

PROVISION OF SUPPORT SERVICES AND LEARNERS' ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE: A CHALLENGE AND INNOVATION IN NTI NCE DISTANCE LEARNING PROGRAMME IN CROSS RIVER STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study was designed to determine the influence of Learners' support services on the academic performance of NCE distance learning students of the NTI study centres in Cross River State, Nigeria. Three hundred and fifty NCE distance learners, (one hundred and thirty seven males and two hundred and thirteen females) were drawn from the study population participated in this study. Learners were stratified into male and female. Simple random sampling technique was used to draw up the number of learners from each study centre. Descriptive research design was also employed. Learners' support services and students' performance questionnaire was the only instrument used for data collection. The data obtained were analyzed using one way analysis of variance (ANOVA). The findings revealed that lack of ICT facilities, non-availability or late arrival of course materials, lack of effective guidance and counselling services in each study centre, inappropriate feedback mechanism and epileptic administrative and students' rapport influence NCE distance learners' academic performance negatively. Finally useful recommendations were made based on the study result for the provision of requisite learners' basic support services to all the six study centres in the State.

The issue of poor academic performance of students' in developing countries has been of much concern to all and sundry particularly in Nigeria. The problem is so enormous that it has led to the widely acclaimed fallen standard of education in Cross River State and Nigeria at large. Teachers have been found to have an important influence on students' academic achievement and they also play a crucial role in educational attainment of learners because the teacher is ultimately responsible for translating policy into action and principles based on practice during interaction with the students (Afe 2001). Considering Governments' huge investment on education, its output in terms of quality of students has been observed to be unequal with government expenditure.

In view of the importance of learners' supportive services, Wood (1996) observed a significant influence of lack of supportive services on distance learners' successful completion of course work and their academic performance. Wood enumerated students' support service to include provision of qualified tutors, academic planners, counsellors, schedulers, feedback and technical assistance. He observed that the isolation, experienced by distance education learners would lead to complication in the teaching-learning processes and that support for distance learners should not be overlooked when planning distance programmes.

In a similar study, conducted by Sweet (1998), it was observed that lack of motivators, feedback and teacher contact negatively influence distance education learner self-evaluation ability and successful completion of academic workload. Also Knapper (1998) notes that lack of students support and services, alienation and isolation creates a sense of insecurity for distance learners with adverse effect on high distance learners' drop-out rate.

In the same vein, Borisade (2007) in his study of problems militating against effective implementation of open and distance learning systems in Nigeria, stated that some ineffectiveness in the area of manager, staff, manager-student and manager community relationships affect distance learners' academic performance negatively. According to him, that was a result of some extraneous variables such as temporary lecturers, non-availability of accommodation for students during the programme and community outrageous cost in the provision of accommodation for staff and students.

In the same study, Borisade noted that the concept of 'sorting' which is a recent coinage in Nigeria for a variant of academic corruption; a condition when an academically-deficient student sorts himself out with the lecturer or other persons in authority with a view to securing favours that will wipe out any deficiency.

Berge and Mrozowski (1999) found a significant influence on lack of students' support services on effective teaching learning programme of distance learning programme as it reflects in students' poor performance. They classify students' support to include Advise, counselling, library access, materials delivery, student training, test proctoring. Berge and Collins (1998) found that barriers to adequate delivery of teaching leaning in schools and distance learning include lack of high-end users of technology, inequities among the students and lack of equal access to information based on disparities in funding and management of different centres and programmes.

In the same vein, Virkus (2004) found a significant impact of support services on learners' academic achievement. He also observed that dimensions of time, space, pace, medium access and content within distance education context accounts for a wide range of learners' academic performance disparity which call for more effective teaching techniques that serve as practical guidance for both learners and teachers.

The learner support system generally include processes such as tutoring, counseling, advising, administrative services, library and information systems and other services that facilitate interaction with the course content, instructors and administration. Giles (2002) asserts that student centered learning involves interaction with the content and interpersonal interaction with teachers and other students. It is therefore, important to provide an environment in which both kinds of interaction can occur (Berge 1995). Digital technology will enable distance education to offer more flexibility, increase accessibility, and encourage student autonomy and responsibility while providing more efficient administrative and technical support (Peters 1998). Other learning supports can be provided by creating electronic spaces dedicated to social interaction such as a student union, an electronic year book for biographies and an electronic coffee house for students to engage in social messaging (Vakili 2000).

Ajadi (2010) observes that open and distance learning education system in the developing world, undeniably depend on the printed course material delivery. The course materials are thus the wheel on which the tires of open and distance learning institution run. NOUN and other distance learning establishments in Africa are confronted with the challenges of course material development. According to him, there are several areas where the delivery of course materials has become problematic; beginning from the selection of course writers, and the slow pace in which they write, to editorial stage, to the correction stage and then the internal editing where the language editing is done and the printing stage, all have one logs arm or the other that serves as impediment to the quick writing and delivery of course materials. Similarly, in a study by Jackman and Swan (1994) on alternative instructional models for delivery, they found that interactive video network, course content and assessment pattern using 93 graduate students at North Dakota state University and found that interactive video network places the distance learner on a high platform when compared with the regular students. In the same study they sound that course content affects student persistency, which means that some course work are more conducive for distance classes than others.

Guidance and Counselling services in schools is among the students supportive services available for distance learners in the developed countries of the world, Lapan (2005) found that guidance and counselling service have a positive impact on student, personal, social and academic development, Jarvis and Keeley (2003) conducted a literature review on career development issues, and found a positive relationship between effective guidance and counseling service and completion of course work and high academic performance, while Bridgman and Campbell (2003) tested the impact of school counsellors' direct intervention on student achievement and school success behaviour using a group counselling and classroom guidance approach called student success skills.

Provision of Support Services and Learners' Academic Performance: A Challenge and Innovation in NTI NCE Distance Learning Programme in Cross River State, Nigeria

They found a significant influence of guidance services on student cognitive, social and self-management skills. These researches demonstrated that about 70% of the students in the experimental group improved on average 22 percentile point, as measured by the school social behaviour scale. Moreover, there was a significant group differences between the experimental and controlled students' overall test scores, favouring the former group, but in mathematics and reading scores, 82% and 61% respectively, of the students receiving the guidance intervention improved.

The Purpose of this Study

The purpose of this paper was to determine the influence availability of support services on NTI NCE programme Learners' academic performance in Cross River State, while the only research hypothesis states that, there is no significant influence of support services on learners' academic performance.

Problem of the Study

The issue of poor academic performance from primary school to tertiary institution is of a great concerned to Parents, Teachers and Governments at all levels and Nongovernmental organisations in Nigeria. The unfortunate aspect of this negative development is that the future of the unborn generation will lie on the hand of these prospective NCE teachers. The National Teacher's Institute (N.T.I) aim was to cater for the production of well quality teachers in the country through distance learning programme. The institute with her challenges has not been able to actualize this dream of the Federal Government. Admittedly, in the past, students who passed through this NCE programme have shown positive academic performance through their classroom manifestation of productivity. But in recent times, the kind of students produced by the institute have been rated too low that most parents and civil society no longer show interest on N.T.I programmes. For instance, module and other materials which would have aided teaching and learning process most often come too late, sometimes two to three weeks into the examinations and since the institute doesn't allow facilitators to introduce their relevant materials. Also the way in which the programmes are organised is worrisome, most often students attend classes in a classroom with inadequate sitting facilities which if not checked would bastardize the vision and the mission of the distance learning programme in Nigeria.

Research Methodology

A descriptive survey research design was used in carrying out this study. Descriptive research involves collecting data in order to test hypotheses and answer research questions raised in the study. Its' also concerned with; conditions that exist; practices that prevail; beliefs, point of view or attitudes that are developing. At times, descriptive research is concerned with how and what is or what exist is related to a preceding event that has influenced or affected a present condition Ofo (1994). According to Denga and Ali (1998) Descriptive survey design aims at collecting large and small sample from the population in order to examine the distribution, incidence and interaction of educational and sociological phenomena.

Descriptive survey research design is considered the most appropriate design for this study because it enable the researchers to survey the current NTI NCE Programmes practices or operation in order to ascertain factors responsible for poor output of NCE programmes. The study area was Cross River State of Nigeria. The study population consisted of all the six NCE study centres, students, course facilitators and the centre mangers. The table below shows study centers and the number of students from NCE 1 to 4 of 2009/2010 academic session.

Table 1
Students' Population, and NCE Programme Study Centers in Cross River State.

Study Center	CALABAR		IKOM		OBUBRA		UGEP		ODUKPANI		UYANGA		TOTAL	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
NCE 1-4	166	278	32	50	32	27	42	80	33	47	39	55	344	537
TOTAL	444		82		59		122		80		94		881	

Source NTI 2009 annual report

The sampling technique used in this study was stratified sampling and simple random techniques. The study population was stratified into study centres, the programme into year of study namely NCE cycle 1, cycle 2, cycle 3, and cycle 4, and the students into males and females while simple random sampling was (hat and draw) used in drawing up the total number of three hundred and fifty students(350), that is one hundred and thirty seven males and two hundred and thirteen females, for centre breakdown, two hundred (70 males and 130 females = 200) from Calabar centre, thirty students (13 males and 17 females =30) from Ikom centre, twenty (10 males and 10 females =20) from Obubra study centre, forty (17 males and 23 females =40) from Ugep study centre, thirty (13 males and 17 females = 30) from Odukpani study centre while thirty (14 males and 16 females =30) from Uyanga study centre. Stratified sampling and simple random sampling techniques were adjudged to be the most appropriate sampling techniques due to the manageable size of the study population.

The instrument designed for data collection for this study was based on questionnaire titled learners' support services and academic performance questionnaire (LSSAPQ), constructed by the researchers with knowledge and input from literature reviewed as well as interaction with colleagues in the department of Educational foundations, Guidance & Counselling. The questionnaire contained two major sectors, A and B. Section A sought to elicit personal and demographic information, while section B was designed to collect data for independent and dependent variables such as access to modern ICT facilities 5 items, availability of course materials 5 items, guidance and counselling service 5 items, effective feedback system 4 items and administrative and students relationship 5 items. The respondents were required to tick the how satisfied and dissatisfied they were with the statement as it affected the availability and utilization of students' support services in their respective study Centers in any of the columns provided. A four point Lickert scale was used in determining the respondents' degree of satisfaction or dissatisfaction to each item on the questionnaire. A pilot test was equally conducted to determine the reliability coefficient estimate of the instrument, using forty (40) students from pivotal teacher training programme (PTTP), however Cronbach alpha reliability estimate was used in calculating the reliability coefficient of the instrument and the result ranges from .79 to .86 which means that the research instrument was very reliable for use. The instrument was then administered to four hundred NTI NCE students in all the six study centres in Cross River State.

Result

The data collected was analyzed using one way analysis of variance (ANOVA) and the hypothesis was tested at .05 level of significance. Hypothesis, there is no significance influence of availability of support services on learners' academic performance. Five independent groups were involved, so the appropriate test statistic for this hypothesis was one way analysis of variance (ANOVA).

Table 2
Mean and Standard Deviation of the Variables

Variable	N	Mean	SD
Access to Modern ICT Facilities	350	55.00	7.25
Availability of Course Materials	350	46.32	6.82
Guidance and counseling service	350	38.16	6.45
Effective feedback system	350	52.59	7.53
Administrative and students relationship	350	53.21	6.95

Analysis of variance (ANOVA) on the influence of availability of Support Services on NCE Learners' Academic Performance

Source of variation	Degree of Freedom	sum of square	Mean square	F
Between group	4	136894.03	34223.51	16.8981*
Within group	345	698725.16	2025.29	
Total	349	835619.191		

Significant at .05, F Critical =3.830, DF=4 and 345

The table 2 above reveals a significant influence of availability of support services on learners' academic performance, in that the calculated f value of 16.8981 is greater than the critical f value of 3.830, therefore the null hypothesis is rejected on that premise.

Discussion

The result of the study findings revealed a significant influence of availability of support services on learners' academic performance. This implies that learners' support services such as access to modern ICT facilities, availability of course materials, guidance and counselling service, effective feedback system, administrative and students' relationship influence NCE NTI distance learning students' academic performance significantly. This also suggests that non availability of the above support services may account for high rate of students' poor academic performance in NTI NCE distance learning study centres in cross River state.

Nevertheless, the current study is in consonance with the previous studies. For instance, Wood (1996), and Sweet (1998), in their separate studies observed a significant influence of lack of supportive services for distance learners on students' successful completion of course work. These researchers enumerated students' support service to include provision of qualified tutors, academic planners, counsellors, schedulers, feedback and technical assistance, as well as course materials. They also observed that the isolation, experienced by distance education learners would lead to complication in the teaching-learning processes and that lack of motivation, feedback and teacher contact negatively influence distance education learners' self-evaluation ability.

The current study also agreed with Berge and Mrozowski (1999), Berge and Collins (1998) and Virkus (2004), whose studies found a significant influence of inadequate students' support services like guidance & counselling, library access, materials delivery, student training and test proctoring on students' poor performance. They also found a significant positive impact of learner support system such as tutoring, counseling, advising, administrative services, library and information systems and other services on students' academic performance. It was observed also that administrative (centre managers) and students' interaction, positive interpersonal interaction between

students, teachers and the NTI Calabar Office equally affected students' academic performance greatly.

Conclusion

This study has shown the frustration facing the NTI NCE distance learning programme in Cross River State. It is also insinuated that NTI distance learning programme is greatly in need of well articulated learners' supportive services in order to create and sustain the needed academic momentum in which NTI hopes to establish in the years to come. The findings also revealed that NTI NCE distance learning programme lack basic ICT facilities, late arrival of learners' course materials, relatively low guidance and counselling services, poor feedback mechanism and low staff/ learners' relationship are all factors that breed high academic failure among the NTI NCE distance learners in Cross River State.

Therefore, it is adduced that NTI distance learning policy makers and regulators should appropriate the balance between quality control and accountability on one hand and making room for innovation on other hand. They should as well demonstrate a sensible approach toward ensuring quality content on their courses, provide for highly qualified and well trained centre managers and facilitators and comprehensive learners' support services. This might promote better distance learners' academic performance in all the institutes' programmes. If the foregoing challenges are not attended to on time, the entire distance learning programme might experience imminent collapse in the nearest future.

Recommendations

- (1) Proper guidance and counselling programme should be initiated in all the study centres. Formative students' feedback approach should be given priority attention by both course facilitators and centre managers.
- (2) Centre for educational technology should be equipped with Modern ICT facilities in all the study centres.
- (3) NTI management should ensure that learners' course materials get to the study centres on time.
- (4) Facilitators and centre managers should resist the temptation of demanding gratification from learners before discharging their official duties.
- (5) Effective interpersonal rapport between programme staff and learners should be greatly encouraged.

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Provision of Support Services and Learners' Academic Performance: A Challenge and Innovation in NTI NCE Distance Learning Programme in Cross River State, Nigeria

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