

THE EFFECTIVENESS AND EFFICIENCY OF STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES IN OPEN DISTANCE LEARNING INSTITUTIONS IN AFRICA: A DESKTOP REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

Today, most higher education (HE) institutions throughout the world are shifting towards an Open Distance Learning (ODL) system. The emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic has also prompted conventional institutions to move towards this system. This shift requires a greater investment in student support services, especially if the institution strives to attract new students, retain current ones, improve their overall performance, increase students' progression rates and employability. A desktop review was conducted to ascertain the effectiveness and efficiency of these services and establish any possible direct or indirect association with students' academic achievements. Studies conducted between 1990 and 2020 were examined using Google and Google Scholar, Scopus, EBSCOhost, ProQuest, Science Direct, Sabinet and the National Research Foundation. The review revealed that student support services' effectiveness and efficiency in ODL institutions in Africa are measured by the success, failure, dropout and attrition rates at these institutions. The effectiveness and efficiency of these services cannot be measured in isolation, but in terms of the philosophical and educational perspectives underpinning the education system. Moreover, dropout rates should be viewed in light of economic and educational landscapes. There is a dearth of literature supporting a direct association between the effectiveness and efficiency of student support services and students' academic outcomes. The researchers recommend that empirical studies be conducted to provide more evidence-based information instead of speculation in the absence of empirical facts. Student support services' effectiveness and efficiency need to be planned and implemented at the level of pedagogy and practice, while policy could offer an environment for planning.

Keywords: Efficiency; Effectiveness; Open Distance Learning Institutions; Student Support Services.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Student support services are the link between the educational institution and its students. These services include course materials, the institution's systems and subsystems (Sewart, 1993), and various

mechanisms to help students learn (Chattopahyay, 2014). Resources should also be provided that students can access to engage in their learning (Monyamane & Monyamane-Limkokwing, 2020). They provide students with easy access to study materials and the opportunity to improve their academic journey (Yeon, 2000). Student

support services are the result of ineffective and inefficient interactions that have been observed in the past between students and the various components of services offered by higher education institutions (HE) (Chattopadhyay, 2014). These services begin with the realisation that distance learning is often facilitated and conducted through digital technology because of the overall need for students to learn independently whenever and wherever they feel comfortable (Yeon, 2000).

Pertinent services (Farajollahi & Monika, 2010) that provide students with excellent academic content to ensure their academic success (Secreto & Pamulaklakin, 2015) are established to respond to students' cognitive, psychological, emotional and social needs; and to facilitate the interaction between the institution and its students (Ciobanu, 2013). They are intended to help students cope with and adjust to academic demands in the absence of their lecturers (Nsamba & Makoe, 2017). Therefore, it is imperative to integrate these services in the planning and delivery of distance learning programmes and make them crucial components of the institution's systems (Herman, Puspitasari & Padamo, 2015).

Student support services are established to enhance students' academic skills, cultivate the confidence necessary for academic achievement, facilitate student engagement and integration into the academic system, and prepare students for active lives in society (Kelly-Hall, 2010). Without effective and efficient services, students are unlikely to form the necessary academic, emotional, and social bonds, and are more likely to drop out and abandon their studies (Ciobanu, 2013). The contribution and importance of student support services in ODL institutions have been extensively studied. However, these institutions continue to experience high

dropout rates as well as high failure and low success rates (Ciobanu, 2013). These findings lead to questioning the effectiveness and efficiency of the services provided by the institutions. Determining the effectiveness and efficiency of student support services will provide insight into the ODL system, which was the primary motivation for this review. The review has helped to determine if there is a possible direct correlation between these services, success, attrition, and dropout rates. Determining the effectiveness and efficiency of student support services could provide the basis for their sustainability and improvements when and where they are needed. This fact will also regulate and channel the type of support needed to ensure student success, promote the achievement of positive academic outcomes, and improve the quality of services in ODL institutions (Ciobanu, 2013).

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Effective student support services are an important means of enabling students to cope with the academic and personal pressures of distance learning (Shikulo & Lekhetho, 2020). Therefore, without effective and efficient student support services, students' academic, emotional, and social ties to the institution will be compromised. An understanding of student support services, their contribution and importance could help policy makers of ODL institutions to develop policies and strategies for student academic support and provide the necessary guidance to improve service quality. Theoretically, these services are expected to help reduce the institution's dropout rate and increase the student success rate.

Although distance education is widely used in many countries, there is a problem in this system, which is the high dropout rate (Shikulo & Lekhetho, 2020). The challenge is exacerbated by high repetition and attrition

rates among distance learners. This situation can cause or increase the likelihood of students failing and abandoning their studies, resulting in lower completion and success rates in these institutions (Ciobanu, 2013). Open Distance Learning institutions classified as HE institutions in Africa need to make some provisions to deal with the high failure and dropout rates in addition to the text-based handouts that are generally expected to serve as "student support" (Simpson, 2015). These institutions should provide effective student support services to address challenges, meet student needs, promote persistence, and optimise academic success. Ensuring students' access to education is not enough to promote equal educational opportunities if robust support is not provided for all students (Shikulo & Lekhetho, 2020).

Student support services should be an integral part of the overall educational system to meet the diverse needs and expectations of students (Moewes, 2005). According to Simpson (2015) and Moewes (2005), ODL institutions have established these services to support students in their academic journey. In addition, Kelly-Hall (2010) shows that student support services are designed to be integrated into the system because they contribute to the quality of the learning experience and academic success (Ciobanu, 2013). Providing effective student support services is paramount to maintaining the competitive advantage of HE institutions. To remain successful and relevant to the market, ODL institutions are required to provide quality education by providing effective student support services. If there are no effective student support services, students (their customers) are likely to either drop out, fail or transfer to other institutions (Shikulo & Lekhetho, 2020). In order to remain relevant, competitive, and keep up with economic trends, ODL institutions are required to provide quality services to their

students while adopting a more student-centred approach. This is critical because customer satisfaction attracts customers, in this case students (Shikulo & Lekhetho, 2020). Student satisfaction with these services could help institutions attract new students and retain current ones, improve their overall performance, and increase student advancement rates and employability. Ultimately, ODL institutions are responsible for providing effective and efficient student support services to meet the individual needs and aspirations of their students, enhance their learning experience and academic success, and empower them to become self-directed and lifelong learners (Shikulo & Lekhetho, 2020). Despite the sector's efforts to provide opportunities for success for all students, credible statistics on student success rates in this regard consistently paint a shocking and unpleasant picture of the sector HE across the world (Khumalo, 2018). There is also a wealth of empirical evidence on the factors that contribute to low student success rates. The challenges and complexities faced by HE institutions, particularly in relation to completion rates, are significant and go hand in hand with alarmingly low success rates (Khumalo, 2018).

Although access to HE has improved significantly in recent years, student success (academic achievement), as measured by retention and degree attainment, has not (Khumalo, 2018). Retention and success rates remain extremely low despite significant government financial incentives, numerous policy initiatives, and well-intentioned institutional efforts. Leaders in ODL institutions have a great responsibility and are under pressure to ensure that constructively oriented instructional opportunities are created and technologically mediated to increase student academic achievement (Khumalo, 2018). To ensure that students studying in an ODL

system have a lasting learning experience, ODL institutions in Africa have a duty to strengthen student support as an important component of the entire system. Their success is reflected in how satisfied students are with the support services offered and whether they benefit from them. It is therefore critical for these institutions to maintain a high level of quality in their available support services and ensure that they are easily accessible (Herman, et al. 2015).

Despite the documented literature on the importance and contribution of student support services, HE institutions continue to struggle with low success rates, high attrition, and dropouts. While it is known that these services are available, it is unclear whether they are effective and efficient. In addition, the relationship between these services and success and success rates has yet to be confirmed. Low success rates and higher attrition rates (the percentage of students who drop out) have led to questioning the effectiveness and efficiency of student support services, which was the reason for this review. The review was therefore conducted to confirm or reject available evidence on the effectiveness and efficiency of student support services in ODL institutions. In addition, the review sought to establish a direct relationship between these services and student academic achievement. The researchers focused on the following questions, "Are student support services at ODL institutions in Africa effective and efficient?" and "Is there a direct relationship between student support services and student academic achievement at these institutions?"

MATERIALS AND METHODS

To answer these questions, peer-reviewed articles on the effectiveness and efficiency of student support services in HE ODL institutions in Africa were searched in

various databases: Google, Google Scholar, Scopus, EBSCOhost, ProQuest, Science Direct, Sabinet, and the National Research Foundation. The review examined and analysed available studies across Africa covering the period from January 1990 to December 2020. This period was chosen as publications prior to 1989 were not available. This approach was preferred because of its reliability. When done properly, it provides researchers with a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under study (Whittmore & Knafl, 2005). Unpublished studies were not considered in the review. The review is also not exhaustive of all sources on the topic. Rather, it is merely an attempt to provide a comprehensive overview of the effectiveness and efficiency of student support services in African HE ODL institutions. During the review, the collected literature was reviewed, secondary data was analysed, and a bibliography was compiled to ensure that all documents were organised, easily accessible, and interpretable. However, the review was constrained by outdated data (mostly sourced from the internet and easily outdated), lack of or few studies on HE ODL institutions in Africa, data of limited use and inaccurate data.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Picciano (2017) defines a theory as a set of statements, principles, and ideas about a particular subject. The functions of a theory are to explain, describe and predict phenomena. It also explores and develops strategies to achieve desired outcomes. Simply put, a theory exists to explain and enhance the understanding of how we (humans) learn. This review was supported by the Integrated Multimodal Model developed by Picciano (2017) for Online Education. In developing this model, Picciano (2017) examined learning theories and learning theories for online education

such as behaviourism, cognitivism, social constructivism, community of inquiry (CoI), connectivism and online collaborative learning (OCL) as there is no single theory specific to online education. In the next sections, the reasons for considering the above theories (in the previous paragraph) in the development of Integrated Multimodal Model for Online Education are briefly explained.

Behaviourism

This theory focuses on the way people behave. It was developed based on the positivist worldview, which emphasises the relationship between cause and effect. Thus, it means that an action causes a reaction. In education, this theory is concerned with the way students behave in relation to their learning. The main focus of this theory is to examine the way students react to certain situations or circumstances. The main focus is on the observed object, what the individual is thinking or processing in their mind. This theory assumes that what cannot be observed cannot be studied. This theory was developed based on the experiments of Ivan Pavlov where dogs learned by association of food, feeding time and the bell. Whenever the bell rang, the dog salivated.

Picciano (2017) further postulates that this theory led to the development of taxonomies of learning because it emphasised the study and assessment of multiple steps in the learning process. Benjamin Bloom was one of the first psychologists to establish a taxonomy of learning that related to the development of intellectual skills and emphasised the importance of problem solving as a higher order skill. According to Bloom, the taxonomy of learning is based on six key elements:

- **Creating:** The assembling of elements into a coherent or functional

whole and the reshaping of elements into a new pattern or structure through generating, planning, or producing.

- **Evaluate:** Making judgments based on criteria and standards by examining and critiquing.

- **Analyse:** Breaking down material into its parts and determining how the parts relate to each other and to an overall structure or purpose by differentiating, ordering, and classifying.

- **Apply:** Performing or applying a procedure by executing or implementing it.

- **Understand:** Produce meaning from oral, written, and graphic communications by interpreting, illustrating, classifying, summarising, inferring, comparing, and explaining.

- **Recall:** retrieve, recognise and recall relevant knowledge from long-term memory.

Cognitivism

This theory is a reaction to the behaviourists' rigid emphasis on predictive stimuli and responses. The theory assumes that the individual's psyche plays an important role in learning and focuses on the interactions between the environmental stimulus and the way students respond to it. For this theory, motivation and imagination seem to be crucial elements of learning that link environmental stimuli and student responses (Picciano, 2017). This theory is interdisciplinary as it has its roots in psychology, biology, neuroscience, computer science, and philosophy. These explain the functioning of the brain as well as the levels of cognitive development that form the basis for learning and knowledge acquisition.

Therefore, cognitivism is one of the predominant learning theories, which makes it more interesting and advanced for online software applications and leads to the integration of artificial intelligence and learning analytics in the classroom (Picciano, 2017).

Social constructivism

Social constructivism is the result of the work of many education theorists, such as Lev Vygotsky, John Dewey, and Jean Piaget. This theory was developed to describe and explain teaching and learning, given the complex interactive social phenomena between teachers and students. The theory is based on the premise that learning entails problem-solving and the social construction of solutions to problems is the basis of the learning process. The process implies the coexistence of the teacher, the learner, and a problem to be solved; the teacher provides a social environment in which the learner can assemble or construct the knowledge required to solve the problem with others. In this theory, learning is also seen as a series of practical social experiences where learners learn by doing, collaborating, and reflecting with others (Picciano, 2017).

Community of inquiry (CoI)

This theory developed by Garrison, Anderson, and Archer is based on cognitive, social, and teaching presence. This learning model supports the design of online and blended courses as active learning environments or communities. It depends on the interaction between teachers and learners in sharing ideas, information and opinions. This learning model is one of the most popular theories for online and blended courses that are designed to be highly interactive between students and instructors using discussion forums, blogs, wikis, and videoconferencing (Picciano, 2017).

Connectivism

This learning model was developed by George Siemens, one of the early pioneers of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). It takes into account the major changes in the way knowledge and information flow, grow and change due to the vast data communication networks. This model states that Internet technology has shifted learning from internal, individualistic activities to group, community, and even mass activities. The model is described as the integration of principles explored by chaos, network, complexity, and self-organisation theories, where learning is viewed as a process that occurs in nebulous environments with changing core elements and is not completely under the control of the individual. Siemens further states that learning as actionable knowledge can be external to ourselves and focuses on the interconnection of specialised sets of information and the connexions that allow us to learn more and are more important than our current level of knowledge (Picciano, 2017).

“This learning model is suitable for courses with very large numbers of participants, where the learning objective is the development and creation of knowledge rather than its dissemination. Siemens distinguishes eight principles for this learning model (Picciano, 2017)”:

- Learning and knowledge are based on a diversity of opinions.
- Learning is a process of connecting specialized nodes or sources of information.
- Learning can take place in non-human devices.
- The ability to know more is more important than what is currently known.

- Maintaining and sustaining connections is necessary to enable continuous learning.
- The ability to see connections between domains, ideas, and concepts is a core competency.
- Currency (accurate, up-to-date knowledge) is the goal of all connectivist learning activities.
- Decision making is itself a learning process. Deciding what to learn and the meaning of incoming information are seen through the lens of a changing reality. While there is a right answer today, it may be wrong tomorrow because the information climate influencing the decision has changed.
- Intellectual convergence: the phase in which intellectual synthesis and consensus occurs, including agreement to disagree, usually through an assignment, essay, or other collaborative work.

In creating a Integrated Multimodal Model for Online Education, Anderson started from a distance learning perspective, taking into account the views of many other theorists that online learning is part of learning as a whole (Picciano, 2017). He considered a range of theories and models of learning, but placed more emphasis on the work of Bransford, Brown and Cocking, which suggests that effective learning environments are embedded in four overlapping, converging lenses. These four converging lenses form part of the basic framework for Anderson's strategy in building his proposed Integrated Multimodal Model for Online Education. The four lenses are: Community Orientation, Knowledge Orientation, Learner Orientation, and Assessment Orientation (Picciano, 2017).

During the construction process, Anderson also examined the features and opportunities that the Internet offers to each of the four lenses. He found that the Internet has evolved from a text-based environment to one in which all forms of media are supported and readily available. He also found that the hyperlink capacity of the Internet is best for storing and accessing human knowledge (Picciano, 2017).

In order to determine the nature of the interaction between students, teachers, and learning content, Anderson thoroughly examined the meaning of these interactions by analysing and studying the work of several theorists, including Holmberg, Moore, Kearsley, Garrison, and Shale. He then concluded that the critical elements of a theory are the interactions (Picciano, 2017) Anderson, cited in Picciano (2017), also

Online collaborative learning (OCL)

“This theory, developed by Linda Harasim, focuses primarily on Internet institutions that provide learning environments that foster collaboration and build knowledge. The theory focuses on collaborative learning, knowledge construction, and the use of the Internet as a means of transforming formal, non-formal, and informal education for the Knowledge Age. The theory highlights the benefits of shifting teaching and learning to the Internet and large-scale networked education. Harasim distinguishes three stages of knowledge construction through discourse in a group (Picciano, 2017)”:

- Idea generation: the brainstorming phase in which divergent thoughts are collected.
- Idea organisation: the phase in which ideas are compared, analysed, and categorised through discussion and argumentation.

distinguishes between collaborative/collaborative models and models of self-directed instruction, noting that these two models are incompatible, but easily converge due to the extensive interactions between students and teachers. Self-directed instruction models, on the other hand, are designed for independent learning with fewer interactions between teachers and students (Picciano, 2017).

The Multimodal model includes the following elements: Content, social/emotional learning (face-to-face, tutoring, advising), self-directed/independent learning (adaptive software), dialect/questions (discussion board), evaluation (assessment, learning analysis), collaboration/student-generated content/peer review (wiki, mobile technology), and reflection (blog, journal) (Pacciano, 2017). This model is based on the assumption that no part of instruction occurs in the traditional face-to-face mode, thus excluding blended learning models that include some face-to-face components. This model attempts to answer the questions raised by others, particularly Anderson, regarding the elements that may be needed for an integrated or unified theory or model for online education (Pacciano, 2017). The model recognises that educators and instructional planners should seek to use multiple approaches, including face-to-face methods and online technologies, that meet the needs of a wide range of students and take into account differences among students in terms of generations, personality types, and learning styles. The main advantage of this model is that it allows students to experience learning in the way they are most comfortable, while challenging them to experience and learn in other ways. Critical to this model is the concept that academic programmes and course objectives drive pedagogical approaches and the technologies used in learning.

Results and discussion

History of student support services in Open Distance Learning

The African continent comprises 54 countries, each with its own history, politics and culture (Moja, Schreiber & Luescher-Mamashela, 2014). The differences in history, politics and culture have led to a diversity of HE systems in these countries. These differences have led to lessons learned and experiences shared by those who work with students and are interested in providing students with professional and discipline-based supports, development, and services that contribute to broadly defined student success. Ultimately, professional, discipline-based support, student development, and services have led to the establishment of services such as Student Affairs, which later led to the development of current student support services (Moja, et al. 2014).

Originally, the terms student affairs, support, development, and services referred to student life (personal, social, and academic). These services then gave rise to student support services, which aimed to enhance the student experience and thereby contribute to their holistic academic development (Moja, et al. 2014). Student support services were developed and integrated into the ODL system to respond to students' need for support and encouragement to be successful in their learning journey (Tait, 2003). These services were also developed to reduce dropout rates and improve the nature of learning in ODL institutions. The services encompassed various aspects and a wide range of activities from initial academic inquiries to degree completion. Effective information and management systems therefore provide a range of activities that impact on teaching and enhance students' confidence, self-esteem and progress (Tait, 2003).

The notion of student support services has its roots in the context of changing pedagogical practises and the evolution of distance education versus the industrial model. Where students were passive recipients of knowledge, they are now more interactive in seeking and constructing their own knowledge and learning (Sweet, 1993). The introduction of student support services was also associated with the advent of distance education, formerly known as correspondence education. In the European context, this type of education saw the light of day in 1884 with the introduction of the shorthand course of Isaac Pitman, which was offered through postal agencies. This system was characterised by the fact that students received timely feedback on their work despite the distance between them and their instructors (Tait, 2003). This led to the opening of Correspondence University by William Briggs in 1887, a pioneer in supporting students at the University of London (Tait, 2003).

The history of student support services in ODL institutions is marked by the introduction of a variety of teaching and learning programmes for external study by the University of London in 1858 (Tait, 2003). This system provided students with the opportunity to access the teaching and learning resources of the university in order to obtain a degree remotely. The system was considered exciting and exceptional because it proved that distance was not a barrier to studying and acquiring knowledge or gaining desired skills. This system grew in popularity at United Kingdom and was later adopted by Cambridge University which still offers this form of teaching and learning today (Tait, 2003).

The emergence of student support services in these institutions was also linked to the application of Nipper's technology-led approach, Peters' analysis of institutional

history, and Anderson and Dron' s pedagogical framework of analysis. This generation was known for its lack of student support services (Tait, 2014). To remedy this, the Open University of the United Kingdom was founded in 1968. From this point onwards, more attention was paid to student support services and for the first time the role of the tutor was developed and expanded within the university. They formed the core of the student support system and were expected to provide both subject specific support for individual students and more general support in the interests of student progress and success. Some of the roles of tutors in providing student support were (Tait, 2014):

- To provide individual support through teaching and learning;
- To provide assessment;
- Monitor student progress and intervene as needed;
- To provide students with opportunities for social learning, in groups where possible, and a dimension of the local and familiar through a personal contribution to learning; and
- To provide students with the necessary support in administrative and other systemic matters.

These tutorial duties, which led to the hiring of part-time tutors to support university operations, were later termed "constructivist" because tutors played a meaning-making role for individual students in the delivery of learning materials. The redefined roles of tutors also led to the development of a number of study centres that provided support to students within the university in conjunction with regional centres. The role of tutors was underpinned

by students' desire for personal interaction with their lecturers. The lack of such interactions led to the separation of the curriculum delivery system from the student support sector, making services an integral part of the overall university system (Tait, 2014).

According to Kamau (2012), distance education, which was the precursor and first generation of ODL, relied mainly on print technology and adopted newer and electronic technologies such as audio files as they came into the market in different parts of the world. Correspondence education, as it was known in Britain, France and Germany, owed its name to the use of the postal service. In America it was also known as 'home study' and in Australia as 'external studies' to distinguish ODL from institutionalised conventional face-to-face learning. As mentioned above, Isaac Pitman began teaching shorthand by mail around 1844, while the University of London, founded in 1858, was the first higher education institution in Europe to offer degrees and diplomas by distance learning.

South Africa witnessed the development of numerous student support policies, without which educational opportunities would not be promoted equally across the country (Mays, 1999). It is unfair to simply enrol students without providing them with adequate support to ensure their success. In South Africa, many distance learners are likely to fail if they enrol without receiving adequate support. It has also been argued that an open admissions policy without student support services cannot effectively and efficiently address the needs of students (Paul, 1991). This implies that student support services should be seen as an important factor in reforming the education system and as part of a clear commitment to equal opportunity and addressing student needs (Mays, 1999). As a result, student

support services are increasingly seen as integral to the effectiveness and efficiency of the system as a whole, both locally and internationally. The literature indicates that most successful distance education institutions around the world provide some student support services to help students succeed in their studies (Mays, 1999).

Although the need for policies to support students in ODL has been acknowledged and confirmed, there is nevertheless no evidence of the extent to which this support has been or is being implemented.

Current status of student support services in the Open Distance Learning context

According to local and international educational bodies, student support services are one of the pillars of distance education (Babu, 2012). These services consist of anything that can enable and enhance student learning and knowledge acquisition. This type of support involves creating a conducive learning environment for students. It provides students with a sense of community that allows them to not feel isolated and gives them a sense of self-direction and management. It also reduces loss of control and contributes to student satisfaction, increases motivation, and helps students complete a course (Paniagua & Simpson, 2018). These services should meet the needs of most students and address both academic and non-academic needs so that students can do well in their academic journey (Munyaradzi & Addae, 2019). Academic support addresses students' emotional and social needs that are directly related to their learning activities. Non-academic support should focus on helping students address emotional and social needs that are not directly related to their learning activities as these needs impact their academic performance. Support services for

students should be provided from the first day they enrol and end when they graduate or leave the institution. Finally, it has been found that a lack of effective and efficient student support services from the beginning can lead to poor academic performance and success (Munyaradzi & Addae, 2019). These services are important aspects of any ODL system because they (the services) revolve around many educational and related activities. Therefore, not only can these services be responsive to student needs, but they should be available and accessible at all times so that they can be monitored regularly.

Support services use a variety of methods to help students with their learning (Monyamane & Monyamane-LimkoKwing, 2020). Monyamane and Monyamane-LimkoKwing (2020) further state that students in distance education should be connected to a variety of student support services platforms, including interactive tutorials, workshops, teleconferencing or videoconferencing, interactive and specially designed materials, discussion forums, and tutor-graded assignments so that they can learn without constraints. This interaction allows students to receive feedback from their instructors. In this way, they stay connected to the institution and maintain control over their studies. This interaction is in line with Gagne's instructions (attract attention, describe the goal, stimulate prior knowledge, present the material to be learned, provide guidance for learning, elicit performance, provide feedback, evaluate performance, and promote retention and transfer) that enhance the explanation of goals and strategies (Picciano, 2017). According to Mutambo, Aguti and Winterbottom (2018), student support services are based on the social constructivist learning theories underpinned by collaborative learning. This assumes that knowledge is socially constructed through peer tutoring as students work together in this

process (in pairs or small groups) to discuss learned concepts and find solutions to their challenges. These active, social, contextual, engaging, and student-led academic experiences lead to deeper learning and the development of higher-level thinking. Furthermore, Moore's theory of transactional distance emphasises mediation through dialogue between the space between the student and the structure of the institution. Therefore, the growing innovation in information and communication technology (ICT), platforms such as chat rooms, discussion forums, podcasts, video clips, blogs and wikis, can enhance the dialogue between the tutor and the students and between the students themselves.

The purpose of support services is to enable students cope with multiple academic demands and needs, assist them with their academic prospects, and support them throughout their academic journey until they graduate (Netanda, Mamabolo & Themane, 2017). Student support services consist of a range of available services that complement course materials and other appropriate learning resources for all students (Arifin, 2018; Dampson, Owusu-Mensah, Apau & Osei-Owusu, 2019). Mpofu (2016) agrees that student support services are a critical element of ODL programmes. These services also consider the systemic, affective, and cognitive factors to help students succeed in their studies. Services include a course and design dimension, pedagogical support services, and institutional support services (Mpofu, 2016). In addition, technology infrastructure, scale, and geography must be considered when designing and developing effective student support systems. The type of technologies that students can use is critical because of the role that technological innovations play in our lives. Social media networks, in particular, are an effective tool for providing student support services (Arifin, 2018).

Student support services include all interactive educational activities and services designed to support and facilitate student learning. Supportive services also include a range of human and non-human activities and resources necessary to guide and facilitate learning and knowledge acquisition. They consist of learning mechanisms that aim to meet the needs of students in relation to their studies and related aspects (Rangara, 2015). In some cases, these services include tutoring and teaching, counselling, advising and all related services as well as administrative activities in the service of students such as admission and registration (Brindley, Waltiz & Zwacki-Richter, 2008). Ultimately, support services should be responsive to the needs of students.

In this context, it is argued that effective student support services should be provided at the pre-matriculation stage where students' needs are diagnosed. The information gathered would help providers develop services that meet the needs of known distance learners. It is also important for ODL providers to identify potential students' academic background and commitment to self-sufficiency in securing support from key caregivers, availability of time, and proficiency with technology. Such information would enable providers to understand the academic readiness and emotional readiness of distance learners for the programme of study (Kamau, 2012). It is also important to note that these services are critical due to the distance between students and instructors.

With the advent of the Internet and related networks such as the World Wide Web, the ODL system is now dominated by Web-based technologies. The Web provides a global forum in which to teach courses that can be dynamically updated in ways never before possible. Every student has access to an enormous range of resources that are not

limited by time or space. The cross-cultural nature of the Internet also creates problems with legislation and public scrutiny due to fears that local culture may be threatened by the international culture of developed countries. While the use of the Internet and the World Wide Web in ODL is primarily represented within HE, it is also beginning to be used in schools (Ambeth, 2020).

Student support services have changed the dynamics across the distance education spectrum. With the increased emphasis on students, the entire educational system has evolved from a teacher-centred to a student-centred system. This change has also led to a rethinking of the roles and responsibilities of instructors, with all other stakeholders being proactive rather than reactive. This change has therefore also affected the nature of support in the learning environment. However, it is important to consider the increasing complexity and scale of distance learning to facilitate the transfer of learning from one context to another, especially in today's world where technology is becoming increasingly important and influencing both the support and learning behaviours of students. Through the Internet, students today can instantly connect with their peers as well as the support systems and services available to them (Rangara, 2015).

Determining the effectiveness and efficiency of student support services would not be complete without understanding the concepts of effectiveness and efficiency and examining the mechanisms used to improve student use of these services. A mechanism is a way of doing something that is planned, while effectiveness means doing the right task, and efficiency means doing things the right way (Huddleston, 2002). Effective student support services are essential to the success of any ODL institution because they serve as a link between the students and the institution. These services should reach out to

all students irrespective of their geographical location by having a stronger ICT base and user-friendly phone system to solve students' problems (Mirja, 2014).

The issue of the effectiveness and efficiency of student support services in ODL is complex and ambiguous and requires facts rather than mere assumptions. It is important to put things in perspective in order to facilitate a clear, shared understanding of the issue. Based on the explanation of the terms 'mechanism', 'effectiveness' and 'efficiency', it can be argued that effective and efficient student support mechanisms relate to the provision of relevant, appropriate and suitable services in the right way. It is therefore important to identify the way in which these services are delivered and whether particular skills are required to deliver them. It is also important to assess whether there are effective services. Finally, it is important to determine whether there is a direct relationship between the provision of these services and student success, achievement, and attainment.

Support means encouragement, help, assistance, and motivation. It is important to encourage student learning by giving them practical tasks and activities to engage them in the learning process. Students need to be given group and project tasks to encourage participative and active collaborative learning. Hughes and Carter (2012) and Lynch (2002) suggest the following ways to help students succeed in their studies:

- Hold designated online meetings to communicate and share information about the course(s).
- Encourage active learning by providing hands-on activities.
- Provide generous feedback.
- Give students the freedom to choose.
- Promise a prompt response to emails. Even more important than feedback on assignments is a quick response to emails.
- Provide models. Modelling is a powerful teaching tool, especially when students see a new skill in action.
- Be lenient when possible. Consider a specific set of factors that affect student learning.
- Show a sense of responsibility. Indulgence and accountability are not mutually exclusive, although it may sometimes seem that way.
- Apply proven strategies. This can be accomplished by identifying current best practises based on current research-based strategies for inclusive classrooms.
- Be vigilant and proactively reach out to students to identify those who are struggling with learning and intervene as soon as the problem is identified.
- Rethink grading and consider different types of grading depending on the type and intensity of support you provide to students.
- Teach students self-management by equipping them with the necessary skills to make their learning more effective and efficient.
- Modify some of the steps above to make it easier for students to learn and retain a new skill, and reinforce the newly learned skills.

Despite the documented literature on student support services in ODL, there is still a dearth of literature on the skills needed to provide these services. The researchers believe that communication, compassion, interpersonal skills, organisation, problem solving, and time management are critical in providing student support services. In addition, it is important to match the various support systems with the skills that are typically required to provide such support. Nsamba and Makoe (2017) note that student support services in ODL degree programmes are broad and include services such as registration, counselling, learning support (academic), guidance, tutoring, learning advice, feedback on assignments, interaction with teaching and administrative staff, career services, provision of study centres and financial support when needed. They also emphasise that all of these services are necessary for students to be successful in their academic journey.

The literature shows that there are a variety of support services that differ from one institution to another as the field has evolved from 1989 to the present (Kumtepe, Toprak, Ozturk, Buykkose, Kilinc & Menderis, 2019). This variety of student support services offered by different institutions at different times is an indication that there is no universally accepted idea of what constitutes effective student support services.

According to Shikulo and Lekhetho (2020), HE institutions in this sector face increased competition and need to remain successful in the market and provide quality education. The only way these institutions can achieve these outcomes is by providing effective support services. This will retain students at the institution. Providing quality education promotes student satisfaction, loyalty and trust. Therefore, HE institutions should strive to provide quality student

support services to attract new students, retain current students, improve their overall performance, and increase student retention and employability. Effective student support services that meet the diverse and unique needs of students will enhance their learning experience, academic success, and achievement, making them self-directed and lifelong learners.

The effectiveness of these services is determined by a number of factors, and the understanding of what constitutes effectiveness in this regard varies from one institution to another. It is understood that the academic and non-academic needs of students, as well as the nature and operation of the institution, are critical to this effectiveness. Some services are geared towards the institution as a whole, while others are tailored to the requirements and needs of the students. However, UNESCO (Ciobanu, 2013) highlights the common functions of student support services as follows:

In the context of the relationship with the academic institution, these services should:

- Provide support and explain the institution's values, mission, and policies;
- Ensure that leadership makes responsible decisions;
- Evaluate the social experiences of students to improve the effectiveness of programmes;
- Establish policies and programmes that contribute to campus safety;
- Support the values of the institution through the development and enforcement of student standards;

- Support student participation in institutional governance;
 - Provide essential services such as admissions, enrolment, counselling, financial aid, health, and housing consistent with the mission and goals of the institution;
 - Represent institutional resources for working with students, either individually or in groups;
 - Promote interaction between students and the university/university through programmes and activities;
 - Support and help create ethnic and cultural diversity;
 - To assume a leadership role in crisis situations;
 - Take an active intellectual and professional role; and
 - Establish and maintain effective working relationships with the local community.
- students' cultural and aesthetic horizons;
 - Teach students how to resolve personal and group conflicts;
 - Provide special programmes and services for students with learning difficulties;
 - Contribute to the understanding and appreciation of ethnic differences, racial or otherwise;
 - Provide opportunities for leadership development;
 - Establish programmes that promote healthy lifestyles and reduce misconduct;
 - Provide opportunities for recreation and leisure; and
 - Provide counselling and career guidance and help clarify career goals and explore options for further study or employment.

In the context of the relationship with students, these services should:

- Help students transition into university life;
- Help students explore and clarify their values;
- Encourage the development of friendships and a sense of belonging to a campus community;
- Assist in the pursuit of financial aid for further education;
- Provide opportunities to broaden

These functions of student support services also demonstrate that there is no single criterion for effective services. The effectiveness of these services is determined by student success and institutional failure rates. Therefore, the most effective student support services are those that significantly and positively contribute to higher student success rates. However, other factors also play a role in promoting institutional success. The most important aspect is that services, regardless of their components, should facilitate and enhance the interaction between students and their educational institutions. These institutions should help students succeed in their learning journey and in life after university.

It is also important to note that the effectiveness and efficiency of student support services is usually compromised by the lack of a clear policy to guide ODL activities and funding. The lack of a clear policy adversely affects smooth collaboration and communication among students, their instructors, and the institution. Conversely, the lack of funding negatively affects the institution's ability to upgrade and procure facilities and provide efficient services. This is evident in the lack of adequate study materials, ICT infrastructure and inadequate and untrained support staff to assist students in need. These factors also affect the decentralisation of student support services (Mutambo, et al. 2018). Partnerships with other institutions could therefore facilitate effective student support services and promote the sharing of information on best practises as well as identify ways to improve existing services (Munyaradzi & Addae, 2019).

The quality of student support services is evident in Europe, Asia, and America. It is argued that although ODL is satisfactory and has been approved by various national educational and decision-making bodies, institutions providing these forms of education still experience lower success and pass rates than traditional educational institutions despite the use of advanced educational technology. While proactive and innovative measures to ensure the effectiveness and efficiency of administrative and face-to-face academic support are important, it should also be recognised that the technology used in ODL continues to promote more flexible, interactive, seamless, adaptive, and personalised learning environments (Simpson, 2012). Shikulo (2018) points out that the quality and effectiveness of these services is crucial for ODL contexts because students need continuous support during their studies to cope and adapt to the academic environment,

perform well and succeed in their studies. In addition, various factors such as lack of technological tools, understaffed regional centres, lack of services on weekends and holidays, lack of collaboration between students and between students and their lecturers still hinder the effectiveness and efficiency of services (Shikulo, 2018).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the information gathered, one might conclude that the effectiveness and efficiency of student support services in ODL institutions is measured by success, failure, dropout, and attrition rates. However, dropout rates should also be considered in light of economic and educational realities. For example, an institution may enrol 30,000 students in a given year but provide no support to these students until the end of the year when they write their exams. In such a case, the institution would focus its energy and efforts on providing teaching materials but would not offer any support. Students would be expected to study on their own and perform as required by the institution in order to complete the course. In contrast, another institution with roughly the same number of students provides support, focuses less on didactic materials, and spends less. One could almost certainly assume that the success rate at the second institution is much higher than at the first. This would imply that the effectiveness and efficiency of these services cannot be measured in isolation, but must always be measured in terms of the philosophical and pedagogical perspectives that underlie the educational system. In ODL, then, student support services should address a variety of human, non-human, academic, and non-academic activities and resources that support and facilitate teaching and learning. Student support services should be seen as collaboration, communication, and interaction between students and the

institution, all of which are aimed at helping students achieve their academic goals and tackle their careers and lives with confidence. It is also important to recognise that each ODL institution has its own requirements and needs. The same goes for the effectiveness and efficiency of the services offered. What is considered effective and efficient at one facility is not necessarily effective and efficient at another. Furthermore, none of the many studies examined and analysed have shown a direct relationship between student support services and success, achievement, failure, dropout, and dropout rates at target institutions. Therefore, the researchers concluded that since there is no evidence of a direct relationship, there may be an indirect relationship between student support services and student academic outcomes. Given the complexity, ambiguity, and controversy surrounding the issue of the effectiveness and efficiency of student support services and the relationship between these services and student success, achievement, and attainment at ODL institutions, the researchers recommend that empirical studies be conducted to provide more evidence-based confirmation rather than further speculation without empirical evidence. It is also important that institutions make efforts to mobilise resources and sensitise all stakeholders on the provision of student support services. Finally, effective and efficient student support services need to be planned and implemented at the pedagogy and practise levels, while policy needs to provide an environment for planning.

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