

Student Support at The Open University Of Tanzania (OUT) for the Past 20 Years

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Abstract: *The study reported in this article discusses student support at The Open University of Tanzania (OUT) for the past 20 years. The study uses descriptive survey research design to examine student support at OUT for the past 20 years as perceived by lecturers and students. Interview questions and analysis of e-mail correspondences of a sample of 7 lecturers and 64 students at OUT were conducted. Findings indicate that student support at OUT has evolved from typically traditional to a technology-enhanced student support. Specifically, student support at OUT was typically traditional during the first decade characterized by limited application of ICTs as a result of poor ICT infrastructure; dominant use of print study materials, regularly organized face-to-face sessions, delays in delivery of print study materials, lack of regular communication and interactions and lack of immediate feedback to students. According to lecturers and students the second decade has witnessed improvement in student support in terms of timely delivery of courses (through CDs and MOODLE LMS), access to learning resources (through OUT's website and Portals of other universities) and communication and interactions between lecturers and students (through e-mails). It is recommended that a comprehensive large scale empirical study is conducted to investigate the impact of improvements in ICT on students retention, graduation rate and student academic performance.*

Key words: Student support, Information and Communication Technology, Open and Distance Learning, Open University of Tanzania.

INTRODUCTION

The Open University of Tanzania (OUT) is an Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institution established by the Government's Act No. 17 of 1992 which lead to the formulation of the Universities Act No. 7 of 2005 which was replaced by the Open University of Tanzania Charter and Rules of 2007. ODL is a mode of teaching in which students are geographically and physically separated from lecturers (Keegan, 1990) although they (lecturers and students) can meet during periodically arranged face-to-face sessions.

Although the history of ODL in Tanzania started far back during the days of Cooperative Education Centre in 1965 and the National Correspondence Institution in 1972, systematic documentations indicate that the history of ODL can be traced back to 1979 when the government of Tanzania commissioned the Anglo-

Tanzanian study to explore the ODL mode of delivery particularly for University education (Cutting, 1989). The report recommended the establishment of a correspondence institute at the University of Dar es Salaam. Later in 1988, the Government of Tanzania appointed a committee (URT, 1990) to investigate the possibilities of establishing the ODL university which eventually recommended the establishment of OUT in 1992 as an ODL institution.

The Open University of Tanzania is an ODL institution, offering academic degrees, diploma and certificate programmes to over 60,000 students spread in 28 Regional Centres found within Tanzania and outside (Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda and Namibia). Through ODL, OUT offers two flexibilities. Firstly, OUT provides learning opportunities for those who could not be admitted in conventional universities due to their inflexible schedules. Secondly, OUT uses a mode of programmes delivery which is not limited by time, pace and place.

Like in other ODL institutions, effective student support is critical (Molefi, 2002) for successful student learning at OUT. This article discusses student support at OUT for the past 20 years and demonstrates how student support has evolved over the years from typically traditional to modern technology-enhanced support.

THEORETICAL UNDERPININGS

The Concept of Students Support in ODL

There are many attempts done to conceptualize student support (Keegan, 1990; Robinson, 1995, Bhalalusesa and Babyegeya, 2000; Tait, 2003). Robinson (1995) conceives student support as personal contact between lectures and students, face-to-face, feedback to students on their learning, additional materials such as handbooks and guides, access to libraries (virtual or actual) and communication and interaction facilities. In other settings, student support is used to refer to tutoring and interactive teaching through face-to-face or modern technologies (Tait, 2003).

According to Balalussesesa and Babyegeya (2000), student support includes provision of course outlines, study materials and communications about student learning in general among others.

Synthesis of the concepts reveals that, effective student support must involve (i) provision of learning resources (e.g. course outlines, study materials, handbooks and guides), (ii) regular communication and interaction between lecturer and students through face-to-face or modern technologies and (iii) provision of immediate feedback to students.

Although student support in ODL universities is critical for successful learning, studies reveal that student support in most ODL institutions in Sub-Sahara African countries is ill-developed (Msuya and Maro, 2002; Ntiluhoka, 2007; Mahai, 2008). As a result, students encounter several challenges when learning at ODL institutions.

Importance of Student Support in ODL

There is a lot of literature on the importance and effectiveness of student support in ODL institutions (Tait, 2003; Floyd and Casey-Powell, 2004; Nihuka, 2011; Bozok, 2011). Previous studies have demonstrated that effective student support lowers the dropout rate, increases student retention rate (Roberts, n.d; Tait, 2003) and leads to better study results (Roberts, n.d; 1996; Bozok, 2011).

Such benefits are even better when modern technologies are integrated in the delivery of support to students. For example Bozok (2011) found that the application of modern technologies increased the success of students by improving access to learning resources regardless of time or place. This is because such an effective student support reinforces the student sense of confidence and self esteem which are necessary for distance learners.

The purpose of the study was to investigate student support at OUT for the past 20 years and demonstrate how student support has evolved over the years from typically traditional to modern technology-enhanced support.

METHODOLOGY

Design of the Study

The study reported in this paper used descriptive survey research design to examine student support at OUT for the past 20 years. The major purpose of a descriptive research is to provide thorough description of the state of affairs as it exists (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Descriptive survey is a method of collection of information by interviewing or administering a questionnaire to a sample of individuals (Orodho, 2003). A descriptive survey is very important as it allows vivid description of the phenomena under study (Adeyinka *et al.*, 2007).

Sample and Sampling Approach

A total of 64 students drawn from Arusha, Coast, Kilimanjaro, Kinondoni, Mbeya, Tanga and Temeke Regional Centres participated in the study. Additionally, seven (7) lecturers from Coast, Kinondoni, Tanga and Temeke also participated in the study.

Random sampling approach was used in selecting both lecturers and students to participate in the interviews. The approach provided equal chance to every individual in the Regional Centres to be involved in the study. Besides a specific criteria of working for OUT for at least seven (7) years was used when selecting the participants for the study. This criteria helped to ensure that only lecturers and students who have some experience on OUT's operations participate in the study.

Instruments and Procedures

Interview questions and analysis of e-mails were used during the study to solicit data from lecturers and students regarding student support at OUT for the past 20 years. Interview questions were used because of the fact that they generated in-depth information about phenomena that was investigated (Grainger and Tolhurst, 2005). The interview questions contained semi-structured open-ended questions. Each participant was interviewed once and responses recorded using *ipad's* audio recorder. The recorded information was then transcribed into a word document;

main issues were identified and used to address specific sub-research questions of the study.

E-mails from both lecturers and students were retrieved and used to demonstrate the suitability of using e-mails for communication and interaction between lecturers and students when studying in an ODL mode.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Student Support

One of the purposes of the study was to determine perceptions of lecturers and students about student support at OUT. When asked about the situation of student support at OUT during early 1990's and 2005's, over 85.7% (6 out of 7 lecturers) reported that more often course outlines and study materials were provided to students in Centres in the form of print materials to support students in their learning. Correspondence through courier services and face-to-face sessions were the most dominant means of communication and interaction between lectures and students. Also, 84.4% (54 out of 64 students) pointed out that student support at OUT was a challenge during early 90's and up to 2005. Dominant responses in this regard were that lack or delays in getting printed study materials was a serious challenge during those days as illustrated in the utterance:

'I sometimes had problem getting study materials for some of my courses and at times I even missed and was told to wait until they were printed. Coupled with my family problems, I have been unable to graduate on time. But nowadays things have improved, we get soft copies of study materials and I can access some resources from OUT's website'.

Although students' responses corroborated to those of lecturers, some of them [i.e. 18.8% (12 students)] showed concern on the fact that there was lack of timely information to students about when the study materials will be available at the Centres. This made students waste time and money travelling to the centers unsuccessfully as found and reported in previous studies (see for example Mahai, 2008; Ntiluhoka, 2007; Nihuka, 2011).

According to the lecturers, OUT used to provide hard copies of course outlines to students so as overcome such delays in the delivery of study materials and to guide students in their learning, such a strategy was also reported in previous studies by Ntiluhoka (2007) and Mbunda (2009).

In addition, 70.3% (45 students) pointed out that the first decade since inception, OUT had limited ICT infrastructure at the Headquarters and Regional Centres. This contributed to limited applications of ICTs for communication and interactions with lecturers and for immediate provision of assignments.

ICT-enhanced Student Support

The study aimed to also find out specific efforts that OUT had made towards ensuring use of ICT in enhancing student support in the University. According to Mbwette (2009), one of the efforts is substantial improvement of ICT infrastructure and access in the University in recent times as compared to the first decade or so

since the establishment of OUT. Furthermore, Mbwette (ibid) reports that another effort is the establishment by OUT of four Students Computer Laboratories in Dar es Salaam, 12 (Community Computer Laboratories) and 18 (Student Computer Laboratories) in Regional Centres, each with internet connection.

Regarding efforts made by OUT towards integration of ICT in education, both lecturers (71.4%) and students (93.8%) appreciated that there was noticeable improvement in terms of infrastructure and access to desktop computers, laptops and internet. According to the lecturers, such improvements had made provision of support to students such as delivery of study materials, communication and interactions with students and provision of feedback to students better at OUT than ever before. Similar situation has also been reported in several previous studies such as Mbwette, (2008 & 2009); Bakari, (2009); Nihuka, (2011).

It should be noted that OUTs efforts to integrate ICTs in its operation to enhance student support (among others), can be traced back in 2004 when the University formulated comprehensive structures such as ICT Policy, ICT Master Plan and E-Learning Implementation Strategy (OUT, 2009a; 2009b; 2009c). Amongst others, OUT Policy stipulates clearly that the University aims to (i) enhance the use of ICT as a main interaction platform between students and lecturers and (ii) transform all study materials developed henceforth into an interactive format consistent with Moodle Learning Management System (ICT Policy, 2009).

Additionally, efforts were ongoing to install computer laboratories for students in all Regional Centres (Mbwette, 2012). Besides, as a way to improve students' access to ICT, OUTSO leadership has negotiated with a Tanzanian company called Royalmark Supplies Co. Ltd to supply laptops from China at a cheaper price of USD 270 with specifications provided by IT staff from OUT.

Improvement in Student Support

Furthermore, the study investigated the ways student support had improved at OUT during the past 20 years. Interview responses indicated that student support had improved course delivery and communication and interaction between students and lecturers.

Improvement in Course Delivery

Evidence from discussions during interviews indicated clearly that investment in ICT infrastructure has contributed to the improvement of student support at OUT particularly in relation to delivery of course outlines and study materials and communication and interaction between lecturers and students.

Both lecturers (85.7%) and students (93.8%) indicated that compared to the past, the use of CDs has improved the delivery of study materials and course outlines. Although some of the students (39.1%) were concerned with the costs involved, the rest pointed out that,

‘I can access CDs for some of my courses through CDs that are made available in the Centre something which was impossible in the past.

However the new challenge is the cost involved to get the materials photocopied so that I can use them while am at home or at workplace’.

Students’ responses during interviews were echoed by over 50% of the lecturers who also felt that student support at OUT has significantly been improved. The top management is very committed to support integration of ICTs in teaching and learning. This is evidenced by installation of a heavy CD burner at OUT which has facilitated production of over 566 CDs which are made available to students through respective Centres. Examples of the courses which are available in CDs include BSc. (ICT), BA (General), BA (Ed.), DPTE and Foundation Courses.

Additionally, 76.6% (49 out of 64 students) reported that unlike in the past, they do access study materials and electronic resources for some of their courses from electronic platform called MOODLE Learning Management System and Portals of some universities which have their links in OUT’s website. The following utterance by one of the students justifies this claim:

‘It is possible for me to access study materials for different courses that I undertake through Moodle LMS in the university’s website. Besides study materials, I also access various electronic resources that are available in the Portals of African Virtual University’s and Massachusetts Institute of Technology’.

A closer look in OUT website revealed that most announcements and some course outlines are accessible through Moodle LMS as reported by majority of students. Already there are over 104 courses uploaded in Moodle LMS for students, although only the B.Sc. (ICT) courses are being used extensively by students. Where necessary, students are oriented on how to access electronic resources (such as course outlines, study materials and other related resources) that are useful in their learning. According to Nihuka (2011), students get sufficient and up-to-date learning resources when ICTs such computer and internet are used and such technologies help students to get course outlines and study materials on time. Generally is easier to access resources through ICT than entirely through print. According to Nihuka (2011), improvements in access to learning resources enhance student support at OUT and ultimately improve their academic performance.

Improvement in Communication and Interaction between Students and Lecturers

Lecturers and students were also interviewed regarding whether or not communication and interaction between lecturers and students has improved over the years. According to the findings 87.5% of students (56 out of 64 students) indicated that communication with course lecturers has improved in recent years specifically through the use of e-mails and mobile phone text messages. Students expressed that it was easy to communicate with course lecturers of certain courses than to meet them physically since lecturers were too mobile as evidenced by the following email correspondence from one of the lecturers:

From: lecturer abc xyz <abc.xyz@out.ac.tz>

To: <ngimih@yahoo.com>

Sent: Friday, May 18, 2012 1:27 PM

Subject: Re: Instruments

Dear Student,
Find attached, instruments from Nihuka (2008) and Kigobe (2012).
Go through them and decide which ones do you think are suitable for your study. Feel free to modify or improve the questions so that they reflect your settings.
All the best.
Please let me know whenever you need my help.
Thanks,
lecturer abc xyz.

However, the major concern for most students (93.8%) was frequent power cuts and slow speed of internet. However, interview responses showed that majority of students feel that the use of e-mail communication during the course, improved the way they interacted with lecturers. The majority of students [64.1% (41 out of 64 students)], reported that e-mails made it possible for them to receive immediate and timely feedback from lecturers. Related results are also reported in previous studies conducted elsewhere (Malikowski and Theis, 2006; Dabbagh and Kitsantas, 2005). Most of such studies reported that students in their studies found interactions through e-mail interesting and useful for exchanging information among students and between students and lecturers. The following is one of the email correspondences retrieved from one of the students:

From: <ngimih@yahoo.com>
To: lecturer xyz <abc.xyz@out.ac.tz>
Sent: Monday, May 21, 2012 10:03 AM
Subject: Re: Instruments

Dear Sir,
Thank you Dr, I am working on the instruments, also whenever there is a problem I will phone you for elaboration.
Have a nice day.
Your student, Ngimi.

Note from the e-mail conversation that lecturer *abc xyz* communicates with his student on the issue of research instruments that the lecturer has suggested for his student. Elsewhere, modern technologies such as e-mails are used in education to enhance communication and interaction between lectures and students (Dabbagh and Kitsantas, 2005) for various purposes. In other ODL institutions, increased interactions through such kind of technologies have shown to contribute to increased students' satisfaction, retention and graduation rates (Malikowski and Theis, 2006).

At OUT students are highly encouraged to use their University e-mail addresses to communicate and interact with lectures during their studies (Mbwette, 2012). They (students) are also expected to use e-mail to forward their inquiries in relation to their examination grades to the Director of Examination Syndicate (DES) via Deputy Vice chancellor Academic and Dean or Director of respective Faculty or Institute. According to Nihuka (2011), students in Dar es Salaam use e-mails for about 3 – 6 times per week to communicate and interact with their lecturers compared to their counterparts in Regional Centres.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of the study reported in this paper was to investigate and review student support at OUT for the past 20 years. The study has demonstrated that student support at OUT has evolved from typically traditional to a technology-enhanced student support. Specifically, the study has shown that the first decade since inception, student support at OUT was typically traditional characterized by limited application of ICTs as a result of poor ICT infrastructure; dominant use of print study materials, regularly organized face-to-face sessions, delays in delivery of print study materials, lack of regular communication and interactions and lack of immediate feedback to students. A similar situation is also experienced in other Open and Distance Learning institutions in most developing countries (Dzakiria, 2004); Ludwing-Harman and Dunlap, 2003). Such a traditional and ineffective student support at OUT raised concerns on the part of students particularly in relation to the delays in the delivery of study materials, lack of regular communication and interaction between lectures and students and lack of immediate feedback on their learning (Mcharazo and Olden, 2000; Mahai, 2008; Mnyanyi and Mbwette 2009; Nihuka 2011).

It was not until the second decade since the establishment of OUT that there was a radical shift towards modern technologies integration and significant improvement of student support (Bakari, 2009; Nihuka, 2011; Mbwette, 2012). It is clearly demonstrated in this study that the second decade since inception, student support at OUT became enhanced by ICTs such as Moodle LMS, CDs, e-mails and Portals. According to lecturers and students the second decade has witnessed improvement in student support in terms of timely delivery of courses (through CDs and Moodle LMS), access to learning resources (through OUT website and Portals of other universities) and communication and interactions between lecturers and students (through e-mails).

This study has shown that investment in ICT infrastructure has improved the way courses are delivered, access to learning resources and the way lecturers interact with students. The improvements in the area of ICT at OUT were also reported in previous studies by Nihuka (2011), Moro (2008) and Bakari (2009). Besides benefits, the study has identified challenges of slow internet speed and frequent power cuts as serious challenges towards successful integration of ICTs in ODL. More comprehensive discussion of the challenges associated with ICT integration in ODL universities are also reported in Mnyanyi, Bakari and Mbwette (2011).

Based on the findings discussed in this paper, it is recommended that a comprehensive large scale empirical study is conducted to investigate the impact of improvements in ICT on students drop out/retention; completion/graduation rate and student academic performance. Such a study will gauge the contribution of the improvement in student support as a result of investments in ICT on student learning. Additionally, it will portray a clear image of the situation from which decisions regarding further investment in ICT can be made.

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