

## The provision of Learner Support Services in Open and Distance Education: A case Study of Botswana Open University (BOU), Botswana

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### Abstract

*The purpose of the study was to investigate the provision of learner support services in open and distance education by Botswana Open University. From the 970 learner population in BOU, Francistown Campus; 388 learner respondents (40%) were selected through stratified random sampling to participate in the study. The strata were grouped based on gender, age, education level and programmes of study in order for the various sub-groups to be represented during sampling. A close-ended questionnaire was used as the data collection instrument. The findings of the study revealed that 54% of learner respondents were satisfied with learner support services provided by Botswana Open University. However, 28% of the learners revealed that the standard of the university learner support services needed to be improved while 18% of them highlighted that both distance learners and tutors needed intensive training on distance education, online learning forums and digital educational technologies. The study recommended that the learner support services provided by higher education providers should be inclusive and supportive at all levels.*

**Keywords:** Provision; Learner Support Services; Distance and Open Learning; Inclusive; Educational Technologies

### Introduction

The universities around the globe are faced with the responsibilities of addressing the various needs of students through the use of educational technologies to promote the provision open and flexible distance learning (Zuhairi, 2019). The growth in technology challenges the higher education institutions to address the ever-changing needs of the world of work by ensuring that learners have access to flexible quality education (Zuhairi, 2019). Therefore, the new methods and technologies have been using distance and combined learning to increase the roles of open universities in order to increase learner involvement in higher education (Latchem & Jung, 2010). As a result, open and distance education as pointed out by Mapolisa (2012) is perceived as the most efficient means used to improve access and the provision of flexibility in education for continuous professional development and lifelong learning.

Learner support services in Open and Distance learning (ODL) have been a crucial subject to address the existence of ODL systems (Simpson, 2013). On the other hand, recent research highlights the significance of both educational and non-educational learner support services and the role of educational technologies to make possible the development of more flexible, interactive and adaptive learning environments that necessitate innovative ways of offering ODL programmes and learner support services (Sánchez-Elvira & Simpson, 2018).

In ODL, the provision of learner support services has been the critical matter of significance to distance education providers for the past years (Brindley & Paul, 2008). The reviewed literature indicates that researchers have been working towards comprehending the learning experiences of the distance learners, the challenges they encounter during the learning process, and the factors that motivate their determination and academic achievement (Simpson, 2002). Hence, the development of learner support services in ODL continues to transform, therefore presenting opportunities for new ideas in education. As such, new forms of teaching and learning are devised to support student centred learning central to ODL (Brindley & Paul, 2008).

Even though some distance learning providers lack sufficient budgetary allocations to promote learner support services for ODL, Simpson's (2002) research highlighted that it is considered lawful, and very essential for ODL providers to financially support distance education practices at all levels. As a result, the implementation of the new strategies, research, theories and assessment methods is imperative in measuring the levels of efficiency and the effectiveness of ODL delivery (Mills, 2003).

Usun (2004) described learner support services as the provisions or resources that learners can access and use in order for them to engage in the learning process. However, Bates (1995) observed that in distance education, support deals with a collection of human and non-human resources geared towards guiding and facilitating all the learning activities.

In a study conducted by Bates (1995), it was established that the resources mostly used for ODL programmes among others included; library facilities, the internet usage, ICT infrastructure as well as the various educational media, software programs and online platforms. The study found that the most crucial mode of learner support during the learning process is the tutor, who through guidance and direction helps learners to progress in their studies and be able to fully manage their learning process (Bates, 1995).

### **Statement of the problem**

Despite that open and distance education has become common in Botswana and is implemented by many tertiary institutions, some learners who have enrolled for distance education in Botswana Open University take long to complete their studies. This might be an indication that there are underlying factors that affect the delivery of ODL programmes by Botswana Open University. Therefore, the learner support provided by the university might not be sufficient and suitable to the various needs of learners in order to motivate them towards accomplishing their studies.

Ouma and Nkuyubwatsi (2019) indicated that the crucial challenge which is faced by distance education around the globe is inadequate learner support for the continually growing number of student enrolments in open and distance universities. Moreover, research shows that Botswana, like other developing countries, experiences some challenges in ODL support services (Gatsha, 2010; Ouma & Nkuyubwatsi, 2019). These challenges as indicated by Chokoe (2015) range from infrastructural and financial restrictions, to human resources and quality improvement setbacks.

Further research analysis by Mapolisa (2012) revealed the challenges of organising satisfactory face-to-face classes, insufficient guidance and counselling, ineffective action research supervision, students' lack of ICT skills, inadequate library support, insufficient support from the university management, and restricted distance learners' representation in their leadership and governance (Mapolisa, 2012).

The use of technology has transformed distance learning even further as ODL learner support services have become more complicated (Gujjar, Chaudhry & Chaudhry, 2009). The introduction of online classes with both synchronous and asynchronous communication, online registration and e-library services, e-mail support, discussion forums, as well as interactive web-based counselling are amongst the developments which make distance learning more complicated (Chokoe, 2015).

### **Research Objectives**

1. To investigate the roles of learner support services in Open and Distance Learning.
2. To explore the challenges faced by local tertiary universities when providing learner support services in Open and Distance Learning.
3. To examine the distance learners' perceptions of learner support services Open and Distance Learning in Botswana.

### **Research Questions**

1. What roles do the learner support services play in Open and Distance Learning?
2. Which challenges are faced by universities when providing learner support services in Open and Distance Learning?
3. What are the distance learners' perceptions of learner support services in Open and Distance Learning in Botswana?

### **Literature Review**

### **The roles of learner support services in open and distance learning**

Learner support is the most essential aspect of any Open and Distance Learning (ODL) system. It revolves around a variety of educational and other related activities (Mills, 2003). It is therefore vital for the support services not only to be reactive to the needs of distance learners but rather, they ought to be readily available and accessible. As a result, the supervision of the support services need to be a regular and continuing exercise, which could bring continuous development through support services innovations (Brindley, 1995).

Research highlights that learner support services encompasses the methods that are used by ODL institutions to assist the distance learners to study (Simpson, 2003). In a conventional system, classroom contact, team interactions and library facilities are the mechanisms used to study. However, in the ODL structure, educational technologies including: multimedia, print, audio, video, radio, television, tele-conferencing and video-conferencing, digital study material packages, face-to-face counselling and tutorials, continuous assessment and hands-on-experience among others, form part of learner support services (Zuhairi, 2019).

Tait (2000) documented three major purposes of learner support in ODL, “cognitive”, “affective” and “systemic”, all of which are key to distance learners’ achievement. Cognitive support in particular, as indicated by Tait (2000) makes learning achievable through the provision of specially designed study materials and learning resources for individual students. These resources provide learners with a supportive environment that creates a continual two-way communication between learners and the institution (Tait, 2000).

The librarians in open and distance universities and colleges as stated by Lee (2003) go beyond ensuring that distance learners have access to information. They make sure that learners are able to retrieve information through the internet by helping them to be both information literate and technologically competent (Lee, 2003). On the other hand, the advisors, either educational or psychological counsellors, help distance learners to gain the relevant skills and expertise needed to engage in self-evaluation, plan, make proper decisions, and study efficiently. This, as cited in Aluko and Hendrikz (2012) and supported by Potter (1998) assists learners to defeat the challenges they might encounter during their academic and career processes.

The reviewed literature stresses that distance learners need to be connected to several learner support services such as; interactive tutorials, workshops, tele or video-conferencing, interactive and specially designed materials, discussion forums and tutor marked assignments for them to study effectively (Lee, 2003). This interaction allows distance learners to receive some feedback from the main type of resource; the tutor who acts as a facilitator, linking learners to the institution and other resources, and providing sufficient support to empower learners in exercising control over their learning experience (Sache & Mark, 2000).

### **The challenges faced by universities when providing learner support services in Open and Distance Learning**

Ouma and Nkuyubwatsi (2019) argued that the need for learner support services in open and distance education emanates from the concept that distance learning is commonly provided through information technology where learners are mostly physically separated from other learners and their tutors. According to Douce (2018) distance learners commonly study independently. This therefore means that, they have various needs that are beyond the existing learner support in the conventional education settings (Douce, 2018).

Despite all the support provided to learners, distance learning presents some challenges to the academic livelihood of a distance learner (Aluko & Hendrikz, 2012). For that reason, researchers and distance practitioners have long advocated for the provision of enhanced and appropriate learner support services in order to improve teaching and learning in ODL (Somayajulu & Ramkrishna, 2014).

Research has revealed that the poor national socio-economic infrastructure is a major challenge that limits the provision of quality learner support services in most of the developing countries’ open and distance learning institutions (Ouma, 2003). In Uganda, the economic level in providing electricity and communication networks, including the use of computers, internet and e-learning, is still inadequate. Basaza, Milman and Wright (2010) argued that the inadequacy of some funds to distance education programmes by some universities makes it

difficult to effectively cater for all the learning needs of distance learners and this compromises how learner support services are provided. Besides, the insufficient funds restrict tutor training, workshops and seminars which if conducted, would assist in ensuring that all learner needs are catered for (Basaza, et al., 2010).

In addition, there is limited use of Information and Communication Technology such as live broadcasts and video conferencing in Uganda, Botswana and other developing countries in Africa to support open and distance education (Kaberia, 2012). Moreover, research indicates that though servicing costs may be low, investment and fixed costs on ICTs are high, hence the need for a strong financial resource base of which is not the case in many countries (Rumble, 2001).

Likewise, a study by Lim, Fadzil, and Mansor (2011) on mobile messaging via SMS at the University of Malaysia realised that in Africa, efforts to use text messages were significant at some universities in Uganda and South Africa. However, in a recent related study in Uganda; conducted by Mayende, Muyinda, Isabwe, Walimbwa and Siminyu (2014), it was indicated that the limited usage of mobile phones, devices that didn't support internet connectivity and low ICT literacy amongst learners were some of the limiting factors in ODL.

The challenge of poor internet connectivity is a bigger burden on students from rural areas as compared to their urban counterparts (Basaza et al., 2010). In some developing countries, Botswana inclusive, the internet facility is available at the universities and in urban public internet cafes. Hence, not easily accessible to many in-service teachers who stay and work in rural villages (Busulwa & Bbuye, 2018).

In order to enhance learner support services, a dependable communication method is required for effective delivery. Basaza et al. (2010) cited the lack of satisfactory expertise and knowledge in distance education by both the academic and support staff in many universities around the globe. A research conducted in India by Kaberia (2012) established that the lack of supportive skills by the tutor trainers negatively contributed to the low quality of the trainees and promoted frustrations in delivery and learning. Busulwa and Bbuye (2018) suggested that since many sub-Saharan countries have insufficient staff training and exposure to distance education, there is need to overhaul in order to improve the efficiency of learner support services. In addition, Basaza et al. (2012) highlighted that there is a poor reading culture in many African countries which limits the efficacy of learner support services.

### **Distance learners' perceptions of learner support services in open and distance learning**

Distance learners have varied perceptions on learner support services provided by open and distance education or institutions. According to Messo (2014), these different perceptions have influenced the learners' attitudes towards accepting ODL education systems of different countries, including; Botswana, South Africa and Zimbabwe. Corry (2008) found that distance learners are less dependent on tutors which somehow affect their progress in learning.

As highlighted in a study conducted by Corry (2008), distance learners perceived learner support services provided inadequate and stressed that they required direct interaction with other learners and tutors throughout the instructional process for effective learning. In a study by Kilato (1997) as quoted by Gatsha (2010) distance learners pointed out that learning at a distance through the use of specially designed materials and videos was the most challenging mode of learning to them. The learners stated that sometimes they fail to understand the materials provided and this affected their studies and the overall academic performance. However, a study by Messo (2014) revealed that distance learners enjoyed a high degree of autonomy when using learner support services provided to them.

Furthermore, as Messo (2014) stated, distance learners mentioned that the autonomy they are exposed to enables them to choose what to study, when to study, and how to use the study forums, videos and the study materials provided through learner support services efficiently. Komba (2009) found that 71.2% of distance learners reported easy access to network resources and technical support during their studies while 28.8% highlighted that access to quality study materials was inadequate and unsatisfactory. In addition, 81% of respondents revealed that cell-phones were the most effective mode of communication which made their learning easier as distance learners.

The study conducted by Messo (2008), established that 63.8% of distance learners were likely to recommend others to join ODL programmes because of the high quality support services provided in Tanzania. However, 34.2% pointed out that they were somewhat likely to do so. When Suzanne and Larry (1999) analysed distance students' perceptions of instruction and instructional methods impact in terms of students' satisfaction with delivery in Pennsylvania State University, they found that learners were satisfied with the instructional methods used during instruction. The participants also indicated that the use of phones, emails, tutor-marked assignments and email support were useful as they encouraged a two-way communication making distance learning enjoyable (Suzanne & Larry, 1999).

A study by Gatsha (2010) highlighted that learners who schooled in the then Botswana College of Distance and Open Learning (BOCODOL) were satisfied with the learner support services provided by the college. The findings of the study showed that male learners were more satisfied with group and weekend tutorials, radio programmes and motivational letters than their female counterparts. According to Gatsha (2010) the availability of the part-time tutors further determined the learners' satisfaction levels. Therefore, in case the part-time tutors missed weekend tutorials, learners' satisfaction levels decreased. This then clearly showed that distance learners perceived the presence of tutors beneficial to their studies and success.

### **Research Methodology**

The study used the quantitative research approach in which a close-ended questionnaire with 38 items was employed to investigate the provision of learner support services in Botswana Open University, Francistown Campus. The use of the questionnaire allowed the Researcher to include as many respondents as possible and allowed for the collection of standardized data from the distance learners, making generalizability possible.

The reliability of the questionnaire was determined by cronbach alpha estimates after trial testing and all the variables had an internal consistency index above .80. The stratified random sampling technique was used to select the participants of the study. From the 970 targeted population, a 40% sample comprising 388 distance learner respondents formed part of the study. However, 279 participants were females while 109 were male respondents. Out of the 388 distributed questionnaires, only 333 (85.8%) were completed and returned to the researcher.

### **Discussion of research findings**

The study has shown that while some learners in Botswana Open University are satisfied with the provision of learner support services, others perceive them inadequate for all their needs as distance learners. The 54% of learner respondents were found to be satisfied with learner support services provided by Botswana Open University, 28% of the learners said that the standard of the University learner support services needed to be improved while 18% of them highlighted that both distance learners and tutors needed intensive training on distance education and online learning platforms.

Moreover, the study found that 57% of distance learners were satisfied with tutor-marked assignments and performance feedback, e-library services and tutorials. However, 43% of the respondents indicated that the weekend tutorials and e-library services were not of much benefit to them. With regard to the assignments, they highlighted that the tutors' comments were sometimes not easy to understand, thus complicating their comprehension even further. Nevertheless, the findings by Gatsha (2010) pointed out that weekend tutorials provide distance learners with the opportunity to interact with other learners and tutors thereby sharing some ideas and resolutions to the challenges met during the learning period. As a result, tutorials are significant for distance learners because they are likely to help them address all the questions that emerged when studying alone. If tutorials are not adequately provided, Ansari (2002) stated that learners might drop out of the institution when they fail to learn or gain knowledge from the provided study materials.

While 44.6% of Botswana Open University, Francistown region learners showed that induction workshops were not that helpful, 55.4% learners indicated that they benefited a lot during induction as they had the opportunity to socialise with both other learners and the facilitators themselves. Learners also highlighted that inductions enabled them adjust to the new ways of learning and also understand what the institution

expected of them. To support the findings of the study, Hughes (2004) indicated that induction workshops are significant for distance learners as they promote collaboration among learners, and this could influence their dedication towards completing their studies.

The results of this study further revealed that 58% of the respondents were content with the use of video conferencing and specially designed materials provided by Botswana Open University. However, 42% of the respondents indicated that though the support services of video conferencing and study materials were of much benefit to their learning, limited ICT skills, power cuts and internet connectivity limitations rendered the services not as effective as they are supposed to be.

According to Amey (2000), many distance learners are likely to fail if not provided with adequate learner support services which promote self-directed learning. Learner support services aid the linkages and collaborations between students and the university at large (Amey, 200). Therefore, for effective learning to occur in ODL learners should be provided with the relevant support services and the learning resources fostered towards the provision of quality education academic excellence.

### **Summary of findings**

Botswana Open University needs to improve the provision of learner support services because some learners perceive the support services inadequate in their learning experience. While 54% of learners were satisfied with learner support services that are currently provided, 28% of them were of the opinion that the support services were not sufficient and didn't address their individual needs. On the other hand, 18% pointed out that the tutors and learners had limited knowledge about distance education.

Limited ICT skills, power cuts and internet connectivity were identified as some of the challenges which continue to hamper the effective delivery of ODL programmes and learner support services. It is therefore pertinent for Botswana Open University to provide distance learners with improved, varied and adequate learner support services so as to make learning progressive and effective towards academic achievement. Moreover, both learners and tutors need to be provided with planned and relevant training on distance education in order to enhance the quality of education provided by the institution.

### **Conclusions**

Despite that some learners are satisfied with the learner support services provided by Botswana Open University, some learners perceive the support services given insufficient for the needs of different learners. Therefore, there is need for the learner support services to be varied so that they meet the needs of all learners.

Regular planned trainings, workshops and seminars on ODL should be conducted so that all students; old and new, as well as the tutors and facilitators are empowered on the effective use of ODL teaching and learning resources for quality improvement. The universities that offer distance education should fully support ODL through the provision of relevant resources and financial support for the effective implementation of the ODL curriculum.

### **Recommendations**

**Based on the findings of this research, the study recommends that:**

- Botswana Open University should make use of deliberate and planned student satisfaction surveys to find out about students' perceptions on learner support services.
- The university should constantly measure the quality of the various learner support services offered instead of learner satisfaction level.
- The university should identify learners' various learning needs so that they are provided with the right support services as per the available resources.

### **Future Research**

### There is need to conduct research in future based on the following topics:

- An investigation on the relationship between learner support services and learner performance in Open and Distance learning.
- An exploration of how learner support services influence the commitment of distance learners.
- The perceptions of lecturers on learner support services provided by Open and Distance Learning.

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