study materials to students by post. This practice seemed like an end in itself, as it was assumed that students would read and understand the materials on their own and be able to answer assessment questions at the end of the exercise which takes them to another level. Pedagogically, Keegan (2004) asserts that 'teach yourself books provide the reader with information on the subject matter from which the student learned, but lacked interpersonal communication, different learning techniques and feedback on learning endeavours seen as an integral part of the learning process.

Management theory in the first part of the 21st century looked to the analogy of the machine and portrayed closed systems which exist in themselves as part of the perfect design. The last half of the century is looking at the analogy of the organism, which is the systems approach to organisation and management (Sewart, 1993). This approach believes that the organisation is an interrelated subsystem where such subsystems are cells or organs and might be quite complicated in themselves. This presupposes that distance learning centres or institutes which are subsystems in the conventional or dual-mode universities should be seen as quite distinct and complicated because of the changing needs of learners. That is, it should not be seen as a perfect package that must follow the strict rules of the regular or conventional mode. In distance education, the independence of time and space leads more readily to a division into separate parts and these separate parts of the process must fit

together as a coherent whole from the viewpoint of the student, otherwise the objective may not be achieved. There should not be a creation of a perfect distinct package for distance learners which can be tested and proven for precision. For instance, on the issue of learners' support or instructional design, there should not be a mindset of designing an ideal instructional material per se but rather an instruction created with the consideration of the individual needs of the learners; otherwise, it will amount to a teaching package. In other words, instructional materials should be flexible enough to accommodate learners' individual needs and capacity.

The conventional universities in Nigeria like others in the world had hitherto operated their distance education as a closed system in the first half of the 21st century. The structure in the days of Correspondence and Open Studies Unit (COSU) and later Correspondence and Open Studies Institute (CO SIT) before its transformation to Distance Learning Institute (DLI) for instance, was such that departments whose courses were involved were responsible for the coordination, teaching and assessment of the courses both at the conventional and distance learning sessions (Olayiwola, Reju and Alaneme 2009, 462-466). Course materials were prepared and distributed to the registered correspondence students. The academic board and planning were the same for regular as well as the correspondence unit. The students were seen as same, and no care was taken for distant learners as people separated by time and space. The teaching package (mostly face-to-face) was assumed to be what the students needed and should be enough to make them succeed. At the emergence of DLI, the university council gave a level of autonomy to the institute, constituted a board of studies headed by the Vice Chancellors (VC's) appointee usually a professor, appoints a director (who may not be exposed to ODL practices or have a formal training in that regards) who formulates the broad policies of the institute along with board members, and so maintains the status quo as in the conventional face-to-face mode of learning.

Currently, the systems approach seems to be in practice amongst business organisations and university education is not isolated in this regard. Attention and autonomy are granted to the organisation and management of distance education in Nigeria presently because of the need for continuous exchange with the environment in terms of input, output and feedback. It is believed that reasonable distance education provides interpersonal communication and

feedback, as well as course content and delivery techniques using a range of facilities known as student support services while bearing in mind the difference in learning abilities. There is no correct way of achieving an outcome but rather a several since the outcome required is dynamic. With the system approach, institutions are able to evolve to deal with new challenges and opportunities needed in providing distance education.

Brief Institutional Profiles

There are currently six recognised federal universities operating the dual-mode system and one single-mode university in Nigeria (NUC, 2009).

Table 1: Selected ODL Universities in Nigeria

Mode	Institutions
Dual	(1) University of Lagos (UNILAG), (2) University of Abuja (UniAbuja), (3) University of Ibadan (UI), (4) Obafemi Awolowo University (OAU), He Ife, (5) Federal University of Technology (FUTY), Yola, (6) University of Maiduguri (UniMaid)
Single	National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), Lagos

The University of Lagos right from inception had the vision of adopting distance learning in its mode of delivery as it started through COSU in 1974, metamorphosed into COSIT in 1983 and later to Distance Learning Institute (DLI) in 1997 till date. It was established to offer first degree certificates in Science Education courses, Business Administration and Accounting.

The University of Abuja took off from the first Open University that was closed down by the military government in 1984. The conception of distance learning in the University of Abuja is as old as the university itself: through its Centre for Distance Learning and Continuing Education (CDLCE), established 1992, the university offers degree courses using the distance learning mode.

The University of Ibadan through the sub-unit of the Department of Adult Education and Extra-mural Studies conceived the idea of distance education in 1988 through the Centre for External Studies. It started by offering degree programmes through the correspondence mode before evolving into a full-fledged distance learning programme in 2002, its name then changed to Distance Learning Centre. It offers both degree and diploma certificate programmes.

Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, established its Centre for Distance Learning in 2002 to provide Pre-degree, Certificate, Diploma, Bachelors and Postgraduate programmes. The centre was formally established as a part-time study designed to accommodate regular students as well as professionals who want to advance their career while still engaged in full-time employment.

Federal University of Technology, Yola, was established in 2002 to take care of first degree programmes in Accounting, Business Management, Educational Management and Guidance and Counselling.

The University of Maiduguri, in an attempt to ameliorate the problem of access to university education, has in the past four years established the Centre for Distance Learning to offer both diploma and degree courses.

The National Open University of Nigeria was established in 1983 but closed a few months later in 1984 by the then military government. It was resuscitated in 2001 to make education available to as many people as are willing and ready to benefit from the education provided through flexible and affordable distance learning.

Perceptions of Learner Support Services

Learner support comprises all the assistance provided by a distance education institution which matches the facilities which a face-to-face system provides for the success of its students.

Learner support is defined as the resources which learners can access in order to carry out the learning processes (Garrison and Bayton, 1987 in Usun, 2004). In distance education, support is concerned with a range of human and non-human resources to guide and facilitate the educational transaction

(Garrison, 1989). These resources may be library facilities, various media and software programs, or they could be various socio-economic variables such as student's financial self-sufficiency and capacity to cope with their roles and responsibilities in the family and community. The most important form of support in an educational transaction in Garrison's (1989) view is the teacher, who through guidance and direction can assist the students in achieving their goals and developing control of the educational process. Dillon, Gunawardena and Parker (1992) in a study of the use of real-time interactive television programme observed that students cited their teacher as the factor that played an essential role in aiding their learning. When also asked to name the significant barriers to their learning experience, they also named their teacher. This suggests that the teacher in any interactive distance learning system can make or mar the success of students; but the students are expected to develop an attitude not to depend solely on the teacher, but learn to study with whatever material (asynchronous and synchronous) that is made available, while also interacting with the teacher where further explanation is required.

Harichandan (2005) states that learner support services can be provided through (i) the preparation of a well-packaged study material using self-instructional format in simple language, with clear cut objectives, good content coverage with illustrations, self-check exercises, summary at the end, glossary of complicated and technical words and a list of suggested readings; (ii) appropriate constructive comments on the performance of students by tutors on their assignments so as to encourage them; (iii) organising personal contact programme through face-to-face classroom teaching, guidance and counselling, encouraging study habits, interaction with fellow students; (iv) system of study centres, library services, audio-video facilities, interactivity through computer-mediated communications etc. Dillon and Blanchard (1991), suggest that a distance education programme must design and apply effective learner support services and systems, keeping in view the learner's needs, content, institutional context and technology. They classified the support systems thus; a) Learner support and learner needs; b) Learner support and content; c) Learner support related to the institutional context, and; d) Learner support and technology.

Tait (2003) identifies three reasons learner support is necessary: a) students want to support and interaction except for some 10% of students with

the personality type may not want interaction with other students. The other 90% may look forward to it but demands on time and place prevalent in the lives of adult learners may not allow them; b) student support especially guidance and counselling, tutor support, useful information and administration are all affective which reinforces students sense of confidence and reduces drop-out rate; and c) the nature of learning which includes a further mode of explanation for students especially for tutoring in group work in study centres or online and in the return of assignments termed 'mediation,' has an impact on the learning process.

Support systems developed in recognition of students need help the distance learner become competent and self-confident in learning, interact socially and self-evaluating (Rae, 1989) in Usun (2004). The failure or success and overall image of the institution are determined by the strength and weakness of the student support services in place (Kishore, 1998).

The problem of the Study

It is argued that there may not be adequate provision of learner support services for distance learners in most dual-mode institutions. This is as a result of the fact that concentration on support services is usually on the regular or conventional students who have all the facilities modelled to suit their needs. On the other hand, the amount of support services an institution can offer as stated by Molefi (2002) in Usun (2004) mostly depends on the capacity and resources at the disposal of such particular institution. That is to say, that the resources and carrying capacity of universities are not analogous; and the universities understudy in Nigeria are not different.

Purpose of the Study

The study was based on the assumption that single-mode distance learning universities may have specific support services for their students even though it may not be adequate than the conventional or dual-mode universities for their distance learners. This study attempted to determine what support services were available in the single-mode university and the five dual-mode universities in Nigeria. Similarly, it also investigated the feeling of distant learners of the University of Lagos about the availability and adequacy or not of such support services.

Research Questions

The following research questions were used to elicit responses from respondents:

- 1) Are there provisions for learner support services?
- 2) What facilities are available in which university?
- 3) What are students perception of the availability or otherwise of the facilities?
- 4) Are the facilities adequate?

Methodology

The study made use of the ex-post facto and the survey design as this was deemed to be the most appropriate method to ascertain the practices of learner support services in the dual-mode universities.

Population, Sample and Sampling Technique

The six dual mode universities and the only single-mode university in Nigeria, as well as the distance learners, formed the population of the study. However, it was difficult to study all six dual-mode universities with their students. Two staff each of the only single-mode university in Nigeria and five of the dual-mode universities were studied along with the distance learning students of the University of Lagos. The sample size was twelve (12) respondents in all found in a cluster at a forum organised by NUC. The student sample size comprised 260 students of the DLI, University of Lagos.

The primary instrument for data collection was the self-completing questionnaires. One questionnaire tagged 'Learners Support Services in Distance Learning Institutions' (LSSDLI) administered to the staff of the universities and another tagged 'DLI students' questionnaire on learners support services' administered to the students. The twelve copies of the questionnaire to the staff were all retrieved, while two hundred and sixteen (216) copies were returned from the students. This formed the actual sample size for the students. The questionnaire item was personally served to the students at their study centre within the university. The cluster sampling

method was adopted as a cross-section of students cutting across all departments (Business Admin, Accounting, Educational Science and others) classified into male and female, were served the questionnaire item in their respective classes.

Data Analysis Technique

The frequency tables as well as percentage ere used for the analysis.

Results/Findings

Table 2: Support Services Provided by Universities

		Institution					
Support Services		DLI UNIL AG	CDL UNIM AID	CDL FUTY	DLC UI	CDL/CE ABUJA	NOUN
Library Support	Books	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
	CD-ROMS	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
	Online	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
	Internet	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
	Video	No	No	No	No	No	Yes
	Information	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate
	Available	te	te		te		te
	Conveying mode	Oral	Oral	Written	Written	Written	Written
Study Materials	Writers	Panel	Panel	Experts	Panel	Panel	Panel
	Editors	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
	In-text style	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
	Course modules	Some	Some	All	All	Some	Some
	Presentation	Personal	Personal	Textbook	Personal	Personal	Mixture
	Evaluation	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes
	Feedback	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
	Radio as well as face-to-face	Yes	No	No		No	Yes
Assignment	Submission System	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
	Turn around	4 months	1 month	1 month	2 months	1 month	1 month
	Along	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No
	Mistakes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
	Compulsory	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes
	Feedback	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No

Study Centre	Number	One	Two	Two	Three	Four	Four
	Condition	Ok	Very Ok	Ok	Ok	Ok	Ok
Personal Contact Programme Guidance & Counselling	Frequency	Weekly	Biweekly	Monthly		Monthly	Weekly
	Residential	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	No
	Pre-Enrolment	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
	New Students	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
	Non-performing	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
	Dropouts	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	Yes

The responses from most of the institutions selected for this study on library support and study material suggest that they have mostly books as their library resources except for the only single-mode university. Again, the institutions claim moderate information available for students on library resources and communication of such resources is mostly written than oral. The study materials in the form of course modules in most of the institutions from the study is handled by a panel of course writers, the in-text and personal intimate style of presentation is adopted although the materials are not available in all the courses. However, students are not given the opportunity to evaluate the study material and send feedback on them. Also, the radio programme is used in addition to face-to-face in some of the institutions. It was noted that the University of Lagos owns a radio station (Unilag FM 103.1) which has about 200 km coverage and is used for distance learners.

On assignments and personal contact programmes, the institutions under study each have a system of assignment submission where the turnaround time for the assignments differs from one to four months. These assignments are usually not given along with the study materials at the beginning of the semester or session. The submission of assignment response sheet is compulsory in some of the universities while in some, it is not. However, most of the universities do not usually give feedback to their students on the assignments. Personal contact programmes vary

from weekly/biweekly/monthly contact periods to residential periods except for the single-mode university whose contact programmes are free and residential periods are nonexistent.

All the dual-mode institutions and the single-mode institution offer guidance and counselling at the pre-enrollment and enrollment (new students) stages while most including the single-mode institution offer to counsel to none performing students

Table 3: Students Opinion on Support Services

	Yes	No
Library Support		
Availability of library services	168	26
Accessibility to library facilities	114	92
Adequacy of available library facilities	35	135
Study Material		
Flexible learning styles e.g. course modules, CDs, audio cassettes	21	171
Radio and TV programmes provided in addition to face-to-face contact	30	161
Use of computer -mediated communication e.g. Blogs, facebook, by tutor	14	181
Personal Contact Programmes		
Flexibility of lectures and suitability of time.	175	34
Sufficiency of times lectures are held to enable meaningful learning	82	122
Monitoring of tutors attendance and performance at contact sessions	138	38
Interaction among fellow students	115	79
Freedom of telephone contact with tutor, course adviser and counsellor	110	83
Assignments		
Assignments and projects given as part of learning requirement	188	19
Evaluation of learning outcomes through assignments, test and exams	181	22
Comments on performance through marked assignments returned to students	5	207
Feedback sent on work progress	12	190
Other Supports		
Administrative as well as personal problems addressed by the institute	49	139
Counselling for dropouts		
Workshops and training organized for students on DE technologies	15	182
Accurate and timely information on admissions, registrations, course requirements, and payment policies provided	151	52
Friendly, caring and helpful administrative staff	75	118
Availability of scholarship awards and bursary facilities	8	140
Provision of guidance and counselling session	47	122

very little or no support of radio, TV and computer-mediated communications in addition to the face-to-face contact. A higher number of the students confirmed the suitability of lecture times, interaction with fellow students and freedom to make telephone contact with the tutor, course adviser and counsellor in reaction to assignments and personal contact programmes. Evaluation of learning outcomes through assignments, tests and exams are conducted quite all right, but comments and feedback are not sent to the students on their performance as reflected by the 207 as against 5 that said yes to the comment.

Regarding other support services, the students decried the lack of support in the form of guidance and counselling on personal problems by the institution as well as the unfriendly, uncaring and unhelpful administrative staff. They, however, acknowledged the accurate and timely information on admissions, registrations, course requirements, and payment policies, among others as can be seen in the 151 respondents as against 52 who said no.

Further findings revealed that students strongly emphasized the need for guidance and counselling to meet their personal as well as academic needs; and provision of asynchronous technologies in addition to face-to-face. A comfortable learning environment with all the amenities was also expected as well as a scholarship for indigent students, and the opportunity for payment of school fees in instalments. Access to internet services to enhance ICT usage was another need in addition to improved interaction between students and lecturers. Students requested the return of tutor-marked assignments with comments on their performance, and wish to be part of the academic planning committee. A better and improved treatment by the administrative staff to students will also be appreciated.

Discussion, Implication and Conclusion

The results of the survey suggest that there is provision for learner support services in all the universities studied even though they vary according to institutions ability and are grossly inadequate. For instance, results on library resources by the universities show that it is mostly books that are provided. This implies that students

would need to physically visit the library in order to access materials to enhance learning. This negates the idea of 'distance learning.' The students perceived that some of the support services were actually available although not adequate, while in some cases they were not as per their responses. There was no substantial difference between the students' perception and the university' claim. It is evident that the support systems of the dual-mode institutions are not anywhere close to the ODL requirement even though there is no stamped package as to what the best support services should be, basically because of the socio-cultural diversity and carrying capacity of the institutions.

There is a need for the dual-mode institutions in Nigeria to ensure that support services to an extent should meet acceptable standards that address learner needs, content, institutional context and technology. This way, learners academic performance would be improved since the content will take care of the cognitive, affective, as well as psychomotor domain and be learner-centred. Though it is the general belief that most distance education centres in the Nigerian conventional universities are established solely to generate income for the mother university (Fagbamiye, 2002 in Adegbile and Oyekanmi, 2009), it should be noted that the NUC guidelines for open and distance learning in Nigeria made reference to the Nigerian National Policy on Education (2004) which states that at any stage after junior secondary education, an individual shall be able to choose between continuing full time studies, combining work with study, or embarking on full time employment without excluding the prospect of resuming studies later; which is the reason for the establishment of distance education in case of the latter and those combining work with study. The policy further stipulates that the goals of open and distance education will include the provision of access to quality education and equity in educational opportunities for those who otherwise would have been denied. Therefore, dual-mode universities should endeavour to treat the distance learners as learners with their own specific needs which must at the end of the day achieve the objective of producing satisfied individuals that will be useful to themselves and society as a whole.

The Future of Support Services in Nigerian Distance Learning Institutes

The National Universities Commission (NUC) in collaboration with the British Council and the Open University of UK, has taken a bold step to ensure that the right practice is adopted amongst the Nigerian distance education providers. These include the provision of computer-mediated teaching as the academic staff of the six dual mode universities and the only single-mode University (NOUN) in Nigeria was engaged in e-teaching training divided into sections and concluded in one year.

Specifically, the University of Lagos, in addition, has an on-going step B project assisted by the World Bank to train all academic staff on the use of TCT for effective delivery.

It is cheering to note that the face of distance learning in Nigeria may change fast if the proposition from the NUC quarters that the directors of the distance centres be of the position of Deputy Vice-Chancellors of universities is anything to go by. This is to enable a better organisation and management as well as support for the students.

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