

Learners' Perspectives on Support Services in Distance Learning at the Institute of Adult Education

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Abstract: This study sought to explore learners' perspectives on support services in distance learning at the Institute of Adult Education in Tanzania. The study used the explanatory sequential mixed method design to capture respondents' perspectives on quality of learner support services provided at the Institute. The target population was 350 distance learning diploma students. A sample of 83 students was drawn from the population through simple random sampling. The study employed a closed-ended questionnaire and an open-ended interview in data collection. Quantitative data was analysed through the thematic approach while quantitative data was analysed through descriptive statistics. The analysis led to the conclusion that learner support services existed but were inadequately provided. Most of the students were not satisfied with how face to face sessions were conducted. While the majority of respondents were satisfied with information about choosing courses of study, the majority were not satisfied with stress management services. The study recommends that the institute should develop strategies to ensure provision of quality student support services in terms of academic matters, guidance and counselling and stress management. Furthermore, students should be encouraged to report challenges experienced and propose the best way to improve the situations.

Keywords: Student Support Services; face-to-face tutorial sessions; distance students.

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Introduction

Provision of student support services in distance education is multifaceted, involving staff with different orientations, some of whom coming from face-to-face teaching institutions. Therefore, there is a need to orient educators to change their mind set from that of teaching in-campus students to that of teaching distance students. Distance educators should be computer literate to accomplish their responsibilities efficiently because the use of computers helps students learn the course more

easily According to Almufareeh and Arshad (2023), connecting educators to emerging technology and making them technology literate educators is a big challenge in today's world. Furthermore, students should learn various processes and operations for distance education to cope with its learning methodology, which is different from that of face-to-face learning.

In order to create a conducive learning environment for distance learning students, provision of quality

learner support services is inevitable. Student support services serve as an engine or rather a heart in open and distance learning system, without which the system may collapse. Student Support Services include wide range of academic, administrative and guidance and counselling activities (Chattopadhyay, 2014).

A dominant feature of distance education is the physical and often temporal distance that separates the teacher and the learners. Distance students are often placed in a unique situation in which neither teachers nor fellow students are physically present to clarify, discuss or provide feedback (Gunawardena, 1988). Therefore, effective distance education requires a sound learner support system to simplify the learning process.

The significance of this study arises from the fact that no specific study previously known by the researchers has been in place concerning distance students' perspectives on the quality of learner support services offered in Tanzania. This study goes beyond limits of most literatures, which have generally exhausted about provision of student support services to distance students. Students' perspectives on the quality of student support services cannot be ignored. Students are the prime consumers and recipients of the learner support services. Their feedback is vital for evaluation purposes. The results from the respondents ought to contribute to the improvement in delivery of student support services at the Institute of Adult Education and beyond. ODL learners' chaos have been a common cry amongst learners in the programme. Issues like wrong admission, delay/failure of graduation, incomplete results, fees chaos, to mention but a few, recur every year. This study presents learners' perspective on the quality of learner support services offered by the IAE. Arguably, without relevant and high-quality learner support services, learners' performance is in jeopardy.

Provision of high-quality learner support services is vital for academic success of open and distance learning students. The effectiveness of the services depends on the quality of invested resources. According to Usun (2004), effective learner support services and systems are very important elements of distance education programs. These services and systems emanate from the human and non-human resources that learners can access in order to carry out their learning processes. However, evidence

suggests that schools are facing challenges in accessing the learner support services during their learning process (Jha, 2016). Likewise, with the increase of ODL learners' enrolment at the IAE, there have been an increase of chaos every year, which have not been addressed.

Basing on the identified knowledge gap on the quality of learner support services offered to ODL students at the IAE, the study sought to unveil the views on the quality of student support services to distance students at the Institute of Adult Education.

Literature Review

Learner support services requires schools to put in place programs and curricular activities that guarantee long term success in the process of learning (Njui, 2018). These activities are supposedly packaged and provided to learners by the time learners complete their studies. According to Rae (1989), learner support services are all activities that are designed to assist learner in the cognitive to achieve the intended learning.

Learners' needs in distance education are of paramount importance. Recognition of students' needs helps the distance learner become competent and self-confident in the process of learning (Rae, 1989). Its provision has been the critical matter of significance to distance education providers (Brindley & Paul, 2008). According to Garrison (1989), in distance education, support is concerned with a range of human and non-human resources to guide and facilitate the educational transaction. The author points out that these resources may be library facilities, various media and software programs, community leaders or various socio-economic variables such as students' financial self-sufficiency and capacity to cope with their roles and responsibilities.

Evaluating the quality of students' support services in distance education institutions is vital because by nature, ODL is a high-involving service industry with multiple student support service encounters. Quality evaluation models tend to view quality from the institutional perspective. As a result, little is known about the determinants of service quality, which distance education students can evaluate the support services provided by their institutions (Nsamba, 2017).

Student support services are developed by distance education institutions to help students in their

learning process. These services should cater for students' cognitive, emotional and social needs. While learner support services are the most important component of any ODL system, distance education institutions should strive to ensure that quality of the learner support services is up to the required standard. According to Almufareeh and Arshad (2023) the quality of student support services has been evaluated from the institutional perspective. A study was conducted in South Africa to explore distance students' perceptions and expectations. The results led to the conclusion that service quality in distance education can be measured by six dimensions namely; tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, delivery, assurance and student participation. Each dimension is measured by a number of attributes. The dimensions are useful in helping distance education institutions evaluate the quality of their support services.

According to Zeithaml et al. (1990), the best option to evaluate service quality is by the service users. Effective learner support services and systems are very important elements for distance education programs. These services include the human and non-human resources that learners can access in the process of learning.

Methodology

Design

This study used the explanatory sequential mixed method design to capture respondents' perspectives on quality of learner support services at the Institute of Adult Education. According to Maykut and Morehouse (1994), the use of mixed approach helps to provide readers with a real-life translation of what is being conveyed. The researchers employed a closed-ended questionnaire and an open-ended interview in data collection. The two instruments complemented each other.

Population and Sampling

The target population of the study was 350 distance learning diploma students at the Institute of Adult Education at the Dar es Salaam Study centre in Tanzania. A sample of 83 students was drawn from the population through simple random sampling, which provided equal chances for each individual to be included.

Validity and Reliability

The questionnaires was pre-tested to 30 students before it was distributed to the actual respondents in order to test the validity and reliability of the

instrument. The pilot study exercise enabled the researchers to address unclear items based on the judgment of experts. The pilot test yielded the Cronbach alpha of 0.732. This implies that the internal consistency of the questionnaire was acceptable since Pallant (2011) argued that an acceptable range for a reliable instrument is between 0.6 and 0.9. Furthermore, data triangulation, the use of more than one instrument for data collection increased the reliability of the study findings as suggested by Murdock (2019).

Statistical Treatment of Data

The study generated both qualitative and quantitative data. Qualitative data was collected through an interview schedule while quantitative data was collected through a questionnaire. Qualitative data was transcribed, analysed and grouped into themes while quantitative data was analysed, described and presented in tables.

Ethical Considerations

The researchers made sure that ethical issues are adhered in this study. They followed all the national laws and regulations as far as data collection is concerned. Anonymity and confidentiality of data were ensured in the study and respondents filled the consent form to indicate their willingness to participate in the study.

Findings and Discussion

This section provides the results of the study. It starts with presentation of demographics of respondents and then moves into the analysis of research questions.

Demographics of Respondents

Demographic information reveals that 78.3% of the respondents were females while 21.7% were males. Therefore, the majority of respondents were females as compared to the male's counterparts. The age ranged from 20 to 51 and above but the majority were in the age group of 31 to 40 years and the least were in the age group of 51 and above. In terms of educational background, the majority of respondents held a certificate in primary teaching. The majority (92.2%) were married while the remaining 7.8% were unmarried. Finally, 5% had worked for lesser than four years, 19.6 for six to eight years, 23.5% for 9 to 12 years and 51.9% for above 12.

Research Question: What are the students' perspectives on quality of Support Services at the IAE?

In response to the research question, findings reveal a wide range of responses and issues raised by the respondents. Table one to three involve three categories of students' support services: (a) academic, (b) administrative, (c) guidance and

counselling. Respondents were required to rate given statements basing on the following options: strongly satisfactory = 4, satisfactory = 3, not satisfactory = 2 and strongly not satisfactory =1. Strongly satisfied and satisfied were considered as Satisfactory while strongly not satisfied and not satisfied were considered as Not Satisfactory.

Table 1. Students' Perspectives on Quality of Academic Support Services at the IAE

SN	Statement	Satisfactory	Not Satisfactory
1	I am satisfied with online support services given by tutors	26(31%)	57(69%)
2	I am satisfied with available library services at the IAE	45(54%)	38(46%)
3	Examinations' results are provided timely	14(17%)	69(83%)
4	I am satisfied with ICT support services provided by IAE	25(30%)	58(70%)
5	I am satisfied with quality of study modules	24(29%)	59(71%)
6	I am satisfied with module content coverage in face-to- face tutorials	41(50%)	42(50%)
7	Course instructors demonstrate mastery of the subject matter	72(87%)	11(13%)

Academic Support Services

Table 1 shows that the majority of questionnaire respondents were satisfied with the availability of library services (54%) and course instructors' mastery of the subject matter (87%). These findings were supplemented by the information from one of the interviewees who reported that "the library is equipped with books related to course of study." Another respondent reported, "Through the library link on the IAE website, I can connect to various educational sites like *Research 4life*." This finding is an indication that the library had physical books, which could be accessed physically by students who are closer to the Campus but also it provided online library services to distant students via the website.

On the other hand, the majority were not satisfied with online support services given by tutors (69%). Likewise, the majority were not satisfied with timely provision of examination results (83%). One of the interviewees suggested that "examination results should be released on time to provide adequate preparations for students who may be required to sit for supplementary exams." Another respondent revealed that, "In some cases, only few assignments in continuous assessment are returned to us and you find total coursework already allocated. How can you be sure with allocated marks for assignments not returned to you"? What if there were errors in recording?

Furthermore, majority (70%) of questionnaire respondents were not satisfied with ICT support services. This information was supplemented by the interview schedule findings whereby one of the

respondents revealed that "there are no adequate ICT facilities for practical sessions" while another respondent revealed that "available ICT facilities are not connected to reliable internet connection." The findings, indicate that students were not exposed to ICT practical sessions. As a result, they lacked necessary skills, which could enable them interact with ICT facilities which are inevitable in Distance Education. The findings are similar to those of Musingafi et al. (2016) which indicated that distance students had difficulties in accessing and using ICT facilities. In addition, Mossberger et al. (2003) observed that technical competence was needed in order to have effective access to contemporary ICT.

The majority of questionnaire respondents (71%) were not satisfied with quality of study modules. During interview, a respondents claimed that the modules used are not in good shape because, 'study modules were not properly edited leading to a lot of grammatical and conceptual errors. Module content coverage was neither satisfactory nor not satisfactory as respondents who agreed and those who disagreed tied up. The lack of satisfaction with module content was, for instance, reported by one of the respondents through interview that "modules are not covered, in some cases; we read modules on our own without any guidance from tutors". Another respondent reported that "time allocated for face -to- face is inadequate for module content coverage." Therefore, the majority of respondents were not satisfied with the academic support services.

Administrative Support Services

Satisfaction with provision of administrative services had some varied responses. For instance, the majority of questionnaire respondents (92%) were satisfied with information regarding payments of tuition fees and other contributions is made clear

and timely. According to Molefi (2002), provision of such information is important for distance students to learn properly. Likewise, the majority (59%) were satisfied with the time when course materials were delivered.

Table 2: Students' Perspectives on Quality of Administrative Support Services

SN	Statement	Satisfactory	Not Satisfactory
1	The IAE identifies learners with special needs and abilities and takes appropriate actions before commencement of studies	23 (28%)	60 (72%)
2	Information regarding payments of tuition fees and other contributions is made clear and timely.	76 (92%)	7 (8%)
3	Time allocated for face-to-face tutorial sessions is adequate	41 (49%)	42 (51%)
4	I am satisfied with the time when course materials were delivered	49 (59%)	34 (41%)

Table 3: Students' Perspectives on Quality of Guidance and Counselling Services

SN	Statement	Satisfactory	Not Satisfactory
1	Information about better choices of course of study is disseminated before commencement of studies	79 (95%)	4 (5%)
2	Education on stress management is done regularly during the learning process	18 (22%)	65 (78%)

On the contrary, the majority of questionnaire respondents were not satisfied with identification of learners with special needs and taking appropriate actions before commencement of studies. This finding is against the recommendation of NJCLD (2010) that professionals with expertise in learning disabilities need to conduct comprehensive assessments for students suspected of having learning disabilities before the instructions take place.

They were also not satisfied with time allocated for face-to-face tutorial sessions. Therefore, satisfaction with the administrative support was satisfactory in some areas and unsatisfactory in some other areas.

Guidance and Counselling Services

With regards to quality of guidance and counselling services, majority of respondents (95%) were satisfied with information about better choices of courses of study being disseminated before commencement of studies.

On the contrary, the majority were not satisfied with provision of education on stress management during the learning process. This finding is against the recommendation of Heyden (2011) that guidance and counselling service needs to exist since it assists students to fulfil their basic physiological needs, understanding themselves and developing associations with peers. According to

Mbwambo (2017), distance students face various problems in the course of study, such as financial and family challenges. Hence, lack of skills on stress coping mechanisms may impede students' achievement.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Conclusions

The study concludes that learner support services existed but were inadequately provided as the majority of respondents were not satisfied with academic support services. Administrative support was satisfactory in some areas and not satisfactory in some other areas. Most of the students were not satisfied with how face to face sessions were conducted. While the majority of respondents were satisfied with information about choosing courses of study, the majority were not satisfied with stress management services. The quality of learner support services was therefore inadequate.

Recommendations

In the light of the conclusions, the study recommends that the institute should develop strategies to ensure provision of quality student support services in terms of academic matters, guidance and counselling and stress management. Students should be encouraged to report challenges experienced and propose the best way to improve the situations.

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