The Conceptualisation of Student Support by University Support Staff in an Open Distance E-Learning Environment

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ABSTRACT

Student support is seen as a necessity to better students' progress. For students to succeed when studying at a distance, they need a great deal of support to adjust to the institution of higher learning. Independence theory was used as a lens to understand the role of student support staff in providing services to students. A qualitative case study was employed with a purposive sample of sixteen support staff to explore the role of regional academic coordinators, counsellors, centre managers and librarians, referred to as support staff, in supporting students in an open distance e-learning institution and also to determine their understanding of student support. The results reveal that most of the support staff members were aware of their role in contributing to student success in the institution. They indicated that there is a gap between academics and professional staff where a referral system is lacking to fully support and trace students needing support. Support staff seemed to lack marketing skills to inform and attract students to utilize the services. The results further reveal a lack of technological skills among some of the support staff to facilitate online services for students. The study recommends collaboration among all role players in the institution in order to give holistic support to students and to be trained in technological skills to assist students online.

KEYWORDS

Learning support; Open distance e-learning; Technological support.

INTRODUCTION

Student support services have been a central issue of interest to lecturers. However, student support services became critical with the emergence of open distance e-learning (ODeL). Practitioners and researchers have attempted to understand the experience of distance learners, i.e., what holds them back and contributes to persistence and success in their learning process (Brindley & Von Ossietzky, 2010). Student support is seen as necessary to improve students' progress as they study at a distance. Also, the outbreak of the coronavirus cemented the need for student support services. It upended higher education, economies, and the lives of millions of individuals worldwide. Universities were closed, and teaching was cancelled or put online (Altbach & De Wit, 2020). This demonstrated that for systems to continue and students to study online, support services are a necessity. The success of ODeL depends on functional and optimal student support systems. According to Tait (2000), student support is the backbone of every institution, particularly in the open distance learning environment.

This study focused on how support staff provide services to help students succeed in an open-distance environment. The emphasis was on the University of South Africa (Unisa), which has six (6) regional offices positioned to support students across South Africa (SA). The services available during the study were registrations, counselling, tutorial services, computer laboratories, and library services.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Open distance e-learning

In recent years, higher education institutions have seen a rigorous determination to offer courses and qualifications using distance education, and there is a growing prominence of offering courses for online distance learning using the Internet. Using online systems requires students to log on to a website regularly and download relevant documents (study material). The reasons students opt for distance learning programmes are varied (Falloon, 2011). Some students, especially those working and studying, may need the flexibility of working independently at their own pace. Generally, the structure of ODeL provides students with greater flexibility. It gives them control over time, place and pace of education.

The Nigerian government established the National Open University of Nigeria to address the country's education needs (Oluchi, 2018). The (ibid) further states that as the Nigerian government continues to face financial challenges, it has added distance teaching components to existing universities, which seems to have benefited many students. Dual-mode universities are growing and beginning to flourish (De Wet, 2016).

Letseka and Pitsoe (2014) studied the challenges and prospects of access to higher education and found that students' success rate at Unisa was higher. However, Perraton (2007) disputes and states that one of Unisa's weaknesses is its poor success rate. The poor success rate could be attributed to a lack of support and synergy among units. Students are frustrated due to the lack of support they should be receiving from universities. Unisa is an ODeL institution that provides higher education opportunities to working adults who would otherwise not have the opportunity to acquire a qualification at full-time contact institutions (Letseka & Pitsoe, 2014). The (ibid) also discusses the lack of student support in teaching and learning. Unisa students use technology which is internet-driven, but it has the unintended consequence of excluding a considerable proportion of independent students from meaningful service, mostly poor, disadvantaged students (Mawonde & Togo, 2019). The ODeL framework assumes that every student can be offered support through modern electronic technologies and other digital facilities (Ngubane-Mokiwa, 2017). The university rolls out 30 GB of network data to alleviate this challenge and improve quality education. However, the data is still not sufficient to meet the demands of studying at a distance. This study focused on the support students receive from the support services stationed at regional offices. There seems to be less research on support services and support staff's role in supporting students at Unisa's regional offices.

Student support

Student support provides multi-layered, student-centred co-curricular engagement prospects and professional services. The aim is to improve students' quality of life, holistic wellness, experience and success. According to Simpson (2012), student support includes "all activities beyond the production and delivery of course materials that assist in the progress of students to succeed in their studies". Support refers to a conducive environment that allows students to develop independently and form communities with their counterparts in their study careers. The objective is to improve the provision of student support services in an ODeL context. Unisa's student support services include face-to-face tutorials, guidance and counselling, information and communication technology (ICT) and e-tutoring (Arko-Achemfuor, 2017). As such, a holistic and cohesive approach where the boundaries of professional disciplines are low and working methods are harmonised, in particular by the affordances of digital technologies, is highly favoured (Tait, 2018).

Unisa has numerous support systems for students with diverse needs. This is because students in ODeL institutions face challenges that regular students also face, as well as challenges that the system generates. The services available for Unisa students include counselling services, library services, tutorial support services, digital access centres and library services. These services cover all areas where students may be experiencing challenges in improving study skills, preparing for examinations, and ICT, as well as ensuring a good psychological state of mind.

Counselling services

The Directorate for Counselling and Career Development (DCCD) supports students even before they start their studies, as well as during and after their studies. Mabizela (2014) asserts that 64% of first-year students need counselling in adapting to an ODL institution, while 69% need more insight into career opportunities related to their field of study. The DCCD offers career counselling, which empowers students to choose a qualification that matches their personality and interests. Personal counselling deals with a variety of challenges, including familial and psycho-social problems. Academic support is also a form of support that is aimed at helping students adjust to an ODeL institution by providing study and time management skills and preparing them for examinations through workshops. In addition, the DCCD prepares students for career and job opportunities, which enables them to be linked with possible employers. These services are free for all registered students.

Library services

Even in their first year, university students are expected to participate in high-level academic reading (Nallaya & Kehrwald, 2013). These expectations, together with having to adapt to a distance learning environment, can have a negative impact on students when accessing library material. The library assists students with literature reviews and how they can use the library catalogue, subject databases and other related online tools. In addition to these tools, the library offers answers to short reference questions and support. The institution renders training through MS Teams, which covers an introduction to the Unisa library, using the library catalogue, an introduction to e-resources, using reference sources and an introduction to reference techniques.

Academic Literacy

In order to support students holistically, students who struggle with reading and writing are assisted through the Academic Literacy programme. Workshops are held to equip them with the necessary academic skills. The workshops cover a wide series of topics such as essay writing, report writing, referencing, data collection, literature review and ethics. This programme targets those students who struggle with academic writing to equip them with skills to be able to write assignments.

Quantitative Literacy

Quantitative literacy encompasses using mathematical, computational, or statistical methods, with substantial submissions across a wide variety of disciplines. It highlights the process of formulating, solving, interpreting and applying equations of different types to solve many different real-world problems. This support is offered freely to students so that they can handle work related to courses on mathematical concepts such as accounting, statistics and mathematics.

Tutoring support services

In 2013, Unisa implemented the integrated tutor model (ITM) to offer support to students. ITM offers tutorial support to students through online support (e-tutoring) as well as face-to-face tutorials (Ntuli & Gumbo, 2019). Unisa gives students a study package containing study guides,

tutorial letters, and other media. Tutors are appointed on temporary contracts to offer tutorial services to students, especially in modules that the University has identified as at-risk subjects, whereby most students fail these modules and need extra support. Tutorial services are offered in both face-to-face and electronic mode. Since COVID-19, however, most tutorials are online as the number of students on campuses has declined. In order to accommodate students' needs, technological services are available through e-tutoring.

E-tutoring

E-tutoring comprises tutoring services delivered online, through MS Teams or e-mail (Unisa, 2023). E-tutors are subject experts and specialists with the highest qualification being masters and are appointed by educational institutions. Students are made aware of the allocation of an e-tutor via email, and they engage on the myUnisa platform. Students receive dates and times designed for tutorials for the modules (Unisa, 2023).

Digital laboratories

Unisa regional offices have computer laboratories to which registered students are granted access. Lab assistants help students create passwords for library use and access Unisa materials, such as uploading assignments and library material. Students are also assisted in creating their myLife account, which is the official e-mail the University uses to communicate with students. Furthermore, the university collaborates with community computer centres with functional ICT infrastructure. These centres have computers, printers, photocopiers and an internet connection. This is very beneficial for students since it bridges the gap between the university and students. As students do not have to travel to regional campuses to seek ICT assistance. According to Unisa (2023), students are permitted to spend a maximum of six (6) hours each week in the digital centres where they can type their assignments and access the myUnisa portal. McPherson and Nunes (2004) believe that access to resources is insufficient if students are not equipped. Some students may lack computer skills, which will limit their ability to access ICT systems and comply with the demands of ODeL institutions. Unisa staff working at the labs offer training to students who may lack computer skills. This training is offered regularly to students, especially those who are first-time students.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Wedemeyer formulated the independent study theory in 1971, defining it as learning arrangements that allow learners and teachers to carry out their responsibilities wherever they are (Diehl, 2012). The researcher opines that teaching can take place in dual mode, i.e., face-to-face and online. Independent theory is centred on the independence of the learners (students), learning from a distance. The theory emphasises the learners' independence in their learning process. The learner's independence refers to his or her responsibility in the learning process. The theory of independent study proposes the separation of teaching from learning as a strategy to break the education (learning) "space-time barrier". Independent theory highlights a system of education that is provided from a distance where the student can learn with little or no

supervision, thus encouraging self-regulated students who take responsibility for their studies (Diehl, 2012). The student support staff is responsible for facilitating face-to-face counselling, tutorials, computer training, and face-to-face and online library services, which aligns with Wedemeyer's independent theory.

METHODOLOGY

The study employed a qualitative case study to explore the role of support staff in supporting students and their understanding of student support at Unisa regional offices. The qualitative approach provided a means of gaining a deeper understanding of the participants (Ivankova & Wingo, 2018). This approach was suitable for this study since it assumed that there is a multi-layered, interactive and shared social experience interpreted by participants (Creswell, 2015). The sample was purposive as it allowed participants to be willing to respond to the questions and form part of the study. The following participants responded to an electronic questionnaire: Five (5) student counsellors, two (2) were females, two (2) were males, and one (1) did not disclose. Their experience in the counselling environment ranges between 5 and 10 years.

The five (5) regional academic coordinators were all females who have been in the same field for 15 and 18 years., Two (2) heads of the Facilitation of Learning were males and had been in the position for 15 years and 4 years, respectively. Of the two (2) centre managers, one (1) was a lady, and the second was a male. The lady was in the position for 7 years, and the male was in the position for 6 years. The two (2) deputy directors of Facilitation of Learning and ICT services were both females who had been in positions for 6 and 8 years. Participants were from regional offices across Unisa. None of the librarians in the region responded to the questionnaire.

Data collection

Data was collected through self-developed questionnaires, which were e-mailed to the participants. More space was provided for any input not covered by the questionnaire. The participants had to answer seven (7) questions covering their knowledge of student support in the Unisa regional offices. Participants completed the questionnaire in their own time and space. The raw data were transcribed verbatim, the thematic data analysis method was applied, and the guidelines were provided by interpretative phenomenological analysis. ATLAS.ti was used to analyse data by segmenting transcribed data into codes, categories, themes and subthemes in conjunction with the research questions: "What is the role of support staff personnel in supporting students, and what is their understanding of student support?". Though the ATLAS.ti software was able to minimise data, the process was incomplete as there was a lot of repetition in the responses. The coding was revised manually. As a result, some new categories and themes emerged based on the responses.

Ethical considerations

Letters seeking consent to participate in the study were sent to participants. Once participants received responses, the questionnaires were sent electronically. Ethical clearance was received from the College of Education at Unisa to source data from Unisa support staff.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Five (5) themes emerged from the identified codes: student support, feasible methods of supporting students in an ODeL space, marketing services, provision of student support to students and tools used to support students.

Student support

Student support had a different meaning to participants. Still, all the responses were in line with the definition found in the Unisa policy document, which defines student support as "a range of services offered by Unisa to assist students to meet their learning objectives and to gain the knowledge and skills to be successful in their studies" (Unisa, 2018).

P1 explained student support as "*a provision given to students to succeed academically. This can be done by providing them with resources and facilitation of knowledge by academics and tutors*". P2 said, "*… is measures and initiatives taken by the university to support its students through their administration and academic journey in various ways—the journey starts from when the learner enters the university for the 1st time until exit*".

P7 explained, "We use official programmes such as libraries, tutorials, academic literacies, self-help facilities, computer facilities, counselling services, and *application and registration facilities to support students*."

Student support is viewed as services provided to students through resources, such as technology, counselling, and tutorials, to achieve academically. The participants' responses showed that they understood what student support entails.

Feasible methods of supporting students in an ODEL space

Participants' views on the feasible methods for support should be holistic, where academic and administrative support should complement each other. The referral system was identified as one of the most vital tools in the regions.

P2 indicated a need to track academic performance by investigating throughput rates, conducting an online need assessment survey and creating module/qualification online chat forums. In cases where students cannot be assisted, referrals should be suggested to direct students to the right people to help. Students needing support should be identified during orientation sessions and tutorial classes by fellow students who notice the need to refer them to relevant services. This can be done through Student Affairs, an organisation of academic officials who witness the students' difficulties and communities and student self-referral. Participants suggested a collaboration path where students can be identified when experiencing challenges, and their queries can be traced until resolved.

One participant mentioned "*referrals from different units and specialist's recommendations such as those with special educational needs, e.g., short-si*ghtedness."

It is important that everyone in the support staff department, including academics, counselling, administrative staff, and lab technicians, be involved in assisting students. Paniagua and Simson (2018) state that a holistic approach should be at the core of student support services. Academic support and non-academic support need to be provided with relevant training to give students of different backgrounds a real inclusive education. None of the participants mentioned support for students with disabilities. There does not seem to be an appropriate referral system to assist the staff in following up on whether referred students' needs have been met.

Marketing services

Services available to communicate university information to students are marketed through SMS and myUnisa. Letseka and Pitsoe (2014) maintain that most ODL institutions market themselves to prospective students as open, accessible, flexible, supportive and affordable, with the presumption that this market discourse is aimed at mature adult working students who take responsibility for their learning and are capable of learning alone or in small groups.

Participants expressed how social media should be used to market the services fully, including orientations and workshops.

P10 said, "*Face-to-face, Scopia, Telephone, Emails, SMS, WhatsApp*" are marketing tools available to market support services.

Another participant indicated that "… *usually come to the centre and identify themselves asking about the support they need and, in the area, where they struggle, e.g. other students studying the same course, computer access, internet access, tutors*". The implication is that students rely on word-of-mouth to know about the services at their disposal. Students who do not visit regional centres will never be aware of the services available.

P4 also said, "*There are different types of support, e.g., academic support. Students will come to the orientation session and be informed of the available support, and they will come and register for it.*" This is concerning because if students do not attend orientation sessions, which should also be marketed through social media, they will never know of services available at Unisa regional centres.

Provision of student support

Rutter and Mintz (2019) propose eight (8) steps institutions should adopt to improve success rates. The four (4) steps are: (i) Introduce students to a dedicated advisor and inform students about campus services and opportunities. (ii) Provide time management and study skills training and help students explore possible majors and careers. (iii) Nudge students to take advantage of learning centres, tutoring, study groups and supplemental instruction. (iv) Early exposure to career planning and labour market demands is important. The stages highlighted above are covered in the support departments available at Unisa regional service centres. Where training, access to computer tutorials and counselling services are offered freely to students, be it online or face-to-face. Participants viewed methods of supporting students as more than administrative.

The participants understood that a need analysis must be conducted before students can be supported to provide the proper support.

P14 pronounced, "*… are identified in different ways during orientation sessions, during tutorial classes, by fellow students who notice the need to refer them to us, through student affairs, through academic officials who witness the difficulties the students are having, through communities and self-referral by students*".

P5 and 6 indicated, "*Different support starting with academic literacies, tutorial classes, space for students to study and for discussion, computer space and library facilities, provision of counselling and skills workshops*".

P10 viewed the provision of support as follows: "*… face-to-face tutorials. It is a form of academic support linked to colleges and faculties. I also support students administratively with various administrative enquiries.*"

P19 explained it as "*face-to-face counselling (CAREER, PERSONAL), study and time management skills workshops, exam preparation workshop, career development workshop*". Although the participants knew what student support provision was, they focused on the face-to-face mode of support. Unisa, as an ODeL university, especially after the outbreak of COVID-19, needs to use technology more vigorously to support students wherever they are. As per independent theory, the learners' independence and the use of technology are emphasised, as well as attending tutorial classes and using library services in their learning process, and not face-to-face service. Such services can be used electronically to reach more learners and promote autonomy.

Tools used to support students

Many higher education institutions in SA implement advising technologies, including education planning, counselling and coaching, and risk targeting to help students plan their academic paths and stay on track (Kalmkarian, Boynton & Salazar, 2018). In research conducted in five 95) universities by Kalmkarian et al. (2023), it was found that one (1) widespread approach to improving, advising and support was to use advising technologies such as education planning, early alert, predictive analytics and case management tools to enable advisors and others better to facilitate more focused and meaningful experiences with students. Participants cited different tools to support students, such as smartboard and video conferencing, which link students from different regions when conducting discussions and workshops. Further communication with students can be done through SMS, e-mails, brochures, and websites. Some participants explained that students must be informed or supported through myUnisa, myLife, e-mails, Facebook, SMSs and workshops. Two (2) participants identified other platforms such as Google, the DCCD website, PACE DVDs and brochures, YouTube videos, conference information, and Khetha's website (www.careerhelp.co.za) as tools to support students.

One (1) purported that "*learning management systems (LMS) and various synchronous and asynchronous technologies are some of the viable ways of supporting students in my view.*"

The participants' responses varied, which could be attributed to their area of specialisation in the service they offer students. The responses show that most support staff were familiar with the tools used to offer support to students in an ODeL environment, which other studies have also confirmed.

CONCLUSION

Student support is an essential service aimed at the success of students. With the adoption of Wedemeyer's theory, student support facilitates self-regulated students who take full responsibility for their studies in an ODeL institution. The findings attest that support staff visualise student support positively and understand their role in supporting students. The emphasis is on identifying students needing support and referring them when necessary. The recommendation is that students be informed about the available support services through different tools they use daily, including myUnisa, social media, SMS, e-mail and phone. A gap was identified in the electronic support to students. Students cannot be expected only to receive information during orientation sessions. Other means of disseminating information should be explored to reach all students.

However, there is a gap in support given to students with disabilities. Students with disabilities were not mentioned in all the responses. This raises the question of whether the support staff know the cohorts of such students and the support they need. Tools to support students with disabilities are needed, and training to support staff to use the devices and advise students with special needs is necessary.

An appropriate referral system is needed to assist the staff in suitably following up on the referred students. Students are lost in a system and cannot be traced. The lack of collaboration between academics and support staff is a gap that must be addressed. Once a student has been referred for assistance, a tracking system should be followed to ensure that the student has been fully assisted.

Recommendations

A need for collaboration among services is a priority to curb silo units offering support to students. Services offered should be inclusive to accommodate students with special needs. The ICT department should invest in training support staff on technological modes to support students electronically. Online tutorials, online counselling and e-library services should be promoted; policymakers need to invest in technology by empowering the support staff to perform their duties effectively. Staff upskilling in marketing and support tools for students should also be considered.

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