# Evaluating student support provision in a hybrid teacher education programme using Tait's framework of practice

Folake Ruth Aluko [iD]
*University of Pretoria (South Africa)*
ruth.aluko@up.ac.za

**Abstract**

Effective student support is key in stemming the dropout in distance education. This article reports on the student support provision in a hybrid teacher education programme. Altogether 160 participants were purposively selected; 126 completed a survey, 33 (30 students and 3 administrative staff) took part in six focus group discussions; and one instructional designer took part in a one-on-one interview. Tait's framework on student support guided the study. The data analysis involved descriptive statistics and thematic analysis. The findings revealed that, although the institution is striving to support its students, areas that need attention include call centre services, tutor support services, tutor-student communication, and funding. Recommendations include the need for providers to pay particular attention to students' whole experience to ensure effective student support. Further research is needed regarding the contextualisation of each aspect of Tait's framework; the author suggests some guidelines to guide this process.

**Keywords:** distance education, teacher education, student support, student success, Tait's student support framework

## Introduction and Literature Review

Scholars consider distance education to be one of the most viable ways of transforming societies because of its ability to leverage equity, access and inclusivity (Council on Higher Education [CHE], 2014; Nage-Sibande & Morolong, 2018). This ties in with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, especially concerning teacher preparation and professional development (United Nations, 2015). According to CHE (2014, p. 1), "there is evidence that, designed and implemented well, (its) provision can reach larger numbers and cater for more diverse student needs". Distance education has been used for decades to train and retrain teachers in emerging economies (UNESCO, 2002). The continuous professional development of teachers is paramount because there is a link between the teachers' quality and students' learning outcomes. Also, the quality of education offered within a country is a strong predictor of economic growth rates (Africa-America Institute, 2015, p. 11).

However, the mode has often been plagued with lower completion rates compared to contact tuition. The risks of lower completion rates in distance education are higher due to the emphasis on access and inclusion (Tait, 2015). Scholars (Aluko, 2015; Tinto, 1975) have warned that the reasons for this dilemma are multi-faceted, and should not be taken out of context. Nonetheless, institutions that enrol students in this mode owe it to the field, to all stakeholders and to themselves to improve student success rates (Grau-Valldosera & Minguillon, 2014).

Generally, student support is defined as the creation of an environment that is conducive to learning to assist students to succeed (Lehman & Conceição, 2014; Simpson, 2012). Findings of a study conducted among members of the International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE) by Tait in 2014 revealed that distance education providers were generally committed to researching student success strategies. However, there was a lack of evidence that findings from such studies were fed back into institutional practices (Tait, 2015).

Tait (2000, p. 289) proposes the "primary functions of student support as being threefold, cognitive, affective and systemic". To cater for students from different backgrounds and to make the early detection of problems more realistic, supporting students should involve everyone, making academic and non-academic services available to them (Sánchez-Elvira & Simpson, 2018, p. 2). Subotsky and Prinsloo (2011) refer to this as planning holistically for the "student walk." The Open University (United Kingdom) is one of a few distance education institutions with a success story in student retention. Wildavsky (2016) attributes this to the ability of the institution to combine "scale with personalisation".

Distance education providers have traditionally been early adopters of new technology, moving through different "generations" to provide students and facilitators with the necessary structure, dialogue and support (CHE, 2014, p. 6). In emerging economies, where paper-based distance education has prevailed, there is a move towards the hybrid model. This is the use of traditional classroom teaching methods together with online learning for the same learners studying the same content in the same course (Cleveland-Innes & Wilton, 2018, p. 12-13). Although information and communication technologies (ICTs) can be used to balance the transactional distance between institutions and students that has long plagued this mode, the "systemic evaluations of distance education provision have provided evidence that much provision is far from ideal" (CHE, 2014, p. 1). Simpson (2013, p. 105) refers to the phenomenon as the "distance education deficit".

The aim of this study was therefore to examine the extent to which support structures put in place by a provider have assisted students enrolled for a newly developed web-dependent B Ed Hons in Teacher Education and Professional Development (TEPD). The author adopted Tait's framework on student support, which was developed to establish an outline to understanding the goals for student success and the means to monitor and improve it, to evaluate the structures. The following research question guided the study: "To what extent have the support structures put in place by the university assisted distance students enrolled for the newly developed B Ed (Hons) TEPD?"

## Background

The unit under study, situated in an emerging economy, has been running paper-based distance teacher programmes for almost two decades, and has graduated thousands of students. Based on institutional and national policies, it adopted web-dependent learning for all its programmes, irrespective of the mode. In October 2016, it introduced a hybrid B Ed (Hons) TEPD. Due to its iterative stance on the quality of all its programmes, continuous improvement is possible based on the application of research findings to practice.

## Conceptual Framework: Tait's framework of practice to support student success

According to Tait's framework (2015), supporting student success is an organic whole-institution system that must be based on the students' whole experience of studying. Previous understanding of student support has been treated as stand-alone, not considering the whole "student walk" referred to by Subotzky and Prinsloo (2011). The framework emanated from a study carried out among members of the ICDE "to examine the ways in which student success can be best supported in open, distance and e-learning programmes, and student drop-out and failure diminished" (Tait, 2015, p. 1). The framework involves the seven key elements briefly described below.

1. *Pre-study information, advice, guidance and admission*
Admission begins with the marketing of programmes. According to the author, "sales and marketing activities are essential if the institution is to make its offer known to relevant sectors of the public".

Although, there is "tension between student acquisition and business growth", institutions are advised to avoid "misleading statements".

2. *Curriculum or programme design for student success*

This refers to the relevance of the curriculum, effective learning design that delivers student engagement, and clarity on how the nature of the programmes contribute to student success.

3. *Intervention at key points and in response to student need*

This "involves all the stages of the student experience" providing the "structure in learner support and in particular interventions to support individual students". These include three stages: pre-study (post-registration, review of readiness to start), in course (early contact, first assignment, mid-module, qualification progress check, preparing for examination) and through qualification (support for next module choice and qualification planning) (Tait, 2015, p. 8).

4. *Assessment to support learning and to judge achievement*

Assessment is key in supporting students to succeed. Strategies emanate from the learning objectives of the module, and include both knowledge and skills. They could be formative and summative, continuous and final.

5. *Individualised and personalised systems of support to students*

Technologies have made personalising individual support for students much easier. The process involves a range of staff members, including tutors, counsellors, guidance workers and career advisors. Due to cost implications, the author advises institutions not to make it an afterthought, but rather an integral part of their planning.

6. *Information and logistical systems that communicate between all relevant participants in the system*

These have been central to distance programmes since their inception. Institutions use diverse learning management systems (LMS), which enable learning analytics. Clow (2016) defines this as "the measurement, collection, analysis and reporting of data about learners … for purposes of understanding and optimising learning".

7. *Managing for student success*

Student success should be at the heart of distance education and should be made a reality.

The author reiterates the importance of putting effective quality assurance structures in place regarding each of the seven elements.

## Research Design and Methodology

The study took place at a higher education institution that runs distance teacher programmes within its Faculty of Education. The researcher adopted the sequential explanatory mixed-methods research design characterised by quantitative data collection and analysis, followed by qualitative data collection and analysis. The design enabled the researcher to develop the survey instrument containing identified variables to be tested. At the same time, the results guided the development of the qualitative instrument and helped with the interpretation of results (Centre for Research and Innovation in Teaching, n.d.).

The population for the study included the first cohort (250) of the B Ed Hons TEPD programme, the administrative staff of the distance education unit and an instructional designer. Generally, convenience, purposive and non-probability sampling techniques were used. However, the researcher adopted the total population sampling technique because of the low enrolment of the first student cohort. The instruments were a survey, interview schedules for individual and focus group discussions, and relevant institutional documents. The validity and reliability of the instruments was based on a literature review and other relevant institutional documents. The researcher adhered to all ethical guidelines as approved by the university.

Table 1 provides the distribution of participants in relation to the instruments.

**Table 1: The Distribution of the Participants in Relation to the Instruments**

| Instrument | Participants | Codes | Number of participants |
|---|---|---|---|
| Survey | Students | SS | 126 |
| Focus Group (FG) discussion schedule | Students (from five contact session venues) | FGSDB (Durban, 6)<br>FGSNS (Nelspruit, 5)<br>FGSPK (Polokwane, 7)<br>FGSPT (Pretoria, 7)<br>FGSRB (Richards Bay, 5) | 30 |
| FG discussion schedule | Student Administration: Distance Education staff members | SADE | 3 |
| Individual interview schedule | Instructional designer | ID | 1 |
| Total participants | | | 160 |

SPSS was used for the statistical analysis, while the qualitative technique involved identifying codes, themes and sub-themes from the qualitative data.

## Findings

The findings from the quantitative and qualitative data presented in this section have been guided by the seven elements provided by Tait (2015). Section A of the survey also contained biographical information.

### Biographical information

Table 2 shows the biographical information in terms of the participants' gender and age brackets. Of the 110 respondents, 81 (73.6%) were female, and 29 (26.3%) were male. These tally with the demographics of teachers in the country (Africa Check, 2018) and enrolled students in the institution's distance education programmes.

The majority of the respondents (40) were in the age bracket 41–50 (35.1%), followed by 33 in the 31–40 age bracket (28.9%), 29 in the 21–30 age bracket (25.4%), 11 in the 51–60 age bracket (9.6%) and one in the 60+ age bracket (0.8%). Although many middle-aged students are still applying for the institution's distance programmes, a new crop of younger students is emerging. This was not the case when the distance programmes were only paper-based. Research has shown that older students need more support in the use of technology than the younger ones (Aluko, 2015).

**Table 2: Gender and Age Brackets**

| Question item | Frequency | Percentage | Missing frequencies |
|---|---|---|---|
| *Gender* | | | |
| Female | 81 | 73.6% | |
| Male | 29 | 26.3% | |
| Total | 110 | 100.0% | 16 (14.5%) |
| *Age brackets* | | | |
| 21–30 | 29 | 25.4% | |
| 31–40 | 33 | 28.9% | |
| 41–50 | 40 | 35.1% | |
| 51–60 | 11 | 9.6% | |
| 60+ | 1 | 0.8% | |
| Total | 114 | 100.0% | 12 (1.7%) |

### *Sub-theme 1: Pre-study information, advice, guidance and admission*

The questions in Section B covered pre-study information detailing how the respondents had heard about the B Ed Hons TEPD programme, the clarity of the information they had received, how they could contact the university, who to contact, and if they had done so, the extent of the helpfulness of staff, the timeliness of registration, and clarity on how to proceed with their studies.

The highest number of respondents (33%) heard about the programme from "marketers", followed by "word of mouth" (31%), while no students (0%) heard about the programme via "social media". Feedback from the qualitative data confirmed these findings, which shows that the university is yet to explore the use of social media to advertise its distance education programmes.

With regard to the clarity of information, there was greater clarity on the questions regarding the time it takes to complete the programme (82%), the academic requirements (74.6%) and the programme outcomes (70.63%). On the other hand, there was less clarity on the questions on technology requirements (56.2%) and programme modules (51.2%). The qualitative data buttressed these facts, except for those on the programme's technology requirements, which was conflicting as many respondents indicated that the related information was clear.

In terms of contacting the university, both quantitative and qualitative data corroborated the fact that students were told they could call the university at the point of registration, with the numbers to call on the brochure. However, most of them found the call to marketers more helpful than that to the university as "the lines kept ringing" (FGSRB1) or they were "pushed from pillar to post" (FGSRB4). An administrative staff member indicated that "it was a time when we were under-staffed" (SADE3).

Generally, the respondents rated the support they received during registration to be supportive in terms of timeliness, the information they received on proceeding with their studies, the contact for enquiries and the friendliness of staff members. Very few respondents rated the support as very low.

## Sub-theme 2: Curriculum and programme design for student success

The majority of the participants indicated that they found the programme very relevant to their job. The following quotations supported their claim:

"The programme is relevant to me because most of the things are practical…they are what we experience at schools." (FGSPT4).

"Very relevant because I wanted to be in a management post, but because I didn't have what I am busy with now I couldn't." (FGSRB6).

## Sub-theme 3: Intervention at key points and in response to student need

Questions in this sub-theme revolved around participants' awareness of three face-to-face contact sessions included in the study programmes, the identification of those with which they are familiar, their satisfaction with the contact sessions based on their attendance, their use of other available supportive interventions and their satisfaction with them.

Table 3 shows that most of the respondents (85.7%) were aware of the face-to-face contact sessions, while most were more aware of the ICT training session. Only two participants answered the question on the module consolidation session.

**Table 3: Awareness of the Face-to-face Contact Sessions included in the Study Programmes**

| | Participants' responses | | | | | | Missing frequencies |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Yes | % | No | % | Total | Total response % of total | |
| Awareness | 90 | 85.7% | 15 | 14.2% | 105 | 83.3% | 21(16.6%) |
| Identification of the ones(s) students know (questions 8a-c) | | | | | | | |
| Knowledge of ICT training session | | | 80 | | | | 46 (36.5%) |
| Knowledge of modules orientation session | | | 33 | | | | 93 (73.8%) |
| Knowledge of modules consolidation | | | 2 | | | | 124 (98.4%) |

The majority of the participants indicated that they were satisfied with the contact sessions. Those that were not totally satisfied gave the brevity of ICT training, incapable presenters, computer illiteracy and lack of support for some electives as reasons.

Other supportive interventions were learning guides, tutorial booklets, admin booklets, online assignment submission, as well as online digital resources, discussion forums and wiki summaries. Due to the nature of the programme, interventions that could be regarded as compulsory, such as learning guides (99.0%), tutorial booklets (99.0%), admin booklets (97.6%) and online assignment submission (96.2%), received higher ratings. The participants were most satisfied with the learning guides. A student reiterated: "The materials are very helpful." (FGSNS2).

However, the findings showed that the participants rarely made use of the online digital resources, discussion forums and wiki summaries. A participant's comment gives a possible reason for this: "The majority of us have challenges with the online components of the programme." (FGSNS5), while an administrative staff member confirmed that "students need more support with computer literacy" (SADE2). Another student lamented: "Others' participation is problematic and discouraging… a lot of

the discussion is students asking questions and especially during assignment; no real interaction or discussion." (FGSD6). This observation was corroborated by the instructional designer. On the way forward, students requested more contact sessions for ICT training and modules, the retraining of presenters (due to their lack of expertise) and support for electives during the sessions.

### Sub-theme 4: Assessment to support learning and to judge achievement

As asserted in the institution's policy document (University of Pretoria, 2009), assessment is recognised as a key motivator of learning and an integral part of teaching and learning. It also informs teaching practice and can help improve the curriculum. Participants indicated that they were aware of necessary assessment information (learning outcomes, assessment criteria, assessment procedures and dates). Further findings showed that the university uses both formative and summative assessments, which the participants judged as a "good mix of assessments", and that the "number of assessments" was "appropriate for each module". However, the following excerpts show the challenges: "A module feedback came only after the exam." (FGSNS5); "I receive marked scripts with no comments" (FGSRB5); "I think the markers need further training" (FGSPT2); "There were no comments or constructive feedback…I will appreciate some efforts from the marker…I would like to know where I have gone wrong." (FGSD8). All these can be supported by the very low response to questions c to g, as reflected in Table 4.

**Table 4: Students' Response to Questions on Assessment and Feedback**

| Question item | Response | MF |
|---|---|---|
| a. There was a good mix of assessments | 49 | 77 (61.1%) |
| b. The amount of assessment was appropriate for the module | 58 | 68 (53.9%) |
| c. Assessment arrangements and marking were fair | 7 | 119 (94.4%) |
| d. I received prompt feedback on my work | 11 | 115 (91.2%) |
| e. The feedback will help me improve my work in future | 16 | 110 (87.3%) |
| f. The feedback will help me to prepare for my final assessment (exam/portfolio) | 5 | 121 (96.0%) |
| g. I am satisfied with the feedback I received from my tutors | 2 | 124 (98.4%) |

### Sub-theme 5: Individualised and personalised systems of support to students

Sub-theme 5's questions revolved around participants' experience of individualised and personalised support services, including online support, tutor support, the call centre, SMSes, emails, student finance and disability.

Of the 126 participants, few made use of online support (25.3%), tutor support (20.63%) or both online and tutor support (12.69%). Reasons included no response or very late response from tutors, lack of internet access, the cost of bandwidth and inadequate online support. The instructional designer stressed the need for module coordinators to "own their modules" because some of them regarded distance education as an "add-on", and not their core duty (ID).

In terms of other services, 61% had made use of the call centre, 100% had received an SMS from the university, and 84.6% had sent an SMS. A participant described this as the "most reliable" (FGSD2). In addition, 69.8% had received email, while 85.1% had sent email. Of the 126 participants, only one (0.79%) indicated a disability, which confirmed that fewer students with disabilities participate in the institution's distance programmes.

Regarding finance, the majority of the 97 respondents (79.3 %) had a student loan, followed by those who paid cash (17.5%), while only a few students were government-sponsored (2.1%) and only one had a bank loan (1.03%). Although information regarding financial aid is included in the institution's distance education policy (University of Pretoria, 2009) and programme brochure (University of Pretoria, 2019), findings showed that a large number of participants were neither aware of the few highly competitive funding opportunities nor had they applied for them. Although all the participants were employed teachers, they lamented the need for aid for their studies. This is buttressed by the following comment: "but my salary does not mean I am not struggling" (FGSD 5).

In terms of participants' perception of the helpfulness of the support services they receive, the rate of response showed that the clarity and timeliness of SMSes (25.3% and 21.7% respectively) and the clarity of emails (18.3%) received by participants received the highest rating of "extremely helpful", while the call centre services (36.7%) and response to student queries (20.5%) received the highest rating of "not helpful". Findings from the qualitative data reiterated these views. For instance, a student lamented: "Calls are not picked up, and we waste money." (FGSPK4).

### *Sub-theme 6: Information and logistical systems that communicate between all relevant participants in the system*

The findings on this sub-theme were based on evidence that emanated from the institution's policy on distance education (University of Pretoria, 2009) and research reports (University of Pretoria, 2010-2019), as well as data from the focus group discussions with administrative staff members.

At the university, "the web is being used to provide technologically enhanced education and to improve the flow and management of information between teacher and learner" (University of Pretoria, 2009). In addition, tutor records (qualifications and experience of tutors) are detailed for each tutor and are available to module coordinators (University of Pretoria, 2009). The institution uses the PeopleSoft applications, which are linked to its Blackboard LMS. However, according to information gathered from administrative staff members, the institution is still trying to sort out how to make the link between the two easier regarding its distance programmes. Nonetheless, it has up-to-date detailed information about past, present and potential learners that is used to inform policy and plan programme development, course design and material development, learner support and other relevant aspects of educational provision (University of Pretoria, 2009). Research into learners and their needs is a high priority. Therefore, the unit has a dedicated research office for its distance programmes. Its management information system makes it possible to track student performance (in assignments, examinations or even attendance of contact sessions). This information is used to identify inactive and at-risk learners. It is also used to determine completion and throughput rates (University of Pretoria, 2009). This makes the collection of learner analytics possible. All research

findings are used to inform the institution's policy and practice. In addition, due to the context of its students, it still uses bulk SMSes to support students.

### Sub-theme 7: Managing for student success

At the institution, students are at the heart of management. They are the reason for its existence. Since the inception of distance education in 2002, the university adopted the flat matrix management system. This made it possible for distance education to be integrated within existing structures, processes and procedures, where applicable, while some were restructured to accommodate the mode and new ones were set up, where necessary. Thus, the unit exercised functional authority over the staff involved in each particular business process. In addition, the university adapted and put appropriate quality criteria in place to ensure the equity of contact and distance programmes. According to the institution's distance education policy and practice (University of Pretoria, 2009), there is a symbiotic relationship between the academic and administrative systems in which both modes are integrated. The unit manager liaises closely with the academic departments and is a member of the Faculty Teaching and Learning Committee. The quality of the distance programmes is monitored via actions that are taken on research reports and matters that come up and are resolved at weekly operational meetings.

## Discussion

According to Tait (2015, p. 3), the aim of the "student's whole experience of study" framework was to "establish a framework of understanding for establishing goals for student success, and means to monitor and improve it". Thus, the discussion of the findings in this section focuses on how a distance education provider is working towards this ideal.

### Pre-study information, advice, guidance and admission

Institutions make their programmes known to potential clients by diverse means. Apart from its official website and student walk-in service, the institution makes use of marketers that cover a large part of the country. The aim is to open up the institution's programmes to those who would otherwise not have been able to enrol for conventional programmes. Subsequently, the distance programme is serving its purpose of reaching both older adults and the younger generation of learners. However, older students often need more support on the use of technology than younger students. Other research findings support the emergence of this new demography of distance education students (University of South Africa, 2017). The studies of Owusu-Boampong and Holmberg (2015, p. 53) on some European countries generally confirm that "flexibility (i.e. the possibility of balancing study with career, career prospects, family and other responsibilities) is a strong motivation for choosing distance education".

   However, according to Tait (2015, p. 5), "to avoid individual disappointment and high dropout statistics", information for potential students should be very clear in all its ramifications. This is because institutions are often torn between "student acquisition, business growth and the ethics of supporting clients" (Tait, 2015, p. 5). Although participants affirmed the clarity of the information they had received, they preferred dealing with marketers than with university staff. This could be because potential students often have face-to-face contact with marketers, while phoning the university is more expensive. The data emphasised the need to provide an adequate number of staff members so as not to discourage potential students. This links up with institutions risking their reputation

through "word of mouth". Kundu and Sundara Rajan (2017) aver that the latter strongly influences the choices consumers make and is connected to the high involvement of today's consumer over the internet. In addition, the rate of internet penetration is drawing institutions to the use of social media, but Haida and Rahim (2015) indicate more studies still need to be conducted on this area.

### Curriculum or programme design for student success

The curriculum goes beyond a syllabus and includes how it should be taught and how the teaching-learning process itself will be effected (CHE, 2014). According to Tait (2015), curriculum relevance and effective learning design are key in determining student success. This is because the former motivates students, while – according to Tait – the latter mitigates dropout by encouraging student engagement. Unfortunately, poor throughput rates have been a contentious issue in distance education for some time. Among the reasons for this trend is poor programme design (CHE, 2014). Although distance education is not new to technologies, gadgets should focus more on improving teaching and learning (CHE, 2014).

### Intervention at key points and in response to student need

Because of the high number of students involved in distance education, providers need to be creative in planning programme interventions. According to Tait (2015, p. 7), "intervention has been practised in many open distance e-learning systems for many years, and has been demonstrated to improve student completion".

   In his framework, he identifies three levels of intervention: post registration and review of readiness to start, in course and through qualification. At the first level, the programme is web-dependent. Owning a laptop is, therefore, one of the requirements, while students without one can purchase a laptop through a payback scheme external to the institution. In addition, compulsory ICT training before the start of the programme ensures student readiness. The second level involves two additional contact sessions: module orientation and module consolidation. Although Van Zyl and Spamer (2013) aver most distance students may still do well without attending contact sessions, Boelens et al. (2015) found this intervention to be of particular benefit to weaker students. This study found that although the information on diverse interventions is accessible, some students were failing to avail themselves of such opportunities. This brings to the fore the argument of Mpofu (2016) regarding students' roles in enhancing learning opportunities. While current technologies make the provision of diverse interventions possible, many students still struggle with lack of competence in ICT, unfamiliarity with web-based discussions and the high cost of network connections (Owusu-Boampong & Holmberg, 2015). Therefore, providers need to put technology in place that is relevant to their students' context to ensure the scalability of their success rates (Maritim & Getuno, 2018).

### Assessment to support learning and to judge achievement

The curriculum planning process involves deciding on the assessment strategy with evidence that the programme outcomes are being met (CHE, 2014). There is evidence that the institution uses both formative and summative assessment to support student success. Tait's framework (Tait, 2015) confirms that both have been used for several years and that 21st-century technologies have further enhanced the support of student engagement and enabled the diagnosis of learning at shorter intervals. However, participants' challenges with assignments are not very different from those found by other researchers in distance programmes. For instance, Haghighi and Tous (2014, p. 67) and

Owusu-Boampong and Holmberg (2015) found that students were frustrated by unclear instruction, lack of personal feedback and untimely feedback. Therefore, the CHE (2014) advocates for clear instruction on what students should do. This should include tasks that build on their background knowledge. There should also be appropriate feedback and commentary on activities that enable students to experience a form of interaction and discussion that normally takes place in lively classrooms, and self-assessment opportunities, as students mostly study on their own through their learning material. This links back to making the assessment part of the entire programme design. Although new technology affordances make assessment easier, the CHE warns that they should be used carefully "without losing sight of the basic requirements for an effective assessment strategy" (CHE, 2014, p. 54).

### Individualised and personalised systems of support to students

Sánchez-Elvira and Simpson (2018, p. 3) opine that investing in this kind of support increases students' "intrinsic motivation, thus promoting integration and retention, and enhancing their academic performance, satisfaction and wellbeing". Such services involve "student-tutor and student-student communication through email and electronic conferences, social clubs and networks, student peer support through Facebook, wikis and other similar crowd-based services" (Tait, 2015, p. 8).

In this study, both online and offline support systems were in use. Similarly, as in this study, several studies have attested to the extensive use of SMSes for both administrative and academic purposes (Abu Ziden et al., 2017). Others have found that students prefer to use WhatsApp for both purposes due to cost (Cetinkaya, 2017), which the institution is yet to tap into. In addition, the number of participants with a disability in this study, and as evidenced in other distance institutional documents, is minimal. Providers need to consider reaching out more to such students. Other areas of concern identified in this study need further improvement. This includes the call centre services, responses to student queries and funding. These areas need attention to support students better (Owusu-Boampong & Holmberg, 2015). Although regarded as expensive (Tait, 2015), carefully integrating these services from the beginning of a programme can have a positive return on investment (Simpson, 2016).

### Information and logistical systems that communicate between all relevant participants in the system

Distance education is no stranger to the combination of information and logistical systems, which have been made possible by the LMS in use by institutions (Tait, 2015). Linked to this is the growing use of learner analytics. According to Tait (2014, p. 14), "the new practices of learner analytics are being developed as the back-system to diagnose and identify when and how learners might need support, deriving from learning within, not separate from, the module or programme". Nonetheless, Tait (2015) observed in the study among members of the ICDE that this is still a promise rather than an achievement because not all institutions are taking maximum advantage of it.

### Managing for student success

Commenting on the earlier work of Moore and Kearsley (1996, p. 5) on the system view of distance education as comprising diverse component processes, the CHE (2014, p. 65) reiterates that this "provides a holistic picture of the various elements and how they interrelate". For Tait (2015, p. 9), managing for student success involves "putting the learner at the heart of the system". A key to enabling this process is to ensure the quality of all aspects of the programme, something which distance education is continually grappling. This consideration, among others, means making sure that "the institution's mission and aims

are clear and known to all; putting in place well thought-out systems, fool-proof and communicated to everyone; and making clear to everyone who is responsible for what" (CHE, 2014, p. 72).

## Guidelines on the Use of Tait's Framework

Based on the findings from this study, the author is suggesting some guidelines on the use of Tait's framework (Table 5).

<p align="center">**Table 5: Guidelines on the Use of Tait's Framework**</p>

| Key elements of Tait's framework | Suggested indices |
|---|---|
| Pre-study information, advice, guidance and admission | - *Marketing strategies relevant to the context*<br>- *Clear information regarding the programme to prospective students*<br>- *Guidance on choice of programme*<br>- *Clear line of communication (e.g. staff students could liaise with)* |
| Curriculum or programme design for student success | - *Programme aligned to institutional mission and vision*<br>- *Programme aligned to national and student goals*<br>- *Built-in student support*<br>- *Technologies relevant to student context and the future plan of the institution (pull and push approach)*<br>- *Training of staff and students regarding the use of technologies*<br>- *Programme evaluation that involves all stakeholders* |
| Intervention at key points and in response to student need (pre-study, in course and through qualification) | - *Pre-study*<br>  *a. Clear line of communication*<br>  *b. Review of readiness (Survey to measure student readiness and to know what to improve on and how to further support students)*<br>- *In course*<br>  *a. Call centre*<br>  *b. Contact sessions/Tutoring (online/face-to-face depending on the context)*<br>  *c. Learner analytics on first assignment and mid-module*<br>  *d. Exam preparation: Contact sessions/Tutoring (online/face-to-face depending on the context)*<br>- *Through qualification*<br>  *a. Guidance on next-module choice (as applicable) and qualification planning* |
| Assessment to support learning and to judge achievement | - *Relevant formative and summative assessment*<br>- *Built into the programme design, not an after-thought*<br>- *Training of staff (tutors) on effective feedback*<br>- *Administrative and academic monitoring on timeous feedback* |
| Individualised and personalised systems of support to students | - *Call centre*<br>- *Communication (e.g., tutor-student and student-student)*<br>- *SMS*<br>- *The use of social media (WhatsApp, Facebook, YouTube*<br>- *Quick response to student query*<br>- *Funding*<br>- *Students with disabilities* |

<p align="right">(Continued)</p>

**Table 5:  (Continued)**

| Information and logistical systems that communicate between all relevant participants in the system | - *Management Information System (MIS) with diverse levels of accessibility*<br>- *Learner analytics (information to improve practice)* |
|---|---|
| Managing for student success | - *Total Quality Management*<br>- *Communication of mission and vision to all stakeholders (including academic and administrative staff members)*<br>- *Communication of institution's stance on quality and how this relates to all staff*<br>- *Management of key staff with clear line of responsibilities*<br>- *Operational meetings with key staff members with timelines attached to actions*<br>- *Periodic evaluation of all structures – short-term and long-term*<br>- *Periodic institutional audit* |

As earlier indicated, the framework can be adapted to any context. In summary, the indices reflect the relevance and importance of the involvement of all stakeholders in the process of supporting students. In addition, they serve as a means to monitor, evaluate and improve on institutional structures.

## Impact of the Research on Practice and Conclusion

Effective student support that results in positive throughput rates has been an ongoing battle for distance education providers. Although there is consensus on the importance of researching the phenomenon, there is sparse evidence that the research findings influence practice. Distance education providers will benefit immensely from paying attention to Tait's framework in its totality to understand the challenges and to address them effectively. For instance, the application of the framework to this study has helped to bring to the fore the areas of strength (e.g. curriculum/ programme design for student success) and weakness (e.g. more needs to be done in the area of intervention at key points and in response to student need) in the programme at the unit of study.

As at the time of writing this paper, the unit has begun to review its policy and to put measures in place to address the shortfalls highlighted in this research. The researcher organised a colloquium to which she invited a distance education expert on quality management and academic and non-academic staff members, including management. The findings of the study were presented, while the guest expert gave a presentation and facilitated a discussion on total quality management in distance education. Using the guidelines indicated in Table 5, a longitudinal study has been put in place to monitor the impact of Tait's framework on practice.

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