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## *Editorial board*

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# Student Support Services in Open and Distance Learning: The Case of the Open University of Tanzania

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***Abstract:*** *In the last two decades Open and Distance Learning (ODL) has witnessed a tremendous growth in Tanzania and worldwide. The Open University of Tanzania shows an increase in enrolment rates from 776 at its commencement in 1994 to over 40,000 in 2011. The same scenario is evident in India and China. The growth has been possible due to an increase in demand in higher education and inability of conventional universities to absorb big numbers of students that qualify for higher education. To maintain quality of education in ODL institutions student support services are crucial. By using questionnaires and interviews the study analyses the student support services available at The Open University of Tanzania: their prospects and challenges. The identified student support services at OUT include print materials, face to face sessions, Portfolios, ICT related support including Student Academic Record Information System (SARIS), on-line examination registration, CD-ROM, cassette records and e-Learning.*

## Background to the Study

The Open University of Tanzania (OUT) was established by an Act of Parliament No. 17 of 1992 and the offering of the programmes commenced in January, 1994. According to Kuhanga Report (1990) and the University's Act, the objectives of the University are:

- To offer opportunities for higher education and training to a large segment of Tanzania's population especially following the expansion of schools at lower levels and limited entry to tertiary level institutions.

- To provide access to higher education to disadvantaged groups and individuals especially those living in rural areas by bringing higher education programs to the door steps through distance teaching.

- To sustain the connotation of the philosophy that education has no end alone that it is a fundamental right for every citizen.

The 1992 Act was repealed and replaced by the Open University Charter which is in line with the Universities Act No. 7 of 2005. The Charter became operational with effect from January 2007. The University is an Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institution but it also runs some conventional programmes. It offers various certificates, diplomas, degrees and postgraduate programmes.

Open and Distance Learning is a system of learning where the learners learn at a distance what, where, how and when the student wants. Open and distance learning is characterized by the separation of the learner from the tutor. The system can be manifested by utilizing a wide range of media such as print materials, television, radios audio and visual cassettes and ICTs which bridges the separation gap. ODL system is

now widely used in many countries. Dikshit, Gang, and Panda (2002) pointed out that the system is posed for further expansion in the coming years as its virtually unlimited potential to impart education to anybody; anywhere and anytime, is being recognized by educationists, policy makers and planners. Tanzania through the Open University of Tanzania is one of these countries which have embarked in ODL to serve majority of her people who are in great need of higher education. Students who are enrolled for the courses offered by the Open University of Tanzania (OUT) have a multiplicity of backgrounds both educationally and experientially. In order to provide them with high quality university education the need for a good and sound infrastructure in the form of learner support services cannot be over-emphasized. *One can ask her/himself: who are distance learners?* **A** learner is physically separated from her/his instructor. This separation considers geographical location, peers, teachers, administrators and sometimes family and friends (Hancock, 1997; Mays, 2000).  Literature indicates that various techniques have been used to bridge the separation. One of the techniques is the provision of student support services (Rumble, 1992; Simpson, 2002).

**Student Support Services**
Student support services are student centred actions or interventions made by an institution to enable the learners to study successfully (Rumble, 1992; Molefi, 1998). The success in the provision and accessibility of student support services in developed countries is based on the availability of human, material and financial resources.  For example, distance education institutions are able to utilize a wide range of media.
Institutions that provide appropriate and adequate student support services have been observed to attract and serve their learners better than those which do not (Dhanarajan, 1997; Simpson, 2002).  This implies that for successful learning programmes, open and distance learning institutions have the obligation of providing and making student support services accessible to their learners. This way the institutions strive to maintain quality assurance.
According to Rumble (1992) the problems of distance learners include:
- Geographical isolation of the learner who is separated from distance learning institution and its administration.
- Economic constraints of the learner and the institution.
- Stress caused by pressure of work and family responsibility.
- Lack of confidence.
Almost every activity undertaken by a teaching institution constitutes student support. In this case student supports according to Sewart (1993) include the following:
- Delivery of study materials.
- Tutorials/practical sessions.
- Counseling and guidance.
- Students' registration for examinations.
- Record keeping.
- Broadcast/recorded media support etc.
At the OUT there are several support services which are offered to students. Among the services provided include: study materials, face-to-face sessions, and students'

registration for exams, record keeping, e-learning, CD-ROM, audio cassettes and portfolios.

This paper examines the position of some of the support services which are offered by the OUT, their present status, challenges and suggests the way forward.

**Research Questions**

The research was lead by two research questions:

- What is the status of student support services available at The Open University of Tanzania?
- What are the challenges that students face in using student available support services?

**Limitations of the Study**

The study was limited by small sample size for both the students and the staff. Also the regional centres involved were few. Hence, the findings may not be used for generalizations rather provide light of what actually happens in terms of students support services at the Open University of Tanzania.

**Methodology**

The research was carried out at the OUT head office and in some few Regional Centres based on the availability of the respondents. Data collection for this research was through a combination of methods. Questionnaire was the major source of data collection. This technique was complemented by other sources of information such as discussions and interviews. Questionnaires were administered to 14 members of staff and 30 students from Faculties of: Education; Arts and Social Sciences; Science Technology and Environmental Studies; Laws; Business Management; Institute of Continuing Education and Institute of Education and Technology. The questionnaire and discussions were designed to assess the support services provided to students at the OUT. Services which were considered were the print materials, face-to-face sessions, portfolios, ICT related support such as: CD-ROM, cassette records and e-learning.

The questionnaires had open and close ended items. The open ended items were meant to allow the respondents to give more details on the challenges faced and suggestions for improving of student support services in the OUT. The questionnaires were returned by 20 out of 30 students and by 14 out of 14 staff members. This gives response rates of 65% and 100%  for students and instructors, respectively.

**Results and Discussions**

**Print materials**

Print materials are among the important support services provided by the OUT to learners. Print materials that fall under support services are information booklets, compendia and textbooks and other reference books. In addition to these there are journals that are internally published and sold to students as well as members of staff. These include *Journal of Issues and Practices in Education, Law, and Huria* journals.

Also few courses have compendia though some of them were reported not to be clearly readable.

Regarding print materials the following components were examined: quantity and relevance of print materials. Students reported that most of the regional centers have libraries however these libraries have mainly study materials and rarely other books.

**Face to Face Sessions**

Face to face sessions are occasional contact sessions organized by ODL institutions. These face to face sessions involve formal meetings of teachers and learners for the purpose of teaching-learning interaction (Rumble, 1992). The sessions are used by students to ask for assistance in areas of difficulty. Dhanarajan (1997), in the same vein, says that face to face sessions provide opportunities for students to interact with their instructors, to seek clarifications in their study materials and give immediate feedback on difficult areas of their learning.

Face to face sessions are meant to fill the gaps of time, physical and geographical separation that usually exists between distant learners and their instructors. It is argued that isolation is one of the main causes for students to drop-out of studies. Face to face sessions minimize the isolation and boredom. Table 1 below is the result of staff members and students were asked about their expectations of face to face sessions.

Table 1

*Staff and Students Expectations from Face to Face Session*

| Expectations | Instructors | | Students | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | No. | % | No. | % |
| Get tutorials/clarifications of difficult areas | 12 | 85.7 | 16 | 80 |
| Meet fellow students for discussions | 10 | 71.4 | 8 | 40 |
| Get feedback on their progress | 9 | 64.3 | 14 | 70 |
| Be guided on how to study | 11 | 78.6 | 15 | 75 |
| Get extra materials like handouts | 7 | 50.0 | 10 | 50 |

The result of the study on Table 1 shows that both instructors and students expected face to face sessions to give tutorials/clarification on the difficult areas. Both instructors and students rated clarification of difficult areas the highest. However more instructors than students saw face-to-face as providing opportunity for students to engage in discussion among themselves. Students and instructors were asked whether the face to face sessions provided by the OUT meet their expectations. All 14 (100%) staff members said that face to face sessions do not meet students' expectations. While 5 (25%) of students said their expectations from the sessions were met, 15 (75%) of the students said their expectations were not met. The results show that majority of students and instructors were dissatisfied by how the face to face sessions are conducted at OUT. The discussion with the respondents on the cause of this

dissatisfaction revealed that face to face sessions conducted by OUT  spend most of the time on administrative and general issues as opposed to academic/subject specific issues which are highly needed by the students.  Further discussion with instructors showed that this problem may be because it is not possible to have instructors who are subject experts in all the areas needed by the students at each regional centre.

Students were further required to point out challenges which they encounter in face to face sessions and how to overcome them. The following were listed as challenges:

- Time for face to face is not enough.
- Few instructors in various areas of specialization.

**Portfolio Assessment**

Portfolio assessment is a new mode of assessment at OUT. Under this mode each student is required to summarise what s/he has done in each subject which s/he wants to sit for examinations. It aims to assess whether the student is ready for test and examinations. Students have to write objectives and learning outcomes from each course, references used so far, challenges encountered and how they expect to overcome those challenges. During face to face sessions, tutors are supposed to assess students' portfolios to see whether they have achieved what they are supposed to.

When tutors were asked if they were aware of what is to be done in the portfolio exercise, all 14 (100%) tutors said that they were aware and all the tutors had participated in the portfolio assessment. The following were attributed as the challenges which face the portfolios exercise:

- No proper preparations from students because some of them do not read their study materials beforehand.
- Some students do not know how to write/fill the portfolios.
- Some students only copy from their colleagues.
- Administrative/generic issues dominate the sessions.
- Few tutors i.e. 2 or 3 tutors cannot cater for all disciplines on offer.
- The exercise is done on an ad-hoc manner by students as most of them fill the portfolios on late hours.

Students on their sides pointed out challenges which they experience from the portfolios as follows:

- Inadequate lecturers.
- A lot of time is wasted waiting for ones turn to be interviewed.
- Lack of proper assistance from tutors who are not subject experts.

**ICT Related Support**

ICT related support is one important aspect of students support services in ODL institutions. It was the interest of the paper to study how this support service is provided by the OUT. Under this area the following were studied:

- Students' and tutors' computer knowledge.
- Access to computers and the Internet.
- Students and staff awareness of e-learning.

- Students and teachers usage of the computers.

The responses were as follows:

**Students' and Tutors' Computer Knowledge.** Computer knowledge is a basic pre-requisite for any computer related support. Investigation of the knowledge of computer by the Instructor and students revealed the following results:

Table 2
*Computer Knowledge*

| Rate | Instructors | | Students | |
|------|------|------|------|------|
| | N | % | N | % |
| Very good | 2 | 14.3 | 4 | 20 |
| Good | 5 | 35.7 | 4 | 20 |
| Satisfactory | 5 | 35.7 | 6 | 30 |
| Poor | 2 | 14.3 | 6 | 30 |
| Total | 14 | 100 | 20 | 100 |

Table 2 indicated that most of the Instructors' computer knowledge ranged between good and satisfactory (71.4%) while (14.3%) were very good in computer and (14.3%) were poor in using computers. This indicated that at this level there were some instructors who did not have computer knowledge. Computer knowledge is very important to all academic staff as it enables them to perform their duties more effectively and efficiently.

**Access to Computer and Internet.** Access to computer and internet is very important for using ICT related support services. The findings of computer and internet access for students and tutors studied are as follows: All tutors 14 (100%) agreed to have computers in their offices though some indicated that their computers were old. The ratio of computers to tutors sampled was as follows:

Table 3
*Computer: Staff Ratio at OUT*

| Ratio | Tutors | |
|-------|------|------|
| | N | % |
| 1:1 | 1 | 7.1 |
| 1:2 | 5 | 35.7 |
| 1:›2 | 8 | 57.1 |

Majority of the tutors under the study 57.1% share one computer between more than two persons while 35.7% of the tutors share one computer between two persons and only one person (7.1) who was not sharing a computer. This indicates that there is need for more computers for its staff. However, there are other computers that are specifically meant for short computer courses run by the University. There is a need, therefore, for the University to provide more computers for effective performance of its staff and also in order, to foster the use of these modern technologies by all staff.

Furthermore, 9 (64.3) tutors indicated that they have computers at home. This is a good sign on the commitment of the staff to the use of modern technologies. Out of these only 4 (22.2%) have access to internet at home.

Most of the students 14 (70%) indicated that they access computers at the internet cafe. They also access computers at work place (20%) and few of them at home (10%). Some enjoy the benefit of multiple accesses. However, these findings cannot be generalised across all the regions. However, findings shade light on the possibility of the effective use of ICT related support services by the OUT as there are students who have access to computers.

**Computer Uses by the Tutors and Students**
Having computers without using them is as is equivalent to not having one. The study on the uses of computers by the instructors and students revealed that, instructors mainly use computers for setting examinations (100%), searching various materials (71.4%), communication with students through e-mail (57.1%), communication with leaders and colleagues through e-mail (85.7%) and typing purposes (100%). None of the staff responded to the questionnaires which were about the use of computers for teaching through e-learning. The researchers admit that they couldn't access those instructors who make use of e-learning for teaching such as in the     BSc (ICT) Programme.

On the part of students, all of them reported using computers and the Internet for examination registration and Student Academic Record Management System (SARIS) for accessing their results. These two activities seem to encourage if not force students to use computers. The use of examination registration and SARIS are important ICT related services the OUT is proud of despite some challenges that face them. Other uses of ICT related support services at OUT include e-learning, m-learning, audio cassettes and CD-ROM. E-learning courses are offered to BSc. Computer Science (ICT) and Master of Law (LLM-ICT) students. M-learning is integrated in Diploma in Poultry course while audio cassettes are mainly used by students with visual impairment.

Students pointed out the following challenges which they encounter when accessing SARIS and on-line examination registration:
- High costs of internet.
- Unaffordability of computers and modems.
- Low internet, sometimes it is blocked and it would not open up and poor accessibility
- Poor network.

- Difficulty in access to computers.

**Conclusion and Recommendation**

The study examined student support services available at the OUT. Students and instructors showed some dissatisfaction on how face- to- face sessions are conducted, especially that there is no subject's oriented support provided to students. Also, it has been learnt that portfolio exercise is not well practiced so far. This is partly due to the fact that it is a new practice and hence, not well understood by the students. With respect to SARIS and examination registration; these are very important support services available at OUT. However, they face many challenges such as high costs incurred on access to computer and the internet, slow internet during browsing and unreliability of the internet and electricity. ICT related support services such as e-learning and m-learning are used in very few courses and much is still desired for their effective integration in other courses.

In the light of the findings the following are suggested:

- The University should develop strategies to ensure that the exercise of filling the portfolios is a continuous process. More time is needed to orient students on what is required from them. The portfolio to be awarded at least 10% of the course work so as to make the students value the exercise.
- There should be tutorials based on difficult areas derived from the students' portfolio exercise.
- Increase days and contact hours.
- Deploy subject experts to handle their courses during face to face sessions.
- Conduct face to face sessions in different zones at different times so that at one time different tutors with different areas of specializations could be in the same zone to assist the students in their subject specific areas at least two weeks per year.
- Students should be assisted to acquire computer basic knowledge in order to harness the potentialities of ICT related support. Also, they should be assisted in terms of access to computers and the internet.

Given the small sample size used, another research could be done that include representation of students and staff from other regional centres.

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