

Student Support: The Engine of Attaining and Sustaining Quality in the Zimbabwe Open University

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Abstract: *Quality student service is one of the main concerns among institutions and stakeholders today especially those involved in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) because it is the engine for quality practices. This study examined the views of students and student advisors on student services that will lead to attaining and sustaining quality in the Zimbabwe Open University. The study was qualitative, collecting data through open-ended questionnaires and interviews from a purposive sample of 223 students and nine student advisors. The study found out that implementing one-stop student services housed at the learner support centre and backed by 10 regional campus centres will lead to attaining and sustaining quality. The respondents cited support system that includes library, Internet, and ancillary services as critical aspects that connects students to the institution. Respondents further impressed that tutor availability, timely giving feedback, face-to-face tutoring and/or online tutoring support and counseling, are critical if student support is to be the engine of attaining and sustaining quality in an ODL context. The study recommended more competent, information literate tutors to be employed, receive extensive training and have their performance assessed for effectiveness in student support. Lead tutors must be appointed from the most competent tutors to mentor others on supporting students. It also recommended further research to be conducted involving more institutions and more respondents.*

Key words: Open and distance learning (ODL), student services, quality, student support centre, information literacy and counselling.

INTRODUCTION

Open and distance learning (ODL) is a multi-dimensional concept aimed at bridging the time, geographical, economic, social, educational, and communication distance between student and institution, student and academics, student and course ware and student and peers (Henning, 2010). For this to take place, students must be supported. Open distance learning focuses on removing barriers to access learning, flexibility of learning provision, student-centeredness, supporting students and constructing learning programmes with the expectation that students can succeed (Henning, 2010). Quality student service is one of the main concerns among institutions and stakeholders today, especially those involved in open and distance learning (ODL) because it is the engine for quality practices. Principles of quality management are a relatively new entrant into the arena of management practices (Srikanthan and Dalrymple, 2003). This is so even though the original literature in the area of quality dates back to the era of human relations development of management theory (1930-1960). The origins of present day quality management are usually ascribed to Japan's search for quality improvements in the 1950s and its success in moulding ideas on quality into a coherent operative philosophy. A serious discussion of it in the Western management literature began in the 1970s (Srikanthan and Dalrymple, 2003). Higher education followed nearly a couple of decades later (Sherr and Teeter cited in Srikanthan and Dalrymple, 2003).

The emergence of student support as a major issue in the Zimbabwe Open University can be linked to two reasons. The first of these and the most crucial one is the rate of student withdrawal from ODL programmes. In one such early departure, 60% of students in an education programme in 2008 withdrew from that programme (Chiom *et al.*, 2010). The second has to do with the quality focus adopted by the university in which student support is the engine of attaining and sustaining quality. Thus, quality issues may play in the hands of the impact of increasing student diversity on students' experience if student support is not given due recognition. The world over, there is concern about students who drop out of university before completing their degree and the associated costs of non-completion can be unbearable for distance education institutions. This research seeks to extend the scholarship on student support services and is structured around a number of key questions in relation to the provision of student support in ODL which has been shaped by the development of a mass higher education system that needs to support students with differing needs on more flexible programmes of learning. This includes, for example, part-time as well as full-time students, home and international students, students with disabilities (Avramidis and Skidmore, 2004), students with caring responsibilities as parents and as carers for elderly relatives and those on distance learning courses. In addition to these differences the need for support on study skills, career guidance and teaching and learning programmes is increasing in order to improve retention rates (Gutteridge, 2001) and the quality of higher education. According to Bristol City University (2011), the university offers a confidential service, within the framework of the University's confidential policy. The University encourages students to make contact with it at any stage, from pre-application to graduation.

Some of the reasons why students need to contact student advisors are as follows:

- They are finding it physically hard to cope with their courses;
- They are experiencing mental health difficulties;
- They wonder if they might be dyslexic;
- They are uncertain whether or not to apply for a Disabled Students Allowance (DSA);
- They wish to explore options for support before they have their DSA assessment;
- They are experiencing delays or difficulties with the DSA process;
- They find their DSA provision no longer meets their needs;
- They want to discuss their examination arrangements;
- They want advice on personal care services or using support workers, such as note-takers or BSL interpreters (Bristol City University 2011)

Open distance learning (ODL) applies a set of methods or processes for teaching a diverse range of students located at different places and physically separated from the learning institution, their tutors/teachers as well as other students (Henning, 2010). In this respect, an ODL model entails a student-centred approach that is built on integrated systems and engaged learning. To this end, ODL involves learning-teaching interaction, and students actively engage and interact with the institution, their lecturers, study material and fellow students (Henning, 2010). This complements well-designed independent study packages as well as the required learner support throughout their studies. Thus, ODL students need support because they are isolated. In recent years, many organizations have paid greater attention to isolation and the impact this factor has on the quality of student performance. ODL institutions have to follow this trend by taking measures to reduce isolation among students. Both the existing literature and the practices of institutions clearly associate better student outcomes with less isolation (Fullan, 2001). Sadly little attention is paid to the same issue when it comes to distance education students. The intention of this study is to unravel the student services that will make these an engine to attain and sustain quality in an ODL context. In this regard, student isolation should receive its due consideration. Today, there is little debate about the fact that isolation has a negative impact on the quality of the work

experience of open and distance learners because the literature shows a long history of isolation, stemming primarily from the nature of classrooms and the manner in which they are spatially grouped throughout school buildings (Stephenson and Bauer, 2010).

Henning (2010), provides useful insight for supporting students in ODL arguing that current trends in ODL internationally display the use of resources, especially technology in a radically different way than the first and second-generation approaches. The trend is further to create an environment of participation and self help, away from the industrialized, centralized, counter service type of approach (Henning, 2010). This goes hand in hand with the shift from remote learning to a learner-centered approach to learning. It is acknowledged that a more technology-enabled environment is necessary for successful ODL and that it presents specific requirements and challenges for the management and services of ODL students' services.

In their survey of students' perceptions of quality in higher education, Hill, Lomas and McGregor (2003), found that the most influential factors in the provision of a quality education are the quality of the lecturer and the student support systems. This clearly shows that the importance of student support is increasing. However, student support is also becoming more difficult to manage considering the diversity in student populations and the glaring fact that growing numbers of students need access to high quality support. The aim of this study is to explore the effectiveness of the support available to ODL students. In so doing, the study seeks to identify ways of improving the support that is currently available by investigating the views of students through interviews on how to make student support services the engine of attaining and sustaining quality.

METHODOLOGY

This study is a qualitative case study of one university. In the first stage, semi-structured interviews lasting 30 minutes were conducted with experienced practitioners working within the student services section, the main thrust being to draw out the important aspects of quality in student support as well as "who" and "what" had a significant impact on the culture of quality in student support. Nine interviews were conducted with experienced practitioners representing student services and support. Interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed using the template approach involving the examination of interview transcripts for common themes and sub-themes using an analysis guide or "codebook" (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) derived from the literature.

The second stage involved a survey research design based on the findings from the literature and interviews. It was designed to provide a description of trends, attitudes, or opinions of students as well as contextual information about the practices in the university under study. The questionnaire survey was conducted on a sample drawn from registered students for the second semester of 2010. Including the pilot survey, a total of 351 questionnaires were administered in person by one of the researchers for completion. Open-ended questionnaires were distributed to students. In all 223 students from four regions of the Zimbabwe Open University participated. A total of 223 questionnaires were returned representing an overall response rate of 63.5 per cent. 223 of these questionnaires were analysed in this report. The open-ended questionnaire responses also received the same treatment for coding, organising, linking, and exploring the transcripts for themes and sub-themes in line with the analysis guide.

In all instances, purposive sampling was used to extract information rich participants. All the participants in this study gave their informed consent before completing and submitting the required information.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the results of the qualitative interviews and open-ended questionnaire responses of the study. In all eight thematic areas were covered from both the interviews and the questionnaires. The majority of questions in the interview instrument were aimed at gaining an understanding of respondents' views, attitudes, beliefs and behaviour related to student support as the engine of attaining and sustaining quality in open and distance learning (ODL).

One-stop Student Services Support Centre

The most important finding to come out of this study was the need for an ODL institution to put in place a one-stop student service centre. One respondent put it this way:

Implementing one-stop student services housed at the learner support centre and backed by 10 regional campus centres will lead to attaining and sustaining quality.

The students cited support system that includes

Library, Internet services, career guidance, e-mail services, study facilities; library facilities; photocopying facilities; access to computers, audio/video facilities; study groups; developmental counseling; orientation for new students; vacation schools; face-to-face/week-end tutorials; telephone tutorials and interactive video-conference tutorials.

The necessity for a readily available one stop student support centre is further highlighted and supported by Lentell and O'Rourke (2004:5) who pointed out that:

...adult education experience suggests that at least 50% of a student's needs are not strictly related to the subject at hand. That is not to say that their needs are solely psychological and unconnected with the content of study; the help they need is of an educational kind, even of an academic kind, but not strictly subject-based.

Information Literacy

Information literacy as an Internet support system was cited as crucial in attaining and sustaining quality. To this end, they applauded the formation of ZOUONLINE concept which they said would greatly change the quality landscape in the Zimbabwe Open University. However, they doubted its capacity to stir quality to greater heights if students are not competent enough to handle the information explosion. To them, to attain and sustain quality in this regard is to enable students to be information literate distance education students.

The concerns of the respondents in this study appeared to be genuine assessment of current practices elsewhere. For instance, UNISA has taken strides in this direction. Henning (2010) maintains that at UNISA they have the flexibility to decide if they should communicate by using Blogger, Wikispaces, or Twitter. The University has the option to upload lectures and experiments to YouTube. Staff can even send RSS audio or video feeds to facilitate the distribution of information/alert to information. They also have the option to join Linked-in or Zoom-info to facilitate communication if they so wish. Collaboration with other academics can be done through Ygma, Google Docs, or Ning (Henning, 2010). They can also create a presence in Facebook, MySpace or Second Life and publish using Creative Commons, Flickr, SlideShare or Merlot.

The need for effective functioning in the knowledge society, and to cope with continuous changes, has caused a wide debate about what kinds of competencies young people and adults need for life and work in the twenty-first century. Many authors believe that in

knowledge society everyone needs increasingly sophisticated skills for information finding, handling and use (Virkus, 2006). In library and information science (LIS) literature these competencies are called “information literacy” (IL). Proponents of “information literacy” believe that it is the absolutely critical literacy for the twenty-first century (Bruce, 2007:3) and for the realization of most academic, personal, and professional goals as well as for economic development (Correia and Teixeira, quoted in Virkus, 2006).

Information literacy is perceived as a prerequisite for lifelong learning and for active, effective and responsible citizenship (Virkus, 2006). Some authors have also commended information literacy and said it is critical for personal growth, empowerment, self-actualization and social inclusion (Bundy, 2009:2). It is also believed that information literacy will help to bridge the digital divide, strengthen the employability of a workforce, counter information overload, and support evidence-based policy and decisions in governments and the professions (Corrall, 2003).

Ancillary Services

Henning (2010) notes that modern ODL institutions have to establish systems for the distributed facilitation of learning after registration, that include provision of tutors, equipped learning centers, libraries, information, and communication technologies were echoed in this research. Ancillary services were seen by the respondents in this study as critical aspects that connects students to the institution. Some of the ancillary services mentioned include tutor availability, personal tutor, job shop, timely giving feedback, E-mail services, typing services, face-to-face tutoring and a less intensive induction which is more of a process than an event. Furthermore, the majority of participants viewed face-to-face tutorials and vacation schools as the most valuable support service that is integral to their success in their studies.

Of the ancillary services mentioned in this study, tutoring is at the heart of the ODL students. The findings on tutorials appear to be similar to that of Fung and Carr (2000), who reported that the attendance rate at tutorials for students at the Open University of Hong Kong was very high, with over 70% of them attending over 75% of the tutorials, including 30% who attended all. To attain this, Owen’s (2002) ideas appear to be relevant for tutorial support in ODL institutions. According to Owen (2002:21), ‘a re-thinking, a radical reappraisal of the whole approach to the personal tutor system’ should be undertaken to upgrade the personal tutor system (Owen, 2002). The gap between the needs or the demands of the student and the capacity of the personal tutor to provide the necessary support should be addressed to increase satisfaction on both sides.

Online Tutoring Support

Henning’s (2010) ideas at UNISA that they can teach asynchronously using Moodle, Desire2Learn or Blackboard to enhance the learning process and that they can conference synchronously using Elluminate, Centralive, Wimba, or Adobe Connect were also reflected in this research where respondents wanted online tutorial support. Online tutoring was cited as quality student support services in an ODL context. Some supporting statements to that effect include “the need for trained e-tutors is important to support students learning through the Internet. Tutoring groups need to be kept small to ensure that quality learning takes place in a collegueship environment. Paralleling this finding is respondents’ particular disagreement that adequate and timely support was available regarding guidance and assistance on how to access and use computers for tutorial purposes.

The need for online tutoring was given as critical in this study. Johnston and Webber (2003) also note that even in developed countries such as the USA, whilst much attention has been

paid to information literacy by American policy-makers, librarians and academics, the results are still relatively narrow, giving a potentially superficial guide to the nature of a curriculum for information literacy in higher education. This casts a dark shadow on e-learning and shows why respondents in this study were also highly concerned by their online tutoring support. Bruce and Lampson (2002) also argue that, despite some progress over the past decade, library and information professionals still report that universal online tutoring especially in developing countries is a distant, if not a receding goal.

Role of the Library

Several respondents highlighted dramatic changes in libraries during the last decade and the increasing role of a university digital library. The discussion about changes in libraries focused most frequently on the ICT developments and the implications of information in digital format. The suggestions below clearly demonstrate students frustration in this regard:

Prescribed and recommended textbooks were not available, yet there has been some kind of revolution during some last years in library services all over the world. Student services should embrace this development.

Our sources are too old, yet the meaning of the traditional library is diminishing and has decreased over the years. The services that are available to all the researchers have become so much more. They have changed a lot during the last five or ten years. During the last period the Internet took off and electronic library services are a quality student support service in an ODL context.

There was agreement in the respondents in this study that library service was one of the most effective and useful student support services. However, the respondents felt that library services were not effective because prescribed and recommended textbooks were not available. In addition, concern was raised by some students that they did not know how to use the library, while others suggested that the library be opened on Saturdays and after hours. As such, ODL libraries should therefore manage and plan their services in such a way that they meet the information and resource needs of clients wherever they are located (Henning, 2010). The role the library plays in supporting the ODL Business Model at UNISA as the African University in service of humanity is provided with practical examples of responses from the library with regards to the student cycle comprised of enquiry, information, application, registration, study package, orientation, distributed learning facilitation, assignments and examination (Henning, 2010).

Social Support to Thwart Isolation

Distance education students appear to experience challenges related to isolation as was unraveled in this study, yet Bird and Morgan (2003) suggest that regional centres should provide a first point of contact for many students and the accuracy and timeliness of information provided to students at this point is critical to their future. Some of the issues mentioned by the respondents include: 'There must be people I can depend on to help me if I really need reliable alliance. There must be a trustworthy person I could turn to any time for advice if I were having a problem'.

Isolation for teachers in public schools functions as a complicated variable that both impacts and is impacted by other factors. These trends and evidence provide a theoretical foundation for looking at isolation as more than an outcome or indicator of the quality of the work experience, and they support the decision to position isolation as a factor that acts in concert with other variables to impact the quality of the work experience (Stephenson and Bauer, 2010). To this, Bird and Morgan (2003) add that the ability of today's distance education student to become part of a learning community depends on the provision of detailed

explanations of the types of academic and administrative student support provided by the particular university, so that the students can feel confident that support is not only close at hand, but that it is also something to which they are entitled.

Supporting the Academic Development of Students

The student respondents in this study were of the opinion that supporting the academic development of the students is critical to attaining and sustaining quality in ODL. Some of the academic areas that they needed support in include: 'Study skills to support academic writing skills and subject specific support to address gaps in subject knowledge and understanding. Prompt feedback need to be given on time'.

In ODL, the support system is 'an educational necessity' and both students and staff benefit from it (Lea and Farbus, 2000). However, to be effective it needs to be motivated by a sincere concern for students' development rather than merely being a response to external measures and pressures. This has to be further supported by prompt feedback to students as observed by Benza *et al.* (1999), that students felt that the assignment turn-around period was unsatisfactory. They argue that students appear to have made a genuine observation because feedback on marked assignments is the most critical tutoring strategy in open and distance learning. The earlier the feedback is provided the more it is likely to have a positive impact on the students' performance.

Accessibility of Student Services to all Students

Contrary to Simpson (2002) assertions that distance education students who are making considerable efforts to attend rare and distant tutorials may expect a higher quality of support than students at conventional institutions who can shrug off the occasional system failure or poor tutorial, the respondents in this study were concerned that there is disparity in the provision of student support services in the different regions of the university under study.

Some of the issues raised in this regard include:

To attain and sustain quality, the issues of accessibility of the services to all students is of paramount importance. The other issue has to do with the quality of these services at all times and at all the places they are offered in order for them to meet the needs of students.

The respondents in this study appear to paint a gloomy picture on the accessibility of student services to all needy students. What this means is that more investment is needed to provide a responsive and sufficient system of student support to cater for a student body that is both more diverse and also increasing as larger numbers of students are encouraged to participate in ODL higher education. Existing support services may suffer from inadequate staffing. Lea and Farbus (2000) found that both staff and students 'felt that the amount of time budgeted for student support in terms of workload is insufficient.

Apart from student advisors, Bristol City University has disability advisors. According to Bristol City University (2011), Disability Advisers provide one-to-one support, advice and information to D/deaf students and those with mental health difficulties, Asperger's syndrome, physical mobility difficulties, visual impairments or specific learning difficulties (SpLDs), such as dyslexia, dyspraxia, dysgraphia, attention deficit (hyperactivity) disorder and Irlen syndrome.

CONCLUSION

The study concluded that student support is the engine of attaining and sustaining quality in ODL as it contributes to improved throughput and retention. Through pro-active planning

and management, this process will ensure equal access to services and resources regardless of the students' location. Open Distance Learning provides additional challenges for any institution as was evidenced in this study but also exciting opportunities to enhance quality student support services. It should be noted that in the University under study, the importance of student support is accepted and appreciated by the University senior managers within the University since access to information resources and services are essential for the attainment of superior academic skills in higher education. However, even though the concept of a student support centre was generally known, there was some confusion with the term being too broad and overwhelming. They regarded a one-stop centre as the best for their situation. This has to be housed at the national centre with branches in the ten regions of the University. The e-learning system was applauded as a well thought out plan. However, respondents in this study though it will not go far if students are not supported through online tutoring, they are not information literate and their academic and social development is not taken care of. Tutoring groups need to be kept small to ensure that quality learning takes place in a collegueship environment. The library services were seen as falling far short of the contemporary practices in which the principle of access entitlement is a prerequisite for any successful ODL institution. This principle entails that every learner, lecturer, research or any other staff members of the institution is entitled to have access to the library and information services of the institution despite their geographical location. The findings appear to point out that it may be far off for the time for a radical review of the role of support services in attaining and sustaining quality in an Open and Distance Learning context.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommended:

- More competent tutors must be employed to conduct tutorial and counseling sessions at the regional campuses to ensure the quality support for students.
- ODL institutions need to employ disability advisers who provide one-to-one support, advice and information to students with disabilities, impairments or specific learning difficulties (SpLDs).
- Tutors need to be provided with extensive training so that they can teach asynchronously using Moodle, Desire2Learn or Blackboard to enhance the learning process.
- Tutor performance must be assessed by learners and student support centre administrators so that their performance is not questioned by students.
- Tutoring groups need to be kept small to ensure that quality learning takes place in a collegueship environment.
- Lead tutors must be appointed from the most competent tutors to mentor others on supporting students.
- ODL institutions need to develop support that promotes the intellectual, personal and academic development and achievement of students from diverse backgrounds.
- ODL libraries should therefore manage and plan their services in such a way that they meet the information and resource needs of clients wherever they are located (Henning, 2010).
- Task teams can be created to spearhead student support on registration, learning development, learner support, assessment, professional development, and policies.

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