APPRAISING THE ORGANISATION AND MANAGEMENT OF LEARNER SUPPORT SERVICES IN DISTANCE LEARNING

BY

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Abstract

Distance education or learning in recent times has emerged as an alternative mode of higher education all over the world. With the advancement of information technology several Distance Learning Institutes (DLIs) are providing admissions to a large number of students in various programs. More emphasis is placed on the quality of learner support services extended by the DLIs as these have been recognized as an integral and essential component of distance learning system. These learner support services guide the learners for self-study and serve as useful interface between the institution and the learner. It is argued that there may not be provision of learner support services in most dual mode institutions. This paper reports an investigation of the type of learners support services existing in the distance learning centres of five dual-mode institutions and the only single mode institution within Nigeria; and the learners' perception of the availability and adequacy of such services in one of the dual-mode university. The study used the survey method which involved the use of questionnaire and observation.   Two staff each of the universities and two hundred and sixteen students formed the sample size of the study. Findings showed that support services were available though not adequate. Suggestions were made to enhance the provision of learner support services in the institutions.

Keywords: Learner support services, Distance Learning

1.   Introduction

Distance education provides greater flexibility to 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 is expected to offer a minimum set of core services which will assist distance learners in identifying and achieving their educational goals. These assistance and guidance that students are offered in order to enhance enrollment, decrease dropout and contribute to academic success, forms the learner support services. In the recent time, learner support has gained interest and attention among distance educators given its agreed role as an integral part of most of the good distance learning institutes especially 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 assist them to overcome the feeling of isolation and facilitate good learning outcomes.

Support services, it is assumed, are readily available on campus for students of conventional universities; 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 to their distance learners given their conventional background and the relegation in most cases (common in Nigeria) of students of distance learning. This often times leads to poor performance and high dropout rates.

2.   Organization and Management of Distance Education

Sewart (1993) noted that due to large number of students which resulted in mass higher education, there was bureaucratization which made education seemed like an assembly line approach in which the product representing studentship, is 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 industrialized form of teaching and learning. He observes that the design and management of an organization as approached by the classical management theorists in the first half of this century was seen in much the same way as an engineer approaches 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, he says, is strengthened in organizations 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. Organizations structured in this way were not designed for innovation and may have difficulty adapting themselves to changing circumstances.

He asserts that this was the basis of management theory early in the first half of this century (21st) and that was also found in the move to mass higher education which began at that time. For instance, the correspondence studies for distance learners at that time were structured to adopt the 'teach yourself' mode, which packaged study materials to students by post and seemed like an end itself. Pedagogically, like Keegan (2004) asserts, teach yourself books provided the reader with information on the subject matter from which the student learned. It was assumed that students would read and understand on their own and be able to answer assessment questions at the end which would take them to a new level. However, interpersonal communication, different learning techniques and feedback on learning endeavors seen as an integral part of the learning process was absent.

Management theory in the first part of this 21st century in essence 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 this century looked to the analogy of the organism or the brain which is the systems approach to organization and management. This approach believes that the organization is an interrelated subsystems where such subsystems are cells or organs and might be quite complex in themselves. This presupposes that distance education units or centres which are subsystems in the conventional or dual- mode universities should be seen as quite complex because of the changing needs of learners. That is, it should not be seen as a perfect package that most 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 discrete

elements and these discrete elements of the process must fit together as a coherent whole from the standpoint of the student, otherwise the objective may not be achieved. There is no construction of a perfect discrete element which can be tested and refined almost in laboratory conditions until they are precisely what are required. For instance, the excessive concentration on a perfect instructional material without consideration of the individual needs of the learners amounts to a teaching package. The teaching package should rather be flexible enough to accommodate learners' individual needs.

The conventional universities in Nigeria like others in the world had hitherto operated their distance education as a closed system in the early half of this 21st century. For instance, the structure in the days of Correspondence and Open Studies Unit (COSU) and later Correspondence and Open Studies Institute (COSIT) before its' transformation to Distance Learning Institute (DLI) 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 & Alaneme, 2009). Course materials were prepared and distributed to the registered correspondence students. The academic board and planning was same for regular as well 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 VCs appointee usually a professor, appoints a Director (who may not be exposed to ODL practices nor 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 is in practice amongst business organizations and university education is not isolated in this regard. Attention and autonomy are granted to the organization 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 good 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 several, or indeed an infinite number since the outcome required is constantly changing; the system is able to evolve to deal with new challenges and opportunities.

3.   Brief Institutional Profiles

There are currently six recognized federal universities operating the dual mode system and one single or uni-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 (ABUJA), (3) University of Ibadan (UI), (4) Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile Ife (OAU), (5) Federal University of Technology, Yola (FUTY), (6) University of Maiduguri (UNIMAID)
Single	National Open University of Nigeria, Lagos (NOUN)

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.

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.

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 programme

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, Bachelor's and Postgraduate programmes. The centre was formally established as a part time studies designed to accommodate regular students as well 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.

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

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.

4.   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 to achieve their goals and develop control of the educational process. Dillon, Gunawardena and Parker (1992) in a study of the use of real time interactive television program observed that students cited their teacher as the factor that played an important 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 difficult 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) organizing personal contact programme through face-to-face classroom teaching, guidance and counseling, 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), suggests that a distance education program must design and apply effective learner support services and systems keeping in view the learners 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 why learner support is necessary: a) students want support and interaction except for some 10% of students with personality type that 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 counseling, tutor support, effective 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 student 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 needs 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 is determined by the strength and weakness of the student support services in place (Kishore, 1998).

5. Problem of study

The amount of support services an institution can offer as stated by Molefi (2002) in Usun (2004) largely depends on the capacity and resources at the disposal of such particular institution. This suggests that the resources and carrying capacity of the universities may not be analogous; same goes for the universities under study in Nigeria.

6. Purpose of Study

The need for this study was precipitated upon the assumption that single-mode distance learning universities may have specific support services for their students even though it may not be adequate, but same may not be said of the conventional or dual-mode universities for their distance learners. This study aimed at determining what support services are existent in each of the dual-mode universities in Nigeria. Similarly, it also investigated what the distant learners of the University of Lagos feel about the availability or not of such support services.

7.   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?

8.   Method

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.

8.1   Population

The six dual-mode universities and the only single mode university in Nigeria as well as their distance learners formed the population of study.

8.2   Sample

It was difficult to get all six universities as well as their students', therefore; the single mode university and five of the dual mode universities were studied. The distance learning students of the University of Lagos were also studied. The Universities staff sample were made up of two representatives each which totaled twelve (12) respondents met at a forum. The student sample comprised 260 students of the DLI, University of Lagos.

8.3   Instrument of data collection

The major tool for data collection was the questionnaire. A research questionnaire on Learners Support Services in Distance Learning Institutions (LSSDLI) was constructed and validated by distance educator experts and copies were served to the universities staff as well as to the students. The twelve copies of questionnaire to the staff were all retrieved, while two hundred and

sixteen 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.

8.4   Data Analysis Technique

The frequency tables as well as percentages were used for the analysis.

9.   Results/findings

Table 2: Support Services Provided by Universities

Support Services		Institution					
		DLI UNILAG	CDL UNIMAID	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 Available	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate
	Conveying mode	Oral	Oral	Written	Written	Written	Written
Study Material	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 in addition to 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	1month
	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	Frequency	Weekly	Bi-weekly	Monthly		Monthly	Weekly
	Residential	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	No
Guidance & Counselling	Pre-Enrolment	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
	New Students	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
	Non performing	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
	Drop outs	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	Yes

9.1   Library Support and Study Material

The responses from most of the institutions selected for this study   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 inform 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, radio program is used in addition to the 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 200km coverage and is used for distance learners.

9.2   Assignments and Personal Contact Programme

The institutions under study each have a system of assignment submission where there turnaround time for the assignments differs from one month 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/bi-weekly/monthly contact periods to residential periods except for the single mode university whose contact programmes are optional and residential periods are nonexistent.

9.3   Guidance & Counseling

All the dual mode institution and the only single mode institution offer guidance and counseling at the pre-enrolment and enrolment (new students) stage while most including the single mode institution offers counseling to non-performing students but mostly on request by the students. However, most dual modes do not engage in counseling for drop outs.

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 programs provided in addition to face to face contact.	30	161
Use of Computer Mediated Communication e.g. Blogs, Face book, 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 counselor.	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
Workshops and training organized for students on DE technologies	15	182
Accurate and timely information on Admissions, registrations, course requirements, payment policies provided.	151	52
Friendly, caring and helpful administrative staff.	75	118
Subsidized tuition by the Institute	29	151
Availability of Scholarship awards and bursary facilities.	8	140
Provision of guidance and counseling session.	47	122

9.4   Library Support and Study Materials

Most of the students confirmed the availability and accessibility to library services by the 168 recorded, but however decried its adequacy as reflected by the 135 who said no. They confirmed the inflexibility of the learning styles as there are very little or no support of Radio, TV and computer mediated communications in addition to the face to face contact.

9.5   Assignments and Personal Contact Programmes

Greater number of the students confirmed the suitability of lecture times, interaction with fellow students and freedom to make telephone contact with tutor, course adviser and counselor. Evaluation of learning outcomes through assignments, tests and exams are conducted quite alright but comments and

feedbacks are not sent to the students on their performance as reflected by the 207 as against 5 that said yes to the comment.

9.6 Other Support Services

The students decried the lack of support in form of guidance and counseling 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 on the 151 respondents as against 52 who said no.

Further findings revealed that students strongly emphasized the need for guidance and counseling 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 scholarship for indigent students, and opportunity for installment payment of school fees. Access to internet services to enhance ICT usage was another need in addition to improved interaction between students and lecturers. Students requested for 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.

10. Discussion and Conclusion

The result of the survey suggests 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, result on library resources by the universities shows 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 are not as per their responses.

There was no substantial difference between the students' perception and the university claim.

It is obvious that the support systems of the dual mode institutions is 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 need for the dual mode institutions in Nigeria to ensure that the support services to an extent meet the acceptable standards of providing support that addresses 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 centered. 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), 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 endeavor to treat the distance learners as learners with their own specific need 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.

11. The future of support services in Nigerian Distance Learning Institutes

The National Universities Commission (NUC) in collaboration with British Council and the Open University of UK, has taken a bold step of ensuring 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 is engaged in an e-teaching training which has been divided into sections running for a 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 ICT for effective delivery. The current management essentially the Director and Deputy Director of DLI are people well grounded on the issues of distance learning and is on-the-go to change the face of distance learning in the University of Lagos.

It is cheering to note that the face of distance learning in Nigeria is fast changing and the organization and management is taking a better dimension where it is being proposed that the Director of the Distance centres should be a deputy vice-chancellor of the university. These are also people either well grounded or interested to make the necessary change to ensure the proper functioning of ODL.

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