
Academic Support Services and Administration in ODL Systems

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Abstract

The paper discussed the concept of Learner support services, a study centre, types or models of study centres, reasons for Learner Support Services in Open and Distance Learning systems. Academic of Support Services (which include tutoring; coaching, teaching, facilitation and hand on practical laboratory work in sciences and technology) at ODL study centres, learners' expectations of support services, providers of academic support at ODL institution's headquarters and at study centres, conclusion and recommendations were proffered

Key Words: Academic, support, services, administration, e-learning Open and distance learning

In all its ramifications, learners' needs and expectations form the major reason for establishing an institution of learning anywhere in the world and National Open University is of no exception. Access to higher education is one of the critical indices

Journal of Resourcefulness and Distinction, Volume 7 No. 1, April, 2014

for development but problematic in the developing countries. According to Ipaye (2007), in Nigeria for instance, statistics indicate that less than 15% of qualified candidates could be admitted by the existing conventional universities. He further opines that Open and Distance Learning seems to be most reliable means of combining accessibility and affordability for the individual and cost efficiency for government and providers. Open and distance learning institutions could help provide mass access; reduce cost of university education, meeting the yearnings of the individual for university admission and rebuilding confidence in those who struggled for places in conventional universities that all is not lost (Ipaye, 2007).

The Federal Government of Nigeria therefore deemed it necessary to resuscitate the suspended National Open University and re-named it as National Open University of Nigeria in 2002. The existence of the university study centres in various states of Nigeria provides the means of which the University reaches out to the nation and the world at large. As of May 2013, there are 49 functional study Centres in 33 States of the Federation including the Federal capital territory and these centres form the bedrock for providing the needed support services to the students spreading all over Nigeria and beyond. In the proceeding section, the paper will explain what learners support is.

Concept of Learner Support Services in ODL

The concept of learner support is a term used to subsume all interactions between institutional personnel and students (prospective and registered) intended to assist them in meeting their objectives from the point of first inquiry through graduation and often for life time (COL 2002).). In a nutshell, Learner Support is tailored towards meeting the learners' academic and socio-psychological needs and also towards realization of the institutions' mission. In most single mode distance institutions, direct academic support services are provided at the study centres while indirect support services are provided at the Institutions' headquarters. In National Open University of Nigeria, learner support model in the Directorate is a two tier system - the headquarters and the study centres. This model had been found to be quite helpful in providing effective support to distance learners because of well-defined functions and activities at headquarters-based study centres and at the study centres situated in the States (in the case of National Open University)

What is a Study Centre?

Study centres constitute an essential aspect of Learner Support Services especially for single mode institutions and particularly in the case of NOUN which is the only Open University in the country. A study centre is designed to support and enhance the educational and learning efforts of distance learning students; it is set up to bring the student closer to the university and to give him or her a sense of belonging to

the university. It provides avenues for face to face interactions between students and students, students and university staff, (both academic and non-teaching staff); it affords didactic interaction between students and their study materials (i.e. by means of pointing out aspects of the study materials s/he finds difficult for others to explain to him or her). Study Centres support students in independent learning by various means of educational technologies and human support (NOUN, 2011).

Types or Models of Study Centres

There are various models of study centres but for the purpose of this paper, six of such models will be discussed;

- a) **The rented model:** In this model, the Distance Education institution merely rents rooms in another institution for the various activities of the DE programme. The institution thus does not have absolute control on what goes on in the centre.
- b) **The partnership model:** Here, another institution or organization, partnering with the DE institution, provides the location and services;
- c) **The dedicated model:** where the building (whether purchased or rented) is dedicated to the use of the ODL institution alone;
- d) **The civic model:** where the local community through the Local Government, an NGO, or the Community takes responsibility to undertake the provision of the centre in order to support the provision of higher (university) education in the community.
- e) **The lodger model:** The centre may be a "lodger" within the premises of another higher institution's facility (Polytechnic or Colleges of Education) possibly paying rent to cover space used, furniture and fittings provided, science laboratory, classrooms, halls offices and power and services by laboratory and workshop staff;
- f) **The regional or zonal model:** This model differs slightly from {c} above in that though it is dedicated, in addition to the normal activities of a study centre, it also supervises activities in a number of other study centres in the Region or Zone.

The choice and adaptation of a particular model of study centre and support services offered by such centre depends largely on the contextual factors such as mission and vision of the particular university, national policy on education, available

resources, learners' characteristics and needs and types of courses and programmes offered (Commonwealth of Learning 2002)

Why Learner Support Services in ODL?

The main reason for learner support in ODL system of education is to provide a warm, and supportive atmosphere for learners so as to enable them develop self-confidence; thus assisting them to achieve personal success in their individual academic and life goals by making available to them a variety of resources, services and referrals (Ipaye,2007) According to kishore (1998), the success or the failure of the ODL methodology and overall corporate image of an ODL institution are contingent on the strengths and weaknesses of the student support services sub-system., Ranasinghe, Vidanapathirana, Rajamanthri, Gamini and Bullumulle (2009) opined that without continuous interpersonal interactions and feedback found in the traditional classroom, the learner in Open and Distance Education can find himself or herself unfocused on the lesson, unaware of his or her progress, and less motivated than the learner in conventional institution. They further observed that Distance learners typically needed a lot of counselling and guidance in order to complete a programme.

Academic Support at Faculties/Schools Level

Apart from those factors mentioned above, other impediments to the realisation of students' learning objectives in ODL system of education include difficulty of the language of study materials and its readability, culture of reading, and studying, motivation, improper and inadequate reading and learning skills or preparation for examination, test anxiety, time management, and work or family commitments, lack of self-confidence etc. Academic achievements in open and distance learning invariably depends on the quality of academic support provided.

Sampson (2000) identified two major areas of Learner Support, which are the academic and administrative support services. Simpson defined academic support as the incorporation of a variety of functions such as explaining concepts, giving hand on practical experience, developing learning skills etc. In realisation of the importance of support services in open and distance education. National Open University of Nigeria provides academic, administrative, social and technological supports to her students, staff and communities. The first line of academic support is mainly provided by the faculties or schools staff as the case may be. This support could be regarded as indirect support services in the sense that, no direct contact is being established between academic faculty staff and students.

At the NOUN Headquarters for example, Schools/Facilities are superintended by the Deans and are responsible for course planning, development and delivery of learning resources (self-learning course materials, video and audio materials, CD-Ron

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etc.), .All academic staff are required to provide programme/strand leadership and also expected to undertake research activities and participate in University/ Professional/ Community services. Academic staff of each school at NOUN Headquarter is duty bound to provide the following academic support services:

- a) course planning, development and delivery;
- b) review and determine acceptability of work of course developers in conjunction with course designers and monitor the progress of course development;
- c) supervise the work of staff involved in the programme;
- d) review, adapt and prepare learning materials for use by the school;
- e) liaise with external examiners, assessors and advisory peer groups;
- f) undertake examination duties including the preparation of examination papers and monitoring of assessment procedures;
- g) liaise with internal unit (e.g. Library and Educational Technology & Publishing Units; participate in the recruitment, training and supervision of part-time tutors;
- h) monitor tutorials and day schools:
- i) participate in University/Professional/Community services; undertake research activities and
- j) undertake such other duties and responsibilities assigned by the Dean of the school (NOUN, 2004).

Administration of Academic Support Services at the Study Centres

The main aim of setting up a study centre is to bring face to face interactions between students and students, students and university staff, (both academic and non-teaching staff); it provides didactic interaction between students and their study materials (i.e. by means of pointing out aspects of the study materials s/he finds difficult for others to explain to him or her). Study Centres support students in independent learning by various means of educational technologies and human support.(NOUN,2011). In a nutshell, a study centre is where the academic courses and programmes are delivered to the students either in occasional face-to-face interaction which is not compulsory but necessary or didactic communication through technologically mediated media. A study centre is a miniature of the university, mirrors the existence of the university in the community far away from the university headquarter. The academic services such as tutoring, coaching, facilitation and hand on practical laboratory work in sciences and technology are carried out at the centre.

As the case of NOUN, the Centre Director superintends over the study centre. At study centre, the Study Centre director with his or her staff provides the following academic services:

- a) Provide counselling on general academic matters before enrolment and during the progress of study, sometimes involving detailed advice on individual subjects, as well as vocational guidance and career counselling;
- b) provide study skills ,advice and courses; arranging local teaching/tutoring; c) manage and monitor students attendance, and assessing its cost-effectiveness; orientation on academic issues, registration, matriculation;
- d) distribute study materials and referrals on additional resources both physically or virtually; arrange for conduct of tutorials and instructional facilitation; e) put learners into groups for tutorials and facilitation;
- f) help to source for qualified Instructional Facilitators and recommending same to the Deans for appointment etc;
- g) organise the timetable, attendance of students; venues and equipment/materials;
- h) provide required technological support; discussion with other students, informal or organised peer tutorials; administering and facilitating in real time at a distance though;
- i) telephone (and/or satellite) links for sound only, sound and picture, sound and picture-and-interactive-computer screen transmissions (computer conferencing); monitor student progress during a study period and taking action to provide encouragement and support when necessary; organizing final examinations;
- j) provide venues, furniture and materials, supervision, security of papers and scripts, record keeping, dispatch of scripts for marking; arrange for the conduct of e-examination and related assessment activities (NOUN, 2011).

Academic Supporting Roles of Staff at Study Centres

The following Staff are directly involved in delivering academic support services to the students at study centres. These include Study Centre Directors, Tutorial/Instructional Facilitators, Knowledge Technologist and Student Counsellors. The writers at this point find it expedient to explain briefly the designated roles of each of these groups of staff at the study centre as they apply to National Open University of Nigeria

The Study Centre Director is in charge of the day to day administration of the centres. Study Centre Director is to:

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- i) Regularly liaise with the headquarters through the Directorate of Learner Support Services on matters relating to the distribution of instructional materials to distance learners and instructional facilitators;
- ii) Participates in the recruitment, training and supervision of part-time tutors and makes sure that there are adequate facilitators for courses on offer at the centre;
- iii) Plans, coordinates and executes tutorial facilitations at the centre;
- iv) Gives one day induction workshop or talk on facilitation in ODL to the facilitators before the commencement of facilitation;
- v) Provides a time -table for facilitation;
- vi) Makes sure that there are available classrooms, laboratories for theory and practical lessons
- vii) Supervises and monitors regularly the work of the facilitators involved in NOUN programmes delivery at the study centre
- viii) Keeps daily attendance of facilitators; that is each facilitator must sign the attendance register after each facilitation session;
- ix) Makes sure that the course materials are available to both students and facilitators promptly;
- x) Provides library facilities and resource materials at the centre. Where not possible he liaises with the host institution or neighbouring higher institution whereby NOUN students can have access to the resource materials;
- xi) Provides common room or rest rooms for the facilitators
- xii) Keeps the records of all the Tutor Marked Assignment and examinations at the centre;
- xiii) Supervises the marking of examinations at the centre;
- xiv) Devises a means of regularly monitoring the conduct of each facilitator;

- xv) Monitors the turn-around of Tutor Marked Assignments and tutorials;
- xvi) Coordinates the use, by distance learners the multimedia information and communication technology available at the Study Centre.
- xvii) Liaises with course developers, examiners, assessors and advisory groups within the locality of the Study Centre;
- xviii) Ensures that the contact sessions and tutorial lecture periods in the centres are problem free and adequately well arranged.

Tutorial/Instructional Facilitators undertake academic support services weaving around issue of tutoring at the study centres. Specifically, the duties of the Facilitator include:

- a) Provides quality learner support which includes guidance about course choice, preparatory diagnosis, study skills etc.
- b) Facilitates students' learning of instructional materials, regular formal and informal learning such as access group, and learning in seminar and tutorials;
- c) Undertakes the delivery of specified course contents using the study centre for purposes of face-to-face interactions with distance learners.
- d) Develops and manages essential feedback mechanism characteristic of effective open and distance learning.
- e) Reviews, assesses and provides feedback on assignments regularly submitted by students as part of the distance learning instructional package and transmits same through the study centre managers to the NOUN Headquarters;
- f) Participates in regular orientation programmes for new students and staff of the NOUN;
- g) Monitors distance learners academic progress as/and when necessary or due.
- h) Reviews, adapts and prepares instructional facilitation materials for use by the School;
- i) Liaises with external examiners, assessors and advisory peer groups.
- J) Undertakes examination duties including, where and when called upon to do so, the preparation of examination papers and monitoring of assessment procedures;
- k) Provides on line learning support for students who have access to and prepares the web-based learning environment of the NOUN;
- l) Engages in creative and innovative roles and activities which will develop and incorporate a range of local needs for support to the communication and discursive requirements of particular courses or programme and learning groups;
- m) Keeps record of students' progress, maintaining accurate records of each learner's work, including assignments and examination and submitting these records to the appropriate School or Centre through the Centre Manager (NOUN, 2004)

Roles of Knowledge Management Technologists in Academic Support Services at the Study Centres

- a) Develop and support the University's management information system including project management system analysis, design, programming user liaison technical support and documentation for internet and need technology projects;
- b) Construct, manage and constantly update the university's web-site and web-based learning environment
- c) Undertake users training for the university's staff and students;
- d) Use java programming especially with flash and multimedia in course development;
- e) Model, stimulate and visualise communications and simple queuing theories (example coding and decoding time and frequency domain representations, convolutions CMSA/CD, M/M/I, M/M/2 etc);
- f) Develop computer applications using internet and client/server technologies as well as the provision of technical and user support of computer systems;
- g) Use and instruct others in the use of a range of software including UNIX/Linux, Windows, Apache/IIS, Tomcat/OAS, Java Servlet/Applications, XML; Per/PHP/ASP, Flash, Photoshop, Dream weaver, NT/2000, Oracle PL/SQL, Developer 2000 and COBOL;
- h) Set-up, test, maintain and operate audio visual and editing equipment at Educational Technology and Publishing Units;
- i) Work on irregular hours and/or shift duties;
- j) Implement and maintain different A.V. and computer systems including hardware installation and configuration and software problem solving;
- k) Assist in the production of multimedia and on-line components such as computer animations and streaming videos and test various hardware and software on different OS; (NOUN, 2004)

Student Counsellors' Roles in Academic Support Services

- a) counselling on general academic matters before enrolment and during the progress of study, sometimes involving detailed advice on individual subjects, as well as vocational guidance and career counselling;
- b) orientation on academic issues, registration, matriculation;
- c) putting learners into groups for learning circles, tutorials and facilitation;
- d) monitoring student progress during a study period and taking action to provide encouragement and support when necessary;
- e) organise workshops, clinics and seminars on learning skills, time management, stress management, preparing for examination etc.
- f) Facilitating study skills and The Good study Guide courses;
- g) Qualified ones among them, conduct systemic researches on counselling problems within their localities;

h) Production and Distribution of Self Learning Materials.

Self-learning materials are produced in prints, burn into CD-ROMs, video and visual cassettes, interactive video, and media production of self-learning for radio and television broad cast are done by Directorate of Instructional Resource Development (DIRD) in the case of National Open University of Nigeria. These self-learning materials are distributed from the warehouses to study centres across Nigeria and re-distributed to the students.

The above mentioned functions of a NOUN study centre epitomise the objectives of support services provided at every NOUN study centre in Nigeria with the aim of meeting the expectations of every student.

Mode of Service Delivery of Academic Support Services in ODL

The most commonly used media of academic delivery in ODL involve some occasional face-to-face interactions, but often optional, in cases of counselling, teaching and learning process. Also, academic counselling, teaching, coaching, facilitation and learning process are 'mediated' in some way by print, including correspondence; by audio, including radio (one-way,), cassettes, telephone or a, cassettes and by computer, including computer-based training,, e-mail, computer conferencing or World Wide Web; (NOUN, 2006)

Challenges Militating Against Effective Support Service Delivery

Academic support services in ODL are not without inherent challenges. These include:

- 1) Lack of efficient information and communication media at the study centres;
- 2) Misconception of facilitation as face-to-face classroom teaching by both facilitators and students of NOUN;
- 3) lack of facilities and equipment eg classrooms and offices spaces, laboratories and computer centres for practical work at some study centres;
- 4) Lack of study materials for so many courses offered at many study centres;
- 5) Scholarship and medical schemes are not available for both staff and students;
- 6) Ineffective and inefficient methods of delivering study materials quickly to students at study centres;
- 7) lack of media facilities and equipment for counselling eg well equipped counselling room

Conclusion

In conclusion therefore, the paper explained academic services to include tutoring; coaching, facilitation and hand on practical laboratory work in sciences and technology that are rendered at ODL study centres. The paper also x-rayed the concept of learner support services, the functions of study centres, types or models of study

centres, reasons for learner support services in ODL system, types of support services at study centres, academic support services, administrative support services, social support service, learners' expectations of support services, providers of academic support at NOUN Headquarter and at study centres.

Recommendations

For effective, efficient and impact-full academic support to occur, the Learner Support unit especially study centres must create a conducive learning environment and adequately provide the following support services:

1. Qualitative and thoughtful tutorial facilitations in all the academic programmes of the university to the students.
2. Disseminating within 1 hour to 7 working days and throughout the session, vital information about admission, registration orientation, fees, course materials etc through telephone, E-mail, correspondences and face-to-face contact
3. Organising and conducting orientation services for new and old students, staff of the university and the general public.
4. Making the registration exercise less cumbersome and with minimum waste of time.
5. Motivating and encouraging students, staff and general public to embrace Open and Distance Education, keep up their enthusiasm, and inspire self-discipline in them, through effective, flexible and non-time bound counselling in the academic, socio- psychological and vocational dimensions.
6. Monitoring the assignments, collecting and grading of Tutor Marked Assignments.
7. Conducting examinations in collaboration with Schools, Centres and other units, using the most objective assessment procedures and providing prompt feedback to the students.
8. Keeping in constant touch with students and providing any early warning signals regarding difficulty with studies in order that prompt remedial actions can be taken by the student him/herself; University, or any significant others in the life of the distance learner
9. Providing qualitative guidance services to students, staff and general public.
10. Conducting in depth and effective workshop, clinic, seminars and in service training for staff of the university and the general public on adjust-ive behaviours to all aspects of distance learning.
11. Providing students with psychologically conducive learning environment for group work, group study, laboratory experiences, individualised study, linkage with study materials, study habits formation, use of e-mail chat -group, on line tutoring and use of the virtual environment

12. Ensuring that course materials like print, audio cassettes, CD- ROMs, Video tapes etc. where and when available, are delivered to students in good time.
13. Providing easy access to multimedia facilities and equipment to enhance students' learning
14. Making facilities within the Study Centre available, where and when possible, for use by the immediate community

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