

Access to Information, Personal and Social Needs as Learner Support Services in Open, Distance and E-Learning Programme in Selected Public Universities in Kenya

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Abstract

Rapid technological changes in education have become paramount towards meeting educational demands. The use of Information Communication Technology (ICT) has helped in bringing down the traditional barriers of access of quality education and training through Open, Distance and Electronic Learning (ODEL) mode of study. This can only be achieved with provision of adequate learner support. As such, the purpose of this study was to evaluate access of information, personal and social needs as learner support services in ODEL programme in selected public universities in Kenya. The research employed descriptive survey design as the study relied on attitudes, opinions and the state of the services in the universities under the study. The study population target was 2028 students and 32 administrators. A sample size of 329 fourth year students was identified using Morgan and Krejcie (1970) statistical table while all the administrators took part in the study. Purposive sampling was used to select three public universities and three study regions where each of the three universities had a study centre. Stratified sampling technique was used to get a representation of students from each university while convenience sampling was used to select the students at each study centre from each university. Interview schedules for the directors and questionnaires for coordinators and students were constructed to help in data collection. Questionnaires from students and coordinators were sorted and the directors' interview schedules were transcribed as per the objective. Descriptive statistics in form of tables and graphs were used to ease understanding of results. The study established that students rated majority of access of information and personal and social needs services offered by the selected universities as poor. Thus, the study recommended that institutions offering studies through ODEL programme should constantly assess the value of services that are offered to their students.

Keywords: Access to Information, Learner Support Services, Open E-Learning Programme, Distance E-Learning Programme, E-Learning Programme

1. Introduction

Technological changes in education and the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has led to access of quality education and training. This has provided learners with opportunities for lifelong learning and meaningful participation in the world of work and society as productive citizens through distance learning. Distance education started as correspondence studies in 1728 (Laaser & Toloza, 2017). Later, the University of London started offering

distance learning degrees through an external programme in 1828. This mode of learning has revolutionized by the emergence of open universities such as Britain's Open University that was opened in 1965 that brought down not only the barriers of place and time, but also access to education beyond political boundaries and across nationalities (Moore et al., 2011). Today, these developments have given birth to modern distance education where students learn without any physical contact with tutors, thanks to the adoption of ICT.

Although the evolution of distance education is more than a century old in the Western world, in Africa it is a more recent phenomenon with the University of South Africa (UNISA) having been established in 1946 to offer distance education programmes. With time, other open and distance universities started and as of today, there are a number of private and public profit and non-profit institutions offering a large number of degree programmes through distance education in South Africa (Denis & Simon, 2019). In East Africa, Makerere University of Uganda was established in 1922 as a technical school and grew to become the University of East Africa in 1963. It houses the main African Virtual University facility for Uganda and has a thriving Centre for Continuing Education. The Open University of Tanzania (OUT) was established by an Act of Parliament to focus on the capacity building of staff and students from OUT and other universities and colleges.

In Kenya, the need for degree courses by distance teaching was first expressed in 1966 when an Act of Parliament established the Board of Adult Education. Later, in 1983, the Kenyan government agreed that the external degree programme be started at the University of Nairobi and the then Kenyatta University College to provide learning opportunities for those aspiring Kenyans who could not secure university admission (Opondo & Boit, n.d.) This was to provide the much needed high level manpower, an opportunity for adults to learn at their own pace, and also provide an opportunity to maximize the use of the limited educational resources both human and material by making university education available beyond the lecture halls, (Asamoah, 2019). By 1997, the African Virtual University (AVU) was established in Kenya as a project of the World Bank whereby Kenyatta and Egerton Universities were identified as pilot sites. Today distance education is offered through Digital School of Virtual and Open Learning (DISVOL), the College of Open and Distance Learning (CODL) of Egerton University and the Centre of Open and Distance Learning (CODL) of the University of Nairobi. Through Open, Distance and E-Learning (ODEL), students who cannot or do not want to take part in classroom teaching at a particular institution on a full-time basis are able to pursue education.

However, studies show that ODEL can only succeed if learners are offered adequate learner support services (Mlay, 2013). This shows that learner support services are very important to students. Studies concerning learner support services have been extensively done Europe, Asia and America. Nonetheless, little has been done in Africa and more so in South Africa. Further studies done have looked at very limited aspects of learner support services: For instance, (Asamoah, 2019) looked at education facilities and learning resources and examined the accessibility of face to face sessions and its effects on learning. In Kenya, studies done were

mostly concerned with infrastructural development and challenges of distance learning to the decision-makers, (Opondo & Boit, n.d.). Therefore learner support services which are referred to as the backbone to ODEL mode of study has not been emphasized in Kenya. It is on the basis of this gap that this study intended to examine the access to information, personal and social needs as learner support services in open, distance and e-learning programme in selected public universities in Kenya.

2. Methodology

In this study, descriptive survey design was used as the study was concerned with the attitudes and opinions of students and the administrators (directors and coordinators) on services offered by various universities. It is also very relevant and appropriate when dealing with educational and social issues (Bryman, 2012). The study population was 2028 fourth year undergraduate students, 29 regional coordinators and 3 directors.

To get the sample size, purposive sampling was done to select three public universities with major components of ODEL programme namely, Egerton University, Kenyatta University and the University of Nairobi which are institutions that had offered the programme for almost two decades. Further, purposive sampling method was used to select three regions in which all the selected universities had study centres. Thus Mombasa, Nakuru and Kisumu regions were selected for the study. The study centres were purposely selected in regions that were located away from the main university so as to compare the services offered by different universities within the same location. The target population was stratified into two groups within each university; those with a population of less than fifteen individuals and those with above fifteen individuals. Using Morgan and Krejcie (1970) statistical table, a sample size of 327 respondents was targeted as the table helps the researcher to determine, with 95% certainty, what the results would have been had the entire population been surveyed. Therefore, all the administrators (directors and the coordinators) to each of the universities were involved in the study. Stratified sampling was used to identify the number of sample size from each university and study centre. And lastly, convenience sampling was used to select fourth year students enrolled for a Bachelor's Degree programme to participate in the study. In total there were 361 (N=361) respondents out of whom 253 responded.

The research instruments used in the study were questionnaires for the students and the coordinators which were structured and open-ended and interview schedules for the directors. Questionnaires are appropriate in descriptive survey where the number of respondents is high and very useful when collecting data from a large sample (Gaurav, 2017). A rating scale to gauge the type of learner support offered to students in ODEL programme was used as they reduce the respondent's subjectivity and is easy in qualitative data analysis. An interview schedule was used to gather information from the directors to the institutions as they are appropriate when dealing with few respondents. They were involved in the study as they are significant decision makers in their institutions and as such they were seen to have valuable information on learner support services offered to their students.

Data collected must to be interpreted to make meaningful, thus, data was cleaned to identify and minimise any errors or misclassification whereby incomplete questionnaires were sorted and excluded from analysis while complete ones were coded and keyed into the computer. Further, interview schedules were transcribed to identify themes to create a code dictionary, (Vaughn & Turner, 2016) that was used for analysis using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 20. Results were summarized in frequency distribution graphs, (Ros & Guillaume, 2020).

3. Results

3.1 Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents

With reference to gender distribution of the respondents who took part in the study, it was noted that 44.5% of the students were male while 55.5% were female giving a fair gender representation. The coordinators gender representation was 39.1% for the male and 60.9% for the female. Directors were also represented gender wise as 66.7% male and 33.3% female.

With regards to the working experience of the respondents who took part in the study, 67% of the directors had over ten years' experience in the directorate of ODEL while 33% had served between five to ten years. In the same line, 22% of coordinators had experience spanning over ten years, 61% between five to ten years while 17% had served in their respective directorates for a period below five years. With reference to the students who took part in the study, only fourth year students undertaking a bachelor's degree had been in the study programme long enough to give reliable data.

3.2 Status of access of information and personal and social needs

3.2.1 Access to Information and Personal and Social needs as per the Students

The study sought to establish the status of access of information and personal and social needs as learner support services offered in ODEL programmes in selected public universities in Kenya. The students were asked to rate access of information needs which were; availability of registration requirements, examination results and institutional regulations. They were also to give ratings on availability of personal and social needs such as; on line interaction, academic advice and students counselling services. Their responses were as indicated in figure 1.

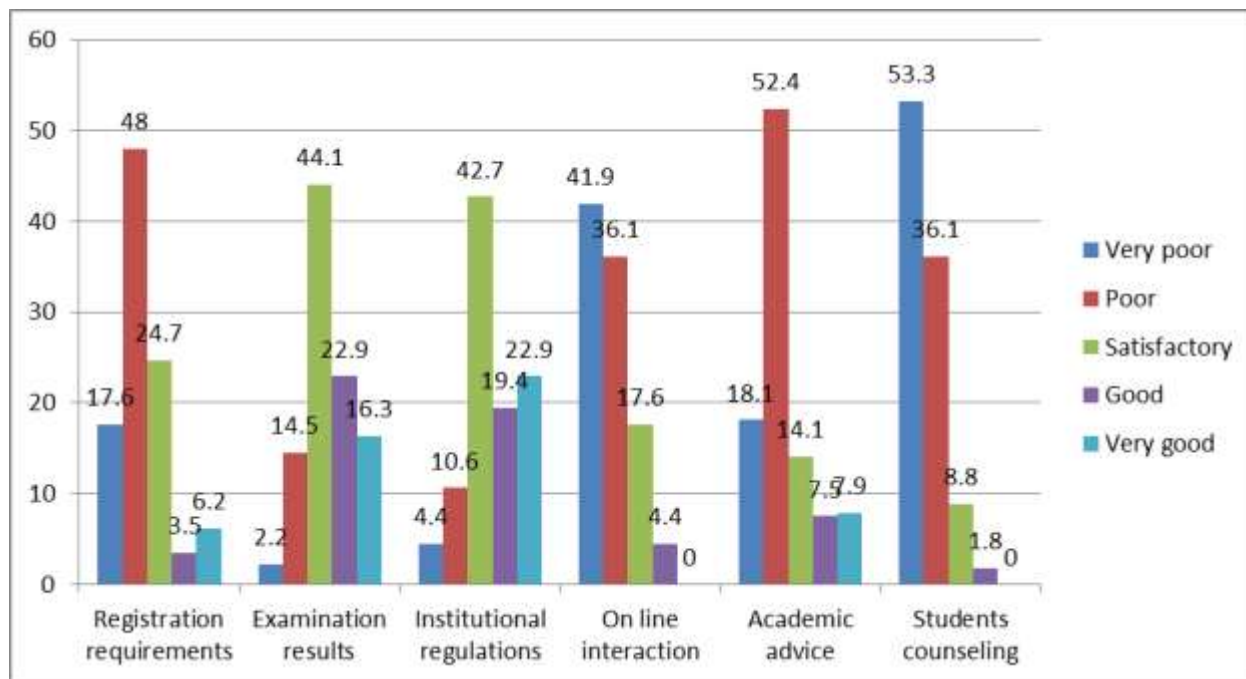


Figure 1 Access of information and personal and social needs as per the students

Figure 1 shows that majority of learner support services offered to ODEL students were generally rated poorly. Slightly less than two thirds (65.7%) of students rated the services to be poor; the same goes for on line interaction (78%), academic advice (70.5%) and students counselling (89.4%) across the three universities under the study. In the same line, a number of students felt that availability of examination results and institutional regulations were satisfactory at 44.1% and 42.7% respectively. The same services were also noted as good and very good cumulatively at 39.2% and 42.3% respectively.

3.2.2 Access of information and personal and social needs as per the administrators

Having looked at the student's ratings of access of information and personal and social needs as learner support services offered by their respective institutions, it was also important to establish ratings of the administrators who included the coordinators and directors. Their responses were as indicated in figure 2.

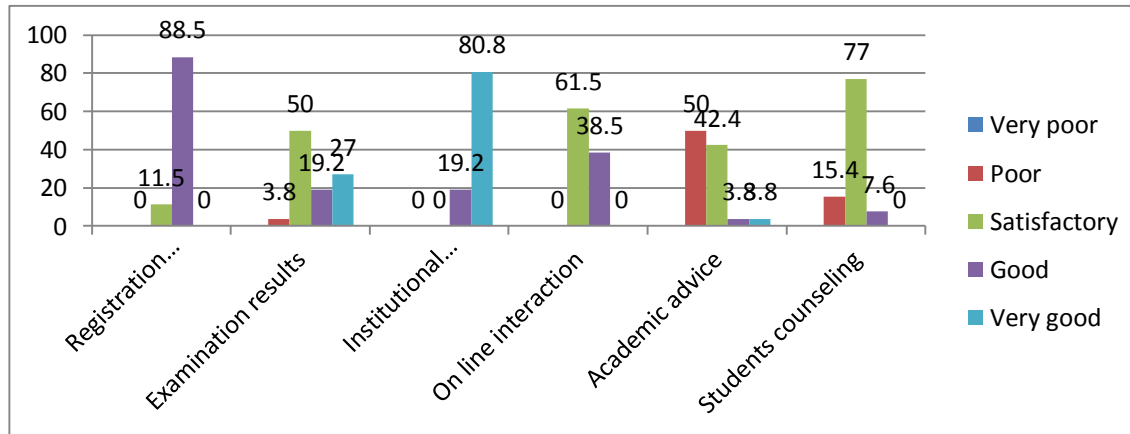


Figure 2 Access of information and personal and social needs as per administrators

According to figure 2, the administrators indicated that access of information and personal and social needs services such as as availability of registration requirements and institutional regulations were rated as good (88.5%) and very good (80.8%). Further, examination results, on line interaction and students counselling services were noted as satisfactory at 50%, 61.5% and 77%.

The findings from the students and the administrators are in tandem to some extent. For instance, academic advice was noted to be poor at 50% by the administrators while 52.4% of the students also rated the service as poor. Additionally, 15.4% of the administrators noted that students counselling was poor as compared to student's perception that the service is poor at 36.1%. This is an indicator that administrators are aware that some of the services they offer to students are not adequate enough. However, there are positive ratings which indicate good learner support services that are supported by the policies put down by respective institutions.

4. Discussion

Access of information and personal and social needs services in ODEL programmes are very important to the students. According to (Kentnor, 2015) registration process and requirements ought to be clear and simple and students should be made aware well in advance of the requirements. This can be achieved by giving the students all the necessary information and as clearly as possible on the first contact that they make with the institution. Also, they may be encouraged to contact the respective officers whenever they need clarifications. This would go a long way in equipping the students with all the necessary information that they require. Unfortunately, majority of ODEL students in the universities under study rated the service poorly, (17.6% very poor and 48% poor). This gives a cumulative total of 65.7% of ODEL students who are in programmes yet they are not very clear of registration process and requirements; an exercise that may affect them in future. The success of this service can be achieved by ensuring that respective officers are available to serve and respond to student's

queries throughout their stay in their institutions. They should also be well informed on all the requirements for registration and attend to all the students needs as promptly as possible.

Secondly, it is important to note that examination results are essential to students in that good grades motivate students to work harder. Results can also be used to move them to the next level as well as determine their progress in any academic work. Thus students need to be well informed on when and where to take exams, assignments as well as practicums as they all contribute to the final grade. They must receive timely results to be aware of the expectations as they prepare for their final examinations. Though examination results were rated satisfactorily in Kenya, some institutions like Zimbabwe Open University has had challenges in marking of assignments and processing examinations results in time, (Musingafi et al., 2015). However, strategies have been put in place to give feedback on any assignment given at least five weeks before examinations are taken. Further, the tutors are expected to return assignment scripts to students in time so that they may understand where they went wrong as well as make corrections as they prepare for their examinations.

Thirdly, rules and regulations must be followed and the institutions are expected to enforce those rules as stipulated in their individual charters. This ensures that order is maintained. Lack of order is a recipe for chaos which is not acceptable in any institution if credibility is to be maintained. From the study findings, majority of ODEL students were satisfied with institutional rules and regulations. Needless to say, students must understand how important rules and guidelines are to their respective institutions as individual institutions have different rules. For instance, there are institutions that may require their learners to physically attend classes, while others have put strict limits to the amount of on line interaction one should have been involved in before taking their end of semester examinations. At the University of Lusaka, students are anticipated to access academic materials early enough, go through the materials made available to them before attending face to face tutorials. This also applies in Kenyan universities in that students are encouraged to attend residential tutorial sessions where possible as tutors take students through the challenging areas, (Aucoin & Mututa, 2019). It is worthwhile to note that most students try as much as possible to adhere to the specified rules and regulations. No wonder, they rated them as satisfactory.

Further, on line interaction increases the quality of ODEL programme as students are able to develop a sense of community and push away the isolation bug that is associated with ODEL mode of learning. It is also able to bring students from different locations together through various forms of communication such as Skype, chat and emails to navigate through challenges that are easily resolved that would otherwise have been very difficult to individual isolated students. However important this service is, 78% of the students rated it poorly. According to Kyei-Blankson et al. (2016) on line interaction may be instructor-learner interaction and or learner-learner interaction. Both are critical as they directly affect students learning. Thus institutions must come up with on line study course designs that incite stakeholders to continuously interact with each other so as to develop a sense of community. Therefore,

institutions must have support staff who are always there to look out and identify remote students and encourage them to interact with others so as to move as a group.

Additionally, academic advice assists students to aspire to meet their expectations as well as achieve their academic potential. Well academically guided students are likely to seek help whenever they are faced with issues during their academic period. The indication by 50% of administrators that the service is poor and 18.1% and 52.4% of students as very poor and poor respectively cannot be wished away. There is need to rethink of how to guide ODEL students to go through the programme by engaging academic advisors and mentors who ought to be available to attend to students whenever need arise. The advisors ensure that students feel validated both academically and personally. They are also expected to have a wealth of experience and understanding of students varied cultural diversity so as to build good relations that would last throughout their academic cycle, (Zhang, 2016).

Lastly, students counseling is important because through counseling, students' problems can be addressed to boost their confidence and self-esteem. It is imperative to note that students with psychological issues may not concentrate on their studies and therefore attending to bothersome issues whether academic or social can go a long way in maintaining students in the programme as well as meet their academic obligations. Cumulatively, 89.4% of ODEL students rated this service as poor and very poor. This is an indicator that student's psychological needs are not being met. To address this issue, institutions must have counselors to support students within their educational programmes. ODEL students have special needs as they need guidance to relate and understand their institutions, be motivated to learn as well as feel the warmth of being part of other students rather than studying in isolation. As such, there is need to have counselling services which can be offered on line via telephone and internet depending on the issue being handled, (Kabate, n.d.). This service ought to be accessible, flexible and cost effective to students. The media used to communicate must be, interactive and user friendly, (Mlay, 2013). Thus institutions must engage counsellors with vast knowledge on counselling skills and techniques as well as competence to handle student's issues devoid of the setting or nature.

Therefore, bearing in mind that learner support services are usually supposed to cater for student's needs, it is very necessary for administrators and especially the directors to establish the reasons behind poor ratings of majority of services offered by their institutions to the students. Further, there is need to re look at the services offered by various universities and do an in depth consultation so as to offer better access to information and personal and social needs as learner support services are critical to ODEL students.

5. Conclusions

From the findings, it can conclusively be said that most of access of information and personal and social needs services offered as learner support services to ODEL students were not good enough to support them adequately. It was noted that majority of the services offered were poor apart from access of examination results and institutional regulations. As such there is need to

improve the services under ODEL programme to make them better so that students are able to seamlessly go through their studies successfully. The study recommends that directors in collaboration with coordinators of various institutions offering ODEL programmes should constantly evaluate the value of access of information and personal and social needs services offered to ODEL students to ensure that they are beneficial to majority of learners. Lastly, institutions offering ODEL programmes should invest in competent, committed and experienced personnel who will go out of their way to support learners within the shortest time possible. This will go a long way in supporting and boosting student's motivation levels to continue using the programme to achieve their academic expectations.

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