Full Length Research Paper

Assessment of support facilities available to degree programme distance learning students in the south-western Nigerian universities

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The study assessed the availability of support facilities to degree programme distance learning students in two universities in Nigeria's University of Ibadan and of Ado-Ekiti. A sample of 250 students was drawn from the two universities. A questionnaire on distance learning student support facilities (DLSSFQ) was elicited. Analysis of the data showed that student support facilities were not adequately provided. However, sampled individuals perceived that distance learning was not better organized and implemented than mere university matriculation examination or school certificate examination coaching centres. The problems identified constitute a threat to the academic integrity of graduates from distance education centres.

Key words: Assessment, facilities, support, distance learning programme.

INTRODUCTION

A dramatic upsurge in the demand for placement into Nigerian universities has occurred in recent years. Okebukola (2002) notes that the Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB) could only offer placement opportunities to just 12% of annual applicants leaving the rest applicants to 'wait for another turn' that may never come. For this singular reason, most applicants who had tried their "luck" several times seek some other opportunities available to them through distance learning programmes offered as a parallel programme by many universities in Nigeria (Fagbamiye, 2002). This, to some distance learners, is borne out of frustration while some others see it as a second chance having dropped out of the conventional system sometime (Dada, 2001; Owoeye, 2004).

The state of the art section

Distance learning is being operationally defined by scholars across the world in many ways. "Any formal instructional approach in which the majority of the instruction occurs at a distance" (Merill, 2003). Learners embarking on distance education programme are faced with many constraints such as: (a) financial constraints, (b) constraints

of time, (c) distance (d) physical disabilities, and (e) family commitments (Kinnaman, 1995; Willis 2006). Since distance learners are varied according to their socio-economic backgrounds, adequate provision should be made by institutions in providing administrative and organizational supports otherwise known as learner support (Idrus and Lateh, 2000). As learners differ from place to place, so are their needs (Schamber, 1988). Sampson (2003) purports that distance learners' needs are relative to each learner and his or her institution of learning, yet the need for supports is unique and necessary so as to reduce the rate of drop-out, frustration and fears of failure.

It would suffice to say that distance education is best suited to a "mature" learner who has the capacity to access his circumstances, make life choices, who is self-directed and who is an active discoverer and constructor of his own learning (Savery and Duffy, 1995). It is best suited for those who can combine the world of work with their studies (Keegan, 1990). And as much as it is expected of learners who embark on distance education to have had some means of livelihood, yet, this assertion, according to Moore and Kearsley (1996) might not be absolutely true as distance education is not meant for a particular age-group but for anyone who, according to Galusha (2006) are on jobs to keep their homes; physically handicapped/impaired or not privileged to un-

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dergo conventional or traditional system of education be-cause of other reasons that are personal.

Survey

According to Moore and Kearsley (1996), there are a number of things that distance learners expect from a distance education course or programme. These include:

1) information that is up-to-date and authoritative.
2) courses that are flexible and accommodate different learning styles.
3) opportunities to do something with what they learn (for example assignments and projects).
4) feedback on their work and progress.
5) help dealing with administrative or personal problems related to the programme.

Meeting these expectations should dictate not only how the course or programme is designed and implemented, but also the nature of the teaching/tutoring involved and the student support services provided. At the programme delivery level, administrators or instructors will be responsible for these tasks along with their other duties (Moore and Kearsley, 1996).

Chem (1999) sees educational guidance and counseling as the uttermost amongst the list of preference. Students may need guidance and counseling at a number of different stages in their work as distant learners. At an early stage, they are likely to need advice about whether a particular course promises to suit their particular academic needs at a particular time; advice about how to study for a particular course given; the media used and the format; orientation on what the course embarked upon will eventually earn them; the effects their study will have on their families, on their jobs (for those on jobs), or health and its financial implications on their families and social lives. Oh (2006) emphasizes student support from guidance and counseling as ultimate as it stabilizes their learning effectiveness. He believes that distance learners must be properly guided as the success of individual distance learners begin with registration of courses, choice of study programmes and the burden they put on themselves, about the assessment of their time and resources, the study load, appropriateness of the courses they offer especially with regard to their previous study history and available support facilities. Carr and Ledwith (1980) observe that women, because of their lack of time management skills, form the greater percentage of dropouts among distance learners.

Therefore, distance learners' need of organizational and administrative support, according to Kinnaman (1995) is imperative. Funds that must be provided to create an administrative unit to be responsible for students' welfare should not be underestimated. Kinnaman (1995) warns by saying that "without this support, distance education stands the risk of becoming a peripheral activity,

without commitment from or significance to the institution and the learners". Distance learning institutions must develop learning course materials of low costs that are affordable to economically less-privileged learners. Miller (2003), Galusha (2006) and Mulrean (2006) agreed with Phi Kappa Phi's the college honour societies standards and guidelines (2005) that providing student support services such as scholarship awards and bursary facilities especially to poor student should gain prominence on the scale of preferences of any institution and government running such a programme, as some students, particularly those without home computers with modems could have difficulty in communicating with the university or teacher. This lack of adequate hardware and subsequent cost barrier of obtaining equipment could place undue hardship on some remote students (Picciano, 2006; Carnevale, 2004). Learners' need of other communication systems such as phones or mails must be met in order to overcome the needs identified above. Only learners who are able to afford possessing a phone or mitigating the in-efficiencies of our post-telecommunication systems will perform well in their course of running the programme (Wang, 2006).

Ademokoya (2007) considers the importance of reaching different categories of special needs persons. He also considers accessing these individuals with education through special distance education. This form of education combines relevant principles and practices of special education and distance learning to provide a comprehensive and result oriented education for special learners. However, the present Nigerian special education programmes appear ill-prepared or deficient to offer Nigerians with chronic health and physical disorder appropriately relevant educational services. Apart from this, even in advanced countries where special education services have assumed high profile status, the fact remains that a combination of principles and procedures of distance learning and special education are required to provide a multi-disciplinary, broad based and a more result-oriented educational services for this individual.

Reiterating the above, Idrus and Lateh (2000) state that interactivity is the major support need of distance learners. This, according to them, may take many forms that are not limited to audio or to teacher-student interactions but to the connectivity the students feel with the distance teacher, the local teachers, aides, and facilitators, their peers and their instructional modes. Without connectivity, according to Garrison (1990), distance learning degenerates into old correspondence course model of independent study as the student becomes autonomous and isolated.

The purposes of interaction with their instructor/facilitators and fellow students during a course may be to get adequate feedback on their ideas and learning progress, or simply for the pleasures of social contact. This could be achieved by telephone, mail, fax or computer messaging especially in advanced countries where communi-

Table 1. Availability of support facilities at distant learning centres.

Facilities	Available		Not Available	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
i. Bursary Facility	10	4.0	240	96.0
ii. Scholarship award	08	3.2	242	96.8
iii. Subsidized tuition	14	5.6	236	94.44
iv Hostel accommodation	165	66.0	85	34.0
v. Computer system	130	52.0	120	48.0
vi. C-D Rom	182	72.8	68	27.2
vii. Instructional modules	201	80.4	49	19.6
viii. Internet use	52	20.8	198	79.0
ix. Social infrastructure for games and sport	65	26.0	185	74.0
x. Guidance and counseling services	195	78.0	55	22.0
Number of observations	250	100		

cations through the above-listed means are made available, functional and cheap. Distance learners must interact with their instructors/tutors (teachers) and with themselves on a regular basis. A student directory listing contact information should be provided and learning activities that provide and promote opportunities for students to work together and interact should be made readily available. Are all these support services available and accessible to Nigerian distance learners?

Motivation and aims

Distant learners across the world are faced with various student support services or facilities needs which, if not taken care of, can impede the learning progress. In Nigeria, these services and facilities and the level at which they are available must be identified so that distance learning centre/institution stakeholders may be availed of the opportunity of identifying areas for concern and improvement. This study aims to contribute to such an assessment by looking at south western Nigeria universities.

Are support facilities available in selected distance learning centres? Are distance learners provided with support facilities? Are these support facilities adequate? How do distance learners cope with non-availability of some student support facilities?

Distance learners registered at the University of Ado Ekiti and the University of Ibadan are used here as a case study.

METHODOLOGY AND DATA

The University of Ibadan Distance Learning Centre (DLC) had been in existence since 1988. 20 years ago though, the University of Ibadan happens to be Nigeria's first university, established in 1948. University of Ado-Ekiti started her own distance learning programme in the late 1990s.

The University of Ibadan distance learning programme is housed within the university campus having all her programmes within the campus. University of Ado-Ekiti has her distance learners almost everywhere in south western Nigeria and holds study centres at any available space across the country.

Only lecturers of the University of Ibadan and the course materials (modules) produced by the University of Ibadan seasoned lecturers are available for the University of Ibadan DLC students, whereas University of Ado-Ekiti distance learners are exposed to receiving lectures and course materials from other universities.

One hundred and twenty five samples from each of the two universities were stratified for the study- University of Ibadan DLC and the University of Ado-Ekiti DLC, Oyo Centre. The samples were randomly taken to touch each of the faculties and departments taking part in the programme- education, arts, the social science, science and agricultural science of the two universities. The individuals consisted of both male and female students (Male = 60 and Female = 65) from each of the two universities' DLC.

A research questionnaire– Distance Student Support Facilities Questionnaire (DSSFQ) was constructed and validated by the researchers using Cronbach alpha coefficient. The reliability of the instrument produced 0.8734. This shows that there was an internal consistency. This instrument was a two item questionnaire in three sections: section A focused on the respondent's bio-data. sections B and C were dichotomous items with section B having available (yes) = 1, not available = 2; and section C having available and adequate = 1, available but not adequate = 2.

The researchers personally administered the instrument on individuals at their registration centres as they came purposely for certain information and transactions. The completed questionnaires were collected immediately to prevent problems of retrieval. This exercise took a week to complete.

RESULTS

As shown in Table 1, 66% out of the 250 sampled individuals indicated that the distance learning centres had hostel accommodation facility available. Majority of the former were registered at the University of Ibadan.

DLC who hold their interactive sessions when conventional students would have gone on end of semester or session vacation. 52.0% said that the centres had adequate provision to make computer systems available to distance learners. 72.8% said that CD-Rom could be provided for distance learners. 80.4% agreed that the centres could provide learners with instructional materials.

However, respondents indicated that all the facilities

Table 2. Provision of support facilities.

Facilities	Provided with facilities (yes)		Not provided with facilities (no)	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
i. Bursary facility	05	2.0	245	98.0
ii. Scholarship award	02	8	248	99.2
iii. Subsidized tuition	10	4.0	240	96.0
iv Hostel accommodation	29	11.6	221	88.4
v. Computer system	18	7.2	232	92.8
vi. CD-Rom	150	60.0	100	40.0
vii. Instructional modules	219	87.6	31	12.4
viii. Internet use	08	3.2	242	96.8
ix. Social infrastructure for games and sport	52	20.8	198	79.2
x. Guidance and counseling services	70	28.0	180	72.0

Table 3. Adequacy of support facilities.

Facilities	Adequate		Not adequate	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
i. Bursary facility	06	2.4	244	97.7
ii. Scholarship award	02	8	248	99.2
iii. Subsidized tuition	08	3.2	242	96.8
iv Hostel accommodation	09	3.6	241	96.4
v. Computer system	15	6.0	235	94.0
vi. C-D Rom	140	56.0	110	44.0
vii. Instructional modules	185	74.0	65	26.0
viii. Internet use	22	8.8	228	91.2
ix. Social infrastructure for games and sport	20	8.0	230	92.0
x. Guidance and counseling services	145	58.0	105	42.0

listed were available in their centres but in varying degrees. Their response also indicated that hostel accommodation, computer systems, CD-Rom, instructional modules and guidance and counseling services were more available than the other facilities.

The Cronbach Alpha Coefficient is a measure of internal consistency of reliability and validity of the instrument used for the study.

According to Table 2, only 5 (2.0%) of distance learners said that bursary facility were provided. 2 (.8%) claimed that scholarship award was provided. 150 (60.0%) respondents agreed that they were provided with CD-Rom. These were major distance learners from the University of Ibadan DLC centre. However, 219 (87.6%) indicated that they were given instructional modules/course materials that facilitated active interaction. From Table 2, only CD-Rom and instructional modules appeared sufficiently provided amongst the list of facilities. Some others that were said to be provided were insufficiently provided and they appear as if not provided at all.

From Table 3, 44.0% of the respondents said that though they were provided CD-Rom, it was not adequately provided. 74.0% said that instructional modules

were adequately provided to distance learners. Only 145 (58.0%) said that they were offered adequate guidance and counseling service. Therefore, only CD-Rom, instructional modules and guidance and counseling services were indicated to be sufficiently and adequately provided amongst the list of the facilities.

The self-completion item in the questionnaire was selected as the most appropriate tool to elicit responses on how distance learners cope with non-availability of some student support facilities. Of these 175 respondents, about 55% (96) said that they were surprised that the University of Ibadan could not provide unaffordable facilities that would enhance adequate learning and stu-dent comfort. They said they had learnt to endure since the programme had a time-frame or duration. Among the remaining, one respondent (amongst the University of Ado-Ekiti sample) stated that the programme was hardly different from summary coaching/lesson organized for JAMB (Joint Admission and Matriculation Boards) or WAEC (West African Examinations Council) and NECO (National Examinations Commission) candidates that is often devoid of proper organization and learners' welfare. Another respondent from the University of Ado Ekiti study

centre stated that he hardly could distinguish between NTI (National Teachers' Institute), NCE (Nigeria Certificate in Education) with DLS (Distance Learning System) where "nothing is impossible" (this might relate to examination malpractices, exploitation through inordinate demands from learners on handouts or course materials and other inadequacies). However, some lamentably stated that since the major mode of content delivery is print, "course materials such as modules should be given to us on time, as we don't find it easy to borrow from other students who had passed through this same programme before us". Some others stated that they slept anywhere; with friends or relatives, during interactive periods, while some rented apartments or rooms elsewhere at exorbitant costs.

DISCUSSION

Generally, the respondents indicated that though the programme is extremely good and attractive, student support facilities are not provided or are not adequately provided. Distance learners are made to suffer untold hardships which directly or indirectly affect their academic performances on the programme and their disposition towards the programme now and later in life.

While it is the general belief of many that most distance education centres in Nigeria are established to generate fund for conventional programmes being run parallel to distance education by the same university (Fagbamiye, 2002), it should be noted however, that the National Policy on Education (2004) states that adequate provision for functional and remedial education/work-study programme that will develop the intellectual capacities of individuals to understand and appreciate their environment, thereby become useful members of the community should be provided. Therefore, universities running distance education programmes should endeavour to undergo process evaluation of their organization performance as "feedback plays a crucial role in opening and maintaining a dialogue between the centre facilitators and students so as to forestall inadequacies in programme implementation" (Hyland, 2001). Holmberg (1983) points out that empirical studies have shown that "quick handling with proper tutor comments on students' welfare in relation to their support facilities has proved essential for students' success" and Morgan (1995) says that the provision of distance students' support services encourages reflection in learning and serves as an antidote to frustration and dropping out.

In the light of the foregoing, distance education institutions in Nigeria should endeavour to make the programme interesting and convenient for the learners by providing more of support facilities made available to conventional students. Distance education should be given priority on budget allocation and the issue of adequate provision of student support facilities should not be underestimated.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The national policy on education should be reviewed to emphasize the inculcation, adequate provision and implementation of policy document on student support services/facilities by Nigerian institutions organizing distance education programme in their curriculum. The federal government should make adequate provision for the smooth running of distance education programme in the annual national budget. Further, federal and state owned institutions running distance education programmes should provide sufficient fund to take care of student support or needs. Therefore, students' tuition should be subsidized to enable students from poor homes or self-sponsoring students meet up with the financial implications that relate to tuition and course materials.

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