

**THE QUALITY OF LEARNER SUPPORT SERVICES IN ODL: THE CASE
OF THE OPEN UNIVERSITY OF TANZANIA– ZANZIBAR CENTRE**

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**A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF EDUCATION IN
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CERTIFICATION

The undersigned certifies that he has read and hereby recommends for acceptance by the Open University of Tanzania a Dissertation entitled: *“The Quality of Learner Support Services in ODL: The Case of the Open University of Tanzania– Zanzibar Centre”* in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Education in Open and Distance Learning of the Open University of Tanzania.

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DECLARATION

I, **Mzee Shirazi Hassan**, do hereby declare that the work presented in this dissertation is original. It has never been presented to any other University or Institution. Where other people's works have been used, references have been provided. It is in this regard that I declare this work as originally mine. It is hereby presented in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the Degree of Master of Education in Open and Distance Learning.

.....

Signature

.....

Date

DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my beloved family; my father Mr. Shirazi Hassan Makungu and my mother Mrs. Mwanajuma Ali Msellem, whose efforts, directives and encouragement resulted to high achievements of my education.

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I thank the Almighty God for giving me strengths and will, and keeping me healthy throughout my course. I would also like to express my gratitude to all people who in one way or another supported and enabled me to undertake and accomplish this dissertation successfully. I cannot mention all of them here; however, I would like to mention a few of them on behalf of others. First, I would like to extend my acknowledgement to my supervisor Dr. Mohamed Msoroka who devoted tirelessly his knowledge, time and efforts to guide and comment on my work. I also thank Dr. Emmanuel Kilatu of the University of Dodoma who read my work and gave constructive comments, which helped to shape it.

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the quality of learner support services in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) at the Open University of Tanzania-Zanzibar Centre. Methodologically, the qualitative approach was central to this study. The study involved 21 participants: one Director of the Regional Centre (DRC), 14 learners and six (6) OUT staff including two (2) lecturers, one (1) Human Resource officer, one (1) Records officer, one (1) Admissions Officer and one (1) Secretary. Data were collected through interviews, documentary review, and observation methods. The findings revealed several shortcomings, which influenced negatively the quality of learner support services at the centre. The quality of face-to-face, internet service, communication, and the Moodle system were obviously low according to participants. Consequently, this study concludes that the quality of learner support services within the Zanzibar Centre is inadequate. In line with these research findings and the drawn conclusions, this study recommends improvement of the situation within the centre. The centre should improve the library services, its face-to-face sessions, Communication system and its Computer laboratory.

Keywords: Learner support service, open and distance learning, distance learning, adult education, learning centres

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|-----|--|
| DL | Distance Learning |
| DRC | Director of Regional Centre |
| HQ | Headquarters |
| HR | Human Resource |
| IAE | Institute of Adult Education |
| ICT | Information and Communication Technology |
| LSS | Learner Support Services |
| ODL | Open and Distance Learning |
| OUT | Open University of Tanzania |

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

1.1 Background to the Study

Learner support services (LSS) are essential for academic success in higher education. They are critical to Open and Distance Learning (Krishnan, 2012). Learner support services are prepared by institutions of Distance Education (DE) to serve as interface between the learner and institutions (Nsamba, 2017).

Learner support services in Distance Learning (DL) include registration, advisory services, counselling, tutoring, guidance and feedback on assignments, interaction among learners and instructors, study centre's provisions and financial assistance (Robinson, 1995). These services are crucial for academic achievements because learners are supported by their lecturers who are physically separated from them. Commonly, the interaction is facilitated by technologies including printed materials and electronic media. With this kind of learning, ineffective provision of adequate and quality support services may lead to dropout among ODL learners (Belawati, 2007; Fraser, 2005; Simptons, 2003).

There is a general inclination to view the quality of learner support services in higher academic institutions from the perspectives of organizations (Simptons, 2003). It is not common to explore it from learners' perspective. It is argued that observing quality from the service providers may limit quality determination to management while ignoring learners (service users). That may result into little recognition of the quality of learner support services from the learner's perspective (Nsamba, 2016). In

order to understand the quality of learner support services provided by the Open University of Tanzania within the Zanzibar Regional Centre, this study paid more attention to learners' views, but it did not ignore the views of OUT staff. Since learners are the service users, they were in a good position to determine, evaluate and define the quality of learner support services. OUT staff were also involved in this study to complement the findings from the learners.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

The problem of poor quality learner support services in Distance Learning (DL) is critical in many countries (Nsamba & Makoe, 2017). The main challenge is said to be the nature of communication network between the learning institutions and learners at regional centres. Consequently, learners miss key deadlines, tutorials, and examinations. This usually leads to improper use of the programme duration and increases dropout rate among learners. Arguably, this is wastage of the scarce resources of both the learners and institutions (Mlay, 2013).

In the Tanzanian context, several scholars have studied issues on Open and Distance Learning. Such scholars include Mlay (2013), Messo (2014), and IAE (2006). For instance, Messo (2014) employed a quantitative approach to investigate learners' perception on the quality of Open and Distance Learning programmes in Tanzania and he found that the selected learners had positive perception of the registration procedures, quality of course materials, access to instructors, clarity of syllabi and course objectives. However, some of them lodged serious complaints about the sufficiency and timely delivery of the study materials supplied to them. The participants also expressed dissatisfaction over the quality of instructional methods,

the quality of interaction with instructors, number of staff in the centres and access to internet services.

Mlay (2013) studied the provision of learner support services to undergraduate learners of OUT in Temeke Regional Centre. In his study, Mlay observed that study materials were of low quality in terms of set up and printing quality, which affected the order, arrangement and continuity of the content. Mlay's research is closely related to the current study. However, Mlay only focused on the Temeke Regional Centre. There were no studies known to the researcher delved on Zanzibar Regional Centre's quality of learner support services. Therefore, this study intended to bridge that gap. The study investigated the quality of learner support services – counselling, advisory services, registration, feedback on assignments, tutoring, and guidance, interaction among learners and instructors, and financial assistance. The quality and relevance of these support services were investigated.

1.3 Research Objective

The objective of this study was to investigate the quality of the available learner support services in ODL and their relevance to OUT learners – Zanzibar Regional Centre.

1.4 Research Questions

1.4.1 General Research Question

What is the quality of the available learner support services for OUT learners at the Zanzibar Regional Centre?

1.4.2 Specific Research Questions

The following are the subsidiary research questions, which helped in gathering relevant information to address the above major research question.

- (i) What are the available learner support services for OUT students at Zanzibar Regional Centre?
- (ii) What are the learners' views on the quality of the available learner support services at Zanzibar Regional Centre?
- (iii) How relevant are the available learner support services to learners?

1.5 Rationale of the Study

The findings of this study in one way or another may help stakeholders to take appropriate decisions to upgrade the quality of learner support services, and hence improve the quality of education provided in a distance mode. Open and Distance Learning practitioners, especially the OUT and IAE, may find the findings of this study useful in promoting the quality of teaching and learning processes through ODL in Zanzibar, and the whole of Tanzania. Also, this study contributes to the existing literature on management of Open and Distance Learning in Tanzania and beyond, especially on learner support services.

1.6 Organization of the Dissertation

This dissertation is divided in five chapters. Chapter one offers background information regarding the study, which is about the quality of learner support services in distance learning. The chapter also provides the statement of the problem, research objective, research questions and rationale of the study. Chapter two discusses relevant literature review to the study. Issues covered in this chapter include

conceptual definitions, theoretical analysis, empirical analysis of relevant studies and the conceptual framework of the study. The methodological approaches used in this study are discussed in chapter three. Issues on research paradigm, research approach, research design, selection of the case and participants, and the data collection methods have been discussed. Chapter four presents the analysis and discussion the findings of the study. Issues on the available learner support services and adequacy of the provided learner support services in Zanzibar ODL centre are extensively discussed. Chapter five gives the summary, conclusions of the findings, recommendations and the limitations of the study.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This chapter presents a review of literature related to this study. The chapter covers the theoretical analysis, and the analysis of relevant empirical studies. Furthermore, issues concerning learner support services are discussed in this chapter.

2.2 Theoretical Analysis

This study was guided by the Hrastinski's (2009) theory of online learning. This theory considers online learning as online participation. This theory suggests enhancement of online learning by enhancing online learner participation. Enhancement of online learner participation is insisted due to its benefits including positive effects on learning, and improved learner satisfaction and retention (Rovai, 2002). Participation may involve peers' collaboration with all kinds of relations.

Learning as participation happens in interaction with others. It is noteworthy that learning is an aspect of all human activities. Learning and participation are not separate activities that can be turned on and off (Wenger, 1998). It is acknowledged that learners learn by supporting each other both inside and outside the classroom (Brown & Duguid, 1996).

The Open University of Tanzania (OUT) uses online system to provide distance learning to learners of different levels. Learner support services are effective joint towards one's learning goals. Both instructors and learners to a large extent

communicate through online technology. For example, OUT learners use Moodle system to learn. Considering that effective online participation requires effective support services (Stephan, 2009), and that this study focuses on OUT which offers education through online systems, then the theory of online learning becomes relevant to this study. The argument is that having effective learner support services may enhance online learner participation, and hence it may result into effective learning among learners.

2.3 Analysis of Relevant Empirical Studies

2.3.1 Learner Support Services – Evidence from Outside Africa

Dzakiria (2005) investigated the role of learner support services in distance learning at the University of Utara–Malaysia. It was revealed that the infrequent face-to-face meetings between distance teachers and learners, and learners' dependency on their teachers caused frustrations, and sometimes impeded the learning process. In the same line, Venter (2003) studied the role of culture and isolation in Asia and Europe and found that learners wanted academic guidance, feedback and reassurance that they were on the right track. Perraton (2000) observed that the high drop-out rates and low pass rates in ODL institutions is caused mainly by inadequate learner support facilities. Therefore, adequate support service should meet or exceed students' needs and expectations. This suggests that distance education institutions should provide the required and desired learner support services.

In Australia, Sharma (2002) found that most of the provided services to ODL learners focused on administrative support, including creation of study centres, distribution of study materials and academic support. Therefore, it is important to ensure the quality

of learner support services for the efficiency and effectiveness of distance learning system much as this study, which was conducted in OUT Zanzibar centre, focused on. In India, Kishore (1998) argues that success or failure of the ODL institutions is determined by the strengths and weaknesses of the learner support services. He studied the learner support and quality indicators in DL and observed that the development of learner support services in distance learning must be relevant to the context where the system works.

2.3.2 Learner Support Services – The African context

The study conducted by Godson (2007) on learner support services in Botswana College of Open and Distance Learning revealed that remote learners experienced delayed assignment feedback due to poor communication service provided to the learners. Communication service was cited as the important learner support services in distance learning system. Therefore, the observed findings of this study will be helpful in improving such service into quality for the effectiveness of distance learning system inside and outside Tanzania.

Nevertheless, physical resources as one of the important services to effectively promote distance learning education constitutes an integral part of the programme while establishing and sustaining effective support services. These include: photocopying facilities, video cassettes and audio materials, laboratories for experiments and guidance and counselling. It was revealed by Kinyanjui (1998) from Kenya that the delivery of programmes relying on efficiency of the local learning centres and resources with coordination of various support services was required by students at convenient location throughout the country.

Heneveld and Craig (1995) investigated the availability of learning materials in distance learning in Cameroon and Nigeria. They found that textbooks were often not available and even when they were available, they were not used. This resulted into poor academic performance of learners. The study suggested that provision of textbooks and other learning facilities have positive association with learners' achievement in schools. In the same line, White (2004) conducted a study in Ghana on school facilities. He concluded that basic school facilities matter significantly for achievement of good outcomes. It should be noted that achievement of the programme objectives usually results into programme sustainability and, therefore, quality school facilities are of high importance Mahai (2005).

To ensure quality education in distance learning, South African Institute for Distance Education (1995) and Lentell (2003) have emphasised that learner support is critical for the delivery of any quality ODL system. In Open and Distance Learning, "learner support services" are the vital part of academic success (Nsamba, 2017).

2.3.3 Learner Support Services – Empirical Findings from Tanzania

A study by Mahai (2005), which was conducted in Tanzania, focusing on the provision of institutional support services to OUT learners found that learners were dissatisfied with library services at regional level due to inadequacy of books and other study materials. Mahai further noted that tutorial services were inadequately provided as they were provided only twice a year, with few resource persons in all courses. The situation forced learners from different fields and different years of study to be instructed together (in a single room), hence discouraging students from

attending those sessions. The study suggested that, in order to address such a problem, which to large extent was encouraging learner dropout, support services, including tutorials, were to be improved in ODL centres.

Moreover, Mlay (2013), conducted a study at Temeke Regional Centre and observed that the quality of the available learner support services at the regional centres helped to maintain quality of distance education services, which might also affect either positively or negatively the academic achievement of learners. Mlay also observed that critical issues revealed in the case of availability of learner support services for improving and facilitating open and distance learning were shortage of buildings for administrative and learning purposes, lack of computer services for students, great shortage of study resources, lack of library services, lack of decentralization system of face-to-face sessions at the regional centre, poor and untimed supply of study materials and lack of guidance and counselling. In addition, the study observed that the study materials were not adequately available at the centres of Open University of Tanzania; most of the available materials, which were in use, were out-dated. He claimed that OUT was not conducting regular review of its study materials to keep them up-to-date, hence adversely affecting the learning process of the learners. Furthermore, the study noted that financial constraint was the main cause of a delay when it came to production and distribution of learning materials.

Kassam (1973) noted that adult education teachers were facing shortage of teaching materials, and there was insufficient fund to run the programme as well as poor co-ordination of the programme. Such a situation could not allow programme sustainability. One can argue that Kassam's findings suggest the necessity of having

enough funds available to regional centres of OUT so as to facilitate reliable provision of learner support services.

Mahai (2014) focused on examining the students' perception and experiences of teaching and learning at the Open University of Tanzania. The study focused on the rural part of Tanzania and aimed at exploring and describing rural undergraduate students' experiences of teaching and learning process. It also intended to examine the nature and provision of support services at the OUT. Mahai's study noted that ineffective provision of learner support services may affect learners' academic achievement.

Mhehe (2002) studied women's enrolment and participation at the OUT. Her study revealed that the challenges in studying at a distance included shortage of funds and other operational concerns like OUT's course delivery, delays in giving assignments and feedback, limited access to resources as well as physical and social isolation from support services. Another study by Bhalalusesa (1998) revealed that successful learning at a distance depends on the nature and quality of support obtained from the immediate social environment including the education institution. What is implied here by the researcher is the friendly learning environment within and outside the institution? Therefore, OUT as educational institution had the core function of enabling and creating conducive and supportive learning environment to its clients.

2.4 Conceptual Framework

This study is about the quality of learner support services at the Open University of Tanzania – Zanzibar Regional Centre. The study was guided by a comprehensive

conceptual framework, which was developed by a researcher after thorough literature review. This conceptual framework assumes that the availability of learning support factors such as online services, face-to-face sessions, sufficient study materials, library services, and ICT services determine quality learner support services. Consequently, the quality learner support services lead to qualified distance learners, who sustain in distance educational programmes. The Figure 2.1 summarises this conception.

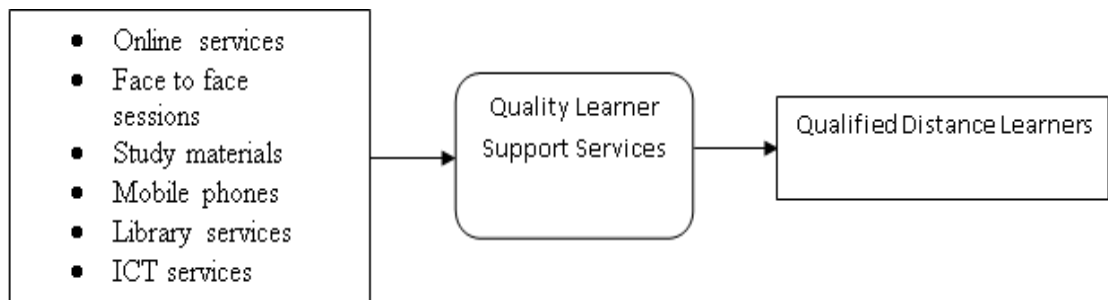


Figure 2.1: Conceptual Framework of the Study

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Paradigm

Guba and Lincoln (1994) define paradigm as a basic set of beliefs or worldview that guides research action or an investigation. Kahn (1962) first used the word paradigm to mean a philosophical way of thinking. Paradigm also has been defined as human constructions, which deal with first principles or the ultimate indicating where the researcher is coming from so as to construct meaning embedded in data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Research paradigms are important because they give beliefs, which influence scholars in a particular discipline on what should be studied, how it should be studied, and how the results of the study should be interpreted.

Scholars have proposed several types of paradigms. Such types include positivist/post-positivist, interpretivist/constructivist, transformative, and pragmatic (Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006). The interpretivist research paradigm, which was opted for this study, aimed at understanding phenomena through the meanings people assign to them in their context (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The interpretivist paradigm is very common in qualitative studies (Msoroka, 2018; Wahyuni, 2012).

The interpretivist research paradigm is more relevant to the current study because this research is a qualitative project, which sent a researcher to the field. Hence, the researcher of this study interpreted meanings of phenomena (quality of learner support services) based on the participants' perspectives.

3.2 Research Approach

This research employed qualitative approach to get the required information related to the quality of learner support services in ODL in the OUT Zanzibar Centre. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2000), Qualitative approach is a field, which cuts across disciplines and subject matters in social sciences and involves understanding of human behaviour and the reasons governing their behaviour. The Qualitative approach was chosen for this study because the purpose of the researcher was to get in-depth understanding of the quality of learner support services in ODL, from the insiders' perspectives (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Qualitative approach helped the researcher to enter into the participants' personal world in their natural settings to get first-hand information (Bryman & Bell, 2015).

3.3 Research Design

According to Kothari (2005), research design is the conceptual structure within which the research is conducted. This study employed case study design, which is relevant to qualitative approach (Msoroka, 2018). Yin (2003) states that a case study design should be considered when: (a) the focus of the study is to answer "how" and "why" questions; (b) the researcher cannot manipulate the behaviour of those involved in the study; (c) the researcher wants to cover contextual conditions because s/he believes that they are relevant to the phenomenon under study; or (d) the boundaries are not clear between the phenomenon and context.

Through a case study design, the researcher conducted in-depth investigation about the quality of learner support services in ODL, within its real-life context (Yin & Davis, 2007). Scholars have suggested several types of case study designs. Such types

include explanatory, descriptive, single case study, multiple-case studies, intrinsic, instrumental and collective (Baxter & Susan, 2010; Yin, 2003). This study employed a single case study. A single case study design was chosen because it is one of the types of case studies used to support thorough investigation of the phenomenon (issue) for one subject or individual subjects (Yin 2003). The researcher used the single case study because Zanzibar has only one Regional Centre and also he found the resources were limited to expand the study to Tanzania Mainland.

3.4 Data Collection Methods

The researcher used individual interviews to collect data. Because this is a qualitative study, at some point, flexibility helped the researcher to succeed in data collection (Msoroka, 2018). For instance, initially, the plan was to collect data from learners through focus group interviews but the researcher switched to individual interviews when he found that it was impossible to bring learners together for interview.

3.4.1 Individual Interviews

Individual interview is a one to one conversation which helps to get people's understandings, perceptions, and experiences on a given phenomenon. It can contribute to in-depth data collection (Cronin, 2016). Individual interviews are common in qualitative researches (Tod, 2006). In this study, they allowed participants to give their opinions, feelings and aspirations, regarding the quality of learner support services in ODL. Individual interviews were used to collect data from all participants that is, the Director of the Regional Centre (DRC), learners and the other 6 OUT staff who were lecturers, Human Resource officer, Records officer, Admissions officer and

the OUT secretary respectively. A single interview session lasted for about 30 minutes. Since Kiswahili is spoken fluently by Tanzanians, the researcher used it during data collection (in all interviews) so as to allow freedom of expression among participants.

Semi-structured interview (SSI) referred to as a qualitative data collection strategy in which the researcher asks participants a series of open ended questions (Nsamba, 2017); is very useful in qualitative studies because it allows researchers to ask probing questions when they feel that the participant did not provide sufficient information (Nsamba, 2017). This research opted for semi-structured interviews which helped the researcher to obtain rich and deep information. A series of open-ended questions were developed to guide the interview process. The researcher asked follow-up questions whenever he found participants' responses were not satisfactory.

3.5 Selection of the Case

This qualitative study investigated the quality of learner support services. The researcher purposefully selected Zanzibar Regional Centre after thorough analysis (Yin, 2009). Zanzibar Regional Centre was selected because it is the only available OUT centre in Zanzibar Island. Being a person living in the Island with experience on ODL system in Zanzibar, the researcher considered the necessity of investigating the quality of learner support services in the centre. The choice had also a link with (some) fellow students' complaints regarding this issue. The research was of the view that the findings of this study might contribute to the improvement of the situation in the centre.

3.6 The Study Participants

According to Polit and Hungler (1999), participants of the study refer to an aggregate or totality of all the objects, subjects or members that conform to a set of specifications. This research is about learner support services in ODL, hence the population of this study comprised of OUT students and OUT staff of the Zanzibar OUT Regional Centre.

OUT students and staff are the main stakeholders of the ODL in Zanzibar because OUT is the main institution that offers distance education in the Island. Consequently, participants of this study included both academic and non-academic staff – the Regional Director, lecturers, learners, Human Resource Officer, Admissions Officer, Records officer and the secretary. The learners were involved in the study because they are directly affected by the way learner support services are provided. Hence, they provided vital information on the quality of learner support services provided at the centre.

The lecturers were also key participants to this study because they usually interact with learners during the teaching and learning processes. They provided relevant information about the available learner support services at the centre. The Regional Director, who is the manager of the centre, provided general information about the availability and the quality of learner support services in the Zanzibar Regional Centre. The admission officer gave information related to the usage of learner support services in the centre, while the Human Resource officer gave his views on the quality of learner support services in the centre.

3.7 Selection of the Study Participants

The research process requires resources such as time and fiscal. The more participants involved in the study, the more resources were required. Hence, it is noted here that it was not possible for the researcher to collect data from all the cases. With scarce resource available, the researcher selected few participants (sample) who were then involved in the study. It was not necessary to collect data from everyone at the centre to gain relevant findings (Merriam, 1998). It is noteworthy that in qualitative research, the number of the participants is usually small; there is no rule on how to select appropriate number of participants (Patton, 1990). The study objectives and the characteristics of the study population (such as size and diversity) determine which and how many participants are to be selected (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). In this study, 21 participants (DRC, 14 learners, 2 lecturers, 1 Human Resource Officer, 1 Records officer, 1 Admissions Officer and 1 OUT secretary) were involved. The following were the procedures used in selecting participants for this study.

Table 3.1: Research Participants

| Participants | Male | Female | Total | Selection Procedure |
|--------------------------|-------------|---------------|--------------|---------------------------------|
| Director Regional Centre | - | 1 | 1 | Purposive sampling |
| Learners | 10 | 4 | 14 | Convenience & Snowball Sampling |
| Lecturers | 2 | - | 2 | Purposive sampling |
| Human Resource Officer | 1 | - | 1 | |
| Admissions Officer | 1 | - | 1 | Purposive sampling |
| Records Officer | 1 | - | 1 | Purposive sampling |
| Secretary | - | 1 | 1 | Purposive sampling |
| Grand Total | 15 | 6 | 21 | |

3.7.1 Purposive Sampling

Purposive or judgmental sampling is a strategy in which particular persons or cases are selected deliberately in order to provide important information that cannot be

obtained from other cases (Patton, 1990). With purposive sampling, researchers select cases/participants because they believe that they have necessary information. Purposive sampling is largely dominant in qualitative research (Patton, 1990). In this study, purposive sampling was applied to select the Regional Centre Director (DRC), Admission officer, OUT secretary and Human Resource officer because of their positions at the centre. These participants were found to have pertinent information related to learner support services.

3.7.2 Convenience Sampling

De Vos (1998) describes a convenience sample as the use of readily accessible persons in a study. Convenience sampling is a process of selecting participants because they are often readily and easily available. This approach was suitable for selecting undergraduate learners and lecturers. Those who were available and ready to participate in the study were involved. Because of the study context, convenience sampling was more relevant to select these participants because it was found inexpensive and an easy option compared to other sampling techniques (Ackoff, 1953).

3.7.3 Snowball Sampling

According to Stephanie (2014), snowball sampling is a process through which research participants help a researcher to recruit other participants for a study. Normally, the researcher asks a participant if he/she can find or point out other participants with relevant information. This approach is mostly applicable in small populations that are difficult to access due to their closed nature, for instance secret societies and inaccessible professions (Breweton & Millward, 2001).

In this study, snowball technique was used to locate postgraduate learners who were hard to find as they do not normally go to the centre. The process began by asking lecturers and other accessed postgraduate learners who recommended other postgraduate learners (Patton 1990). Then, the researcher looked for the recommended learners and interviewed them about learner support services.

3.8 Data Analysis Procedures

According to Bogdan and Biklen (2007), data analysis is a systematic process, which involves working with, organizing and breaking data into manageable units. The data analysis process focuses on synthesizing and searching for patterns, discovering what is important and what was learned and deciding what to tell others.

In this qualitative study, inductive content analysis was employed to analyse the translated data. With this approach, the researcher immersed himself in the data to allow themes and subthemes to develop organically (Creswell, 2003). In this study, the researcher started by listening carefully to what the interviewee was saying, then recorded data and wrote the transcripts. The transcripts written which were in Kiswahili, were translated into understandable English. Then, the transcriptions were subjected to line-by-line coding by using words of the participants to form categories.

The researcher organised information collected into categories and revised it until the final perspective emerged (Creswell, 2003). Various categories and themes related to the research objectives and questions such as availability of learner support services, the most missed learner support services, adequacy of learner support services provided, availability of study materials, the use of library and ICT services, and the

managerial challenges in the provision of learner support services were identified. In interpreting the findings of this study, some of the participants' views and opinion were presented as quotations in terms of actual statements.

3.9 Ensuring Trustworthiness of the Study

According to Guba and Lincoln (1982), trustworthiness of a study refers to the evaluation of four aspects: credibility, transferability, dependability and conformability. Trustworthiness ensures genuineness of qualitative enquiry. To ensure trustworthiness, this study used triangulation during data collection. Triangulation means using more than one method and samples to collect data on the same topic (Patton, 1990). The researcher used various methods to collect data. The methods included individual interviews and observation. In this study, triangulation was used to facilitate validation of data through cross verification from more than one source (Guba, 1981).

This study also used a reflective journal to improve trustworthiness. In this study, a reflective journal was used to record personal information related to work progress (Guba & Lincoln, 1982). Things like ideas, personal opinions and experience were recorded and helped the researcher to reflect back and think critically (every day evening) about the work in progress.

3.10 Ethical Considerations

In this study, ethical considerations were integral throughout the research process—the following procedures were observed: The researcher sought research clearance from the University Authority prior to the field visit, and then he went to the DRC for

introduction and get permission of collecting data in the centre. All participants were informed about the purpose and scope of this study and they willingly decided to participate in the research. Participants were informed on their right to decline to participate in the study, or withdraw from the study at any moment before data analysis. However, no one opted out. Also, this study kept all participants anonymous –no part of this dissertation mentions a real name of any participant –and raw data are kept confidential. However, participants were informed that the anonymous data would be shared through this dissertation and journal publications.

CHAPTER FOUR

DATA PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Introduction

This chapter analyses and discusses the research findings observed in this study concerning the quality of learner support services in Open and Distance Learning (ODL). The findings are discussed in five sections: availability of learner support services, adequacy of the provided learner support services, availability of study materials, the use of library and ICT services, and the challenges related to learner support services in Zanzibar ODL centre.

4.2 The Selected Case

This study was conducted in Zanzibar Regional Centre (one of the centres of the Open University of Tanzania). Zanzibar Regional Centre is located at Zanzibar urban, West region at Bububu (Bei til raas) area. This centre was introduced in 1995. During this study, the centre had a total of 9 staff. They include the Centre Director (DRC), 2 academic staff, a secretary, a human resource officer, an admissions officer, a record officer and 2 security guards. The centre was serving about 3154 students.

4.3 The Available Learner Support Services

Examining the quality of learner support service in open and distance learning is important for ODL system to improve facilitation of learning. However, in doing this, first, it requires examining the availability of such services at the centre. That is why the first question of this study focused on examining the availability of learner support

services for OUT students in the Zanzibar Regional Centre. Participants provided relevant responses where information related to this question was obtained through interviews. The following sub-sections discuss in detail the available learner support services in the centre.

4.3.1 Internet Services

This study revealed that internet was one of the available learner support services at the centre. With the available internet service, both learners and OUT staff at the centre were getting access to online sources such as Moodle system – a common tool for online learning – and e-library. Internet helps learners to share ideas among themselves and with their lecturers. The available Wi-Fi facility in the centre was allowing learners to access internet on their smart phones and laptop computers. This was helping learners to search online learning materials. During interviews, learners commented the following:

There is no library service at the centre; therefore, I use the available internet services to search for study materials (Interview with Salama; Student at Zanzibar Regional OUT Centre).

No, I have not found all study materials. I use the internet or go to the main government library to search for study materials. Also, sometimes I find study materials from those who have graduated (Interview with Ward, Student at Zanzibar Regional OUT Centre).

The above quotations from participants suggest that the Open University of Tanzania has been equipping its centres with internet services, which support the teaching and learning processes. As it was noted, the learners, as well as their lecturers, were happy to use the internet services for communication and for searching learning materials. Literature suggests that in the modern world, internet has been used to support the provision of quality education (Collins & Halverson, 2009).

In the ODL context, internet is said to be a game changer. It provides learner support services by facilitating easy sharing of knowledge and easy communication among learners themselves and lecturers (Dzakiria, 2005). Hence, one can argue that by ensuring that its centres are equipped with internet services, the Open University of Tanzania is modernising itself to take the advantage of modern technologies. Probably, this move may help the university (OUT) to reach more learners and break the distance barrier (LaPadula, 2003). As noted from the participants' interviews, it seems that internet services at the centre have improved learners' participation in their studies. This suggests that the findings of this study are in line with the "online learning theory" which guided this study (Rovai, 2002). However, this study notes that some participants were not happy with the internet services provided. Their stories are covered in the following sections.

4.3.2 Face to Face Sessions

One of the researcher's interests was to investigate the availability of face-to-face sessions at the centre. The findings of this study show that face-to-face sessions were available in the Zanzibar OUT centre. Through face to face sessions, as it was revealed, learners were getting a chance to meet with their lecturers physically and ask questions directly. Hence, learners were getting opportunity to share experiences and getting new knowledge from their lecturers. The following are examples of the comments from participants, which indicate the existence of such services:

I get face-to-face service once in a year. (Interview with Suleiman, the Student at Zanzibar Regional OUT Centre)

I attend face-to-face sessions once in a year (Interview with Mbwana, Student at Zanzibar Regional OUT Centre).

From this finding, one can assume that the Open University of Tanzania planned for face-to-face tutorials to ensure the provision of quality education to its learners. Literature supports the importance of face-to-face sessions in distance learning mode, to reduce learning obstacles to distance learners (Mlay, 2013). Probably, this is the reason for face-to-face sessions to be conducted by the OUT learning centres. Generally, face-to-face service is suitable to reduce obstacles, which hinder learning performance and hence preventing drop-outs in ODL (Mlay, 2013). By using this kind of learning, learners solve their problems, as they are able to physically meet with their lecturers, which make them gain more experience for success. Despite these good stories on the available face-to-face sessions, this study notes that there were complaints lodged related to poor organisation of these sessions. These complaints are discussed in Section 4.4.

4.3.3 Use of Mobile Phones

Mobile phones are flexible devices, which facilitate easy communication. This study found that mobile phones have been used by learners and OUT staff to communicate in order to facilitate distance learning process. With mobile phones, learners and lecturers communicate through calls, text messages, and social media (Whatsap, Face book, Messenger, Viber and Instagram), as well as emails. The following are some of the comments from the learners regarding the use of mobile phones in learning:

I communicate with my lecturers through mobile and emails, and I am satisfied because we effectively communicate (Interview with Bakari, Student at Zanzibar Regional OUT Centre).

I communicate with my teachers through mobile phone and emails; I am satisfied (Interview with Salama, Student at Zanzibar Regional OUT Centre).

In the same line, lecturers also mentioned the use of mobile phones in communicating with their distance learners:

I communicate with them through mobile phone. They either call me, or I call them. I am satisfied with this communication (Interview with Yunus; Lecturer).

The above findings from the participants indicate that learners and lecturers at Zanzibar OUT Regional Centre have been communicating regarding academic matters through mobile phones and emails. This study assumes that the use of mobile phones brings flexibility of communication between learners-lecturers, learners themselves, and learners and other OUT staff. It has been noted here that consistent communication through mobile phone has greater impact on learners' persistence and achievement in the ODL system (Kuswani, 2008). Hence, the current study commends this use of mobile phones in daily academic communication. However, it was clear in this study that at times, some learners were not happy with responses from their lecturers and other OUT's staff. This issue is covered in the following sections.

4.3.4 Online Learning Facilities

In the context of ODL, online learning facilities relate to different learner support programmes including email services, Saris and Moodle systems. All these (emails, Saris, and Moodle systems) use internet to send and receive information. Other online learning facilities include the search engines like Google, which are used by learners to access study materials regarding the use of modern technology to communicate, the findings of this study suggest that, most of the time, OUT learners were using Saris and Moodle accounts to facilitate their learning. Saris is a software which allows OUT learners to have personal online account which is used to access their learning

results and to register for subjects intended to learn and be examined. Moodle system is used to access uploaded learning materials. The system is also used by both learners and their facilitators to communicate and discuss a particular topic. The use of these two systems is said to improve learning facilitation within OUT. Regarding this, during interview, the DRC had these to say:

The mostly used learner's support services at this centre are online services, face-to-face sessions, and social media. These services are mostly used because they help learners share their ideas and we get to help them easily (Interview with the DRC).

Also the findings revealed that learners were using search engines like Google and Google Scholar to search for learning materials. Regarding this, one learner commented:

There are no enough books, but I ask for help from those who graduated before. I also search for materials through the internet (Interview with Kitwana, Student at Zanzibar Regional OUT Centre).

There are no enough books. To solve this problem, I always consult teachers and the previous learners so as to help me (Interview with Hadia, Student at Zanzibar Regional OUT Centre).

As it has been noted above, online learning facilities are important platforms, which boost the success of distance learning. The comments above show that OUT's learners mostly use online facilities to access learning. One can argue that the use of online facilities reduces the perceived learner-learner and learner-lecturer distance (Makoe & Nsamba, 2017). This is because, the platforms provide learners with a room and time to share their ideas and get assisted by their lecturers where necessary. Considering that OUT employs the said platforms to improve learners' participation in their learning, it can be argued that online learning theory, which guided this study, influenced OUT to introduce this mode of learning (Hrastinski, 2009; Rovai, 2002).

To ensure online learning is effective among OUT learners, probably it is now the right time for OUT to encourage its learners to possess computers, especially laptops, and internet facilities. Also, Zanzibar centre should have an equipped computer room with reliable internet services to facilitate easy online learning.

4.4 The Most used Learner Support Services at the Centre

This study found that Moodle system, social media, emails and mobile phones were the most used learner support services at Zanzibar OUT regional centre. One can argue that these services are the most preferable due to their availability and flexibility. It was noted that distance learners (at the centre) were using the identified services to communicate with their lecturers. It was noted that the Moodle system was one of the very specific services prepared for all OUT learners to ensure effective learning environment. With Moodle system, learners were getting a chance to share their experiences among themselves and their lecturer if necessary (they would ask questions, receive assignments, send back assignments to lecturers, and receive feedback as well as attend discussion forums). Responses from several participants indicated the use of such services.

In an interview with the DRC, she mentioned the mostly used services:

The mostly used learner's support services at this centre are online services, face-to-face sessions, and social media. These services are mostly used because they help learners to share their ideas and we get to help them easily (Interview with DRC).

On this aspect, a similar view was presented by other participants:

I do communicate with my teachers through mobile phone and emails (Interview with Mbwana, Student at Zanzibar Regional OUT Centre).

I communicate with the OUT management through email, Moodle system and mobile phone. I am satisfied because I find them anytime I need them (Interview with Jecha, Student at Zanzibar Regional OUT Centre).

I communicate with my learners through Moodle system and email, and I am satisfied (Interview with Maganga, lecturer).

The findings above as revealed from the quotations support the aforementioned mostly used learner support services. This suggests that the Zanzibar OUT learners have the possibility to access various learner support services provided by the centre. With this finding, it can be argued that the identified learner support services seem to be affordable, flexible, and effective. For instance, the identified ways of communication (Moodle system, emails, and mobile phones) are arguably used to reduce distance between learners and OUT staff/lecturers (Berge, 2013). Scholars suggest that the application of such learner support services is a key to the success of distance learning (Dzakiria, 2005).

It should be noted that the use of emails, social media, and mobile phones in distance learning is not a new finding. Mlay (2013) whose study focused on provision of learner support services to undergraduate students of the Open University of Tanzania in Temeke Regional Centre had a similar finding. His study suggested that such learner support services were commonly used in the OUT Head Quarters (HQ). As noted earlier, the use of emails and Moodle system at Zanzibar Regional Centre is an indication that OUT has been putting online learning theory into practice.

4.5 Adequacy of the Provided Learner Support Services

This study found that a significant number of participants noted that the available learner support services at the centre were not satisfactory. The sub-themes below

explain the feelings of the participants on the adequacy of learner support services in Zanzibar Regional Centre.

4.5.1 Poor Communication

The study findings revealed that participants had mixed feelings regarding the adequacy of the available learner support services. As the findings indicate, a few participants were satisfied with the way communication between learners and lecturers was being conducted.

On this particular regard, some of them said:

I communicate with my OUT management through email, Moodle system and mobile. I am satisfied because I find them anytime I need them (Interview with Jecha, Student at Zanzibar Regional OUT Centre).

I communicate with my learners through Moodle system and email and I am satisfied with such kind of communication (Interview with Maganga, lecturer).

However, stories from other learners indicated some sort of communication barriers.

Learners suggested that sometimes lecturers and the course coordinators were not happy to pick up learners' calls. On this particular aspect, the learners noted:

I do communicate with my lecturers through mobile phone and email. However, sometimes they get angry when we call them during the weekend, although they give us feedback (Interview with Dulla, Student at Zanzibar Regional OUT Centre).

Some OUT course coordinators were accused of not picking the students' calls. For example, it was revealed that some learners who were at the research stage stopped their studies because of poor communication with their supervisors (Interview with Shara, Zanzibar Regional OUT Centre Secretary).

I do communicate with my lecturers through mobile phone and emails, but I am not satisfied because they have not been receiving my calls whenever I call for the past two weeks now (Interview with Mbwana, Student at Zanzibar Regional OUT Centre).

I do not get any communication from my lecturers; they do not pick up my calls. This causes discomfort in studies. For example, up to this time, I do not have a supervisor to help my research (Interview with Salum, the Student at Zanzibar Regional OUT Centre).

Other complaints related to poor communication focused on learners' scores. They complained that sometimes they were not receiving their pass grades on time. Others said that sometimes, their answer sheets got lost; hence making them not getting their scores. Consequently they were forced to repeat examinations.

Regarding this, some participants said:

The support services provided to learners are not enough because learners do not reach their goals. Sometimes, learners' grades are not given on time, and others do not get their marks, which makes them repeat exams just because their marks were not seen (Interview with Shara, Secretary, Zanzibar Regional OUT Centre).

The services I get include the Moodle account, and help from the director. However, the scores are usually given late and sometimes the assignments collected get lost hence we have to redo them (Interview with Machano, the Student at Zanzibar Regional OUT Centre).

As it was mentioned by the participants, there is a possibility that poor communication between learners and lecturers was contributing to learners' discouragement and dropping out among OUT learners. This finding is consistent with Mlay (2013) and Lentell, (2003) who hold that, sometimes, learners miss consistent communication with their lecturers. Consequently, learners get discouraged and dropout from the courses. For this reason, this study suggests that OUT should encourage its staff to maintain effective communication with their students in order to ensure active participation among the learners. Effective communication in teaching and learning process is the key to academic achievements (Lentell, 2003).

4.5.2 Poorly Organised Face to Face Sessions

One of the findings in Section 4.2 of this dissertation suggests that face-to-face sessions are available at Zanzibar Regional Centre. It was argued that the use of face-to-face sessions probably helps to reduce the distance between learners and lecturers. However, it was found that despite the availability of such sessions at the centre, learners complained about having ineffective face-to-face sessions. Regarding the same, some of them commented:

I get face-to-face service once in a year. However, I feel that the sessions are not satisfactory because learners have more academic problems but the sessions do not provide enough teachers to help them address such problems (Interview with Suleiman, Student at Zanzibar Regional OUT Centre).

I attend face-to-face sessions once in a year. I am not satisfied with the service because the instructor we come in contact with cannot teach all knowledge areas in a day (Interview with Mbwana, Student at Zanzibar Regional OUT Centre).

It is argued here that, despite the fact that face-to-face sessions were available the above quotes suggest that such services were not satisfactory. The findings as revealed from learners indicate that the sessions were poorly organised. Consequently, a large number of learners did not effectively get the services. Learners complained about poor communication, as they were not informed on time about the dates of face-to-face sessions.

As a result, some of them missed the sessions. Complaints related to unsatisfactory face-to-face sessions in ODL system are not new. Several studies have indicated such complaints. For instance, Mlay (2013) informed the same from Temeke, Tanzania. Hence, this study suggests that OUT has to improve the way it organises its face to face sessions to ensure that learners benefit from these sessions. It should be noted

that in Open and Distance Learning, face-to-face sessions are vital for academic success (Nsamba, 2017).

4.5.3 Shortage of Lecturers at the Centre

One of the findings of this study reveals that Zanzibar Regional Centre had shortage of lecturers. According to the OUT Admission Officer, at the time of this study, there were only four lecturers at the centre who were serving a total of 470 students of all levels. During interview, the DRC was asked to comment on the adequacy of lecturers at the centre against the available learners. She had these to say:

The number of lecturers is not sufficient to learners. Not all subjects have lecturers to handle them at the centre. Around here, the book is the best teacher but we know that it cannot work alone (Interview with DRC).

It was noted that shortage of lecturers at the centre was hindering effective provision of learner support services at the centre. Reacting to this, the DRC said:

This situation does affect the teaching and learning processes because we have a large number of learners of different courses, who are in need of face-to-face service during their learning process (Interview with DRC).

With such acute shortage of lecturers, learners were hesitant to go to the centre for academic assistance because they were sure that they would not find relevant subject lecturers at the centre. One can argue that the shortage of lecturers at Zanzibar Regional Centre may contribute to learners' poor performance as well as increase the number of dropouts at the centre (Mahai, 2005). Reacting to this, both learners and OUT staff at the centre agreed that the situation was affecting the learning system. Given this context, it is argued here that there is a need to allocate more lecturers at the centre so as to improve distance learning at the centre.

4.5.4 Lack of Library Facilities

OUT regional centres are expected to have library facilities to support the learning processes. However, this study found that the Zanzibar OUT Regional Centre had no a library facilities. During interview, the DRC claimed that the centre was in the process to initiate a mini library. The quotes below are the examples of comments, which indicate lack of library facilities at the centre:

Normally, we don't use hard copy books because they are not enough. We don't have library facilities within our centre. Learners use only the online library. The effect is that, not all learners are able to use online learning services. There is still a group of learners who would need physical library services to access books in hard copies. Since they prefer hard copies to soft copy books, these learners incur costs to download and print the learning materials (Interview with DRC).

Learners also had similar observations. Regarding the same issue, one learner said:

There is no library service at the centre. Therefore; I use the available internet services to search for study materials (Interview with Salama, Student at Zanzibar Regional OUT Centre).

During interview, the DRC mentioned the availability of a small store where they were keeping the few available study materials, which were being distributed, to students at the beginning of academic year. The two figures below show the study materials stored in a bookstore at the Zanzibar OUT Centre.



Figure 4.1: Study Materials Stored in a Room at the Zanzibar Regional OUT Centre



Figure 4.2: Study Materials stored in a Room at the Zanzibar Regional OUT Cent

To cope with unavailability of library facilities at the centre, it was revealed that some learners were using the Zanzibar government main library (which is far from where they were living) as an alternative for them to get the study materials they needed. It should be noted that availability of library services has significant contribution to learning processes, whether in the conventional or distance mode). Having a library facility contributes in the development of independent learning. This is a key to distance learning and adult education (Mlay, 2013).

This study notes that the lack of library facilities in OUT's regional centres is not a new finding in the context of OUT centres. With such a situation at Zanzibar Centre, one would argue that lack of library facilities may affect learners' academic achievement (Mahai, 2014). Probably, this may contribute to a feeling of discomfort (among learners) towards learning. Generally, the current study found that there is a need to improve the library services at the centre in order to achieve quality education among the distance learners (Frankwell, 2014; Mahai, 2014).

4.5.5 Shortage of ICT Facilities

As it has previously been stated, OUT has been providing most of its courses online. This suggests that there is necessity of having ICT facilities in all of its centres to facilitate easy teaching and learning processes. However, the current study found that both learners and staff were not satisfied with the available ICT services. There were complaints lodged that ICT services in the centre were not effective and for that the majority of learners were using their own computers to facilitate learning. It was also reported that the available ICT room was not conducive and most of the computers in it were not working. This problem was also observed by the researcher himself; he found that there were no computers in the ICT room. The only active computers were those used for office duties in the secretary office, admissions office and Human Resource office. Regarding this situation, learners commented:

I use ICT at home and not at the Centre. ICT services at the centre are not satisfactory because there is no special programme to enable learners use the ICT system (Interview with Mbwana, Student at Zanzibar Regional OUT Centre).

I always use ICT at home not at the centre. I am not satisfied because we don't have active computer laboratory; all computers are not working properly (Interview with Suleiman, Student at Zanzibar Regional OUT Centre).

I do not use ICT at the centre. I use it when I am at home since most of the centre's computers are broken down (Interview with Dulla, Student at Zanzibar Regional OUT Centre).

Likewise, lecturers and other staff complained about poor internet connections at the centre. They said:

One of the challenges I face is having ineffective internet services at the centre (Interview with Yunus the lecturer).

The main challenge I face is ineffective internet. For example, as we are speaking, there is no internet. Consequently, we can't register the students. Therefore; we send them back home because we cannot give

them any service (Interview with Shara, Secretary, Zanzibar Regional OUT Centre).

The findings above reveal that learners were using their own computers and mobile phones to search for study materials through online library. The findings also reveal that most of the learners were using private internet services. It should be noted that using personal computer and internet services is not bad; it ensures flexibility of learning among learners, which is key to distance learning (Commonwealth secretariat, 2001).

However, sometimes, it becomes a problem when learners find the computers and internet facilities too expensive to manage. Yunus' and Shara's complaints suggest that, currently, the centre cannot accommodate learners' internet needs as the internet connection is not stable at the centre. Lack of ICT facilities and poor internet connection contradict the argument by the Commonwealth Secretariat (2001) that the world of learning is currently based on ICT services. It is also a contradiction to online learning theory (Hrastinski, 2009), which guided this study. Therefore, the centre should focus on improving the ICT services to ensure effective learning process, considering that the Open University of Tanzania recently started to use Moodle and Saris systems, which are very important tools for learning. Thus, it is important to improve the ICT facilities to enable learners to get services easily at the centre.

4.5.6 Shortage of Study Materials

The findings of this study show that the Zanzibar Regional Centre was not having adequate (hard copy) study materials to suit each study unit for every course. Participants of this study complained about the scarcity of such materials. Some

learners claimed to have been dealing with such deficit by finding study materials from their fellow friends who graduated some years back, and from online sources.

They said:

Study materials are inadequate, that is why most learners find the books online (Interview with Dulla, Student at Zanzibar Regional OUT Centre).

There are no enough books, but I ask the past graduates to help me with learning materials they have. I also search for the materials from the internet (Interview with Kitwana, Student at Zanzibar Regional OUT Centre).

There are no enough books. To solve this problem, I always seek help from teachers and from previous learners at the centre (Interview with Halima, Student at Zanzibar Regional OUT Centre).

Probably, this situation is highly contributed by the lack of library facilities at the centre. It is difficult to find enough hard copies of books in the institution, which does not have a library. As noted previously, this situation may affect learners' achievement, encourage postponement of studies and may cause some of them to drop-out as well (Mlay, 2013; Mahai, 2014) – a relevant argument to the conceptual framework of this study. It was also noted that some courses did not have learning materials uploaded into the Moodle system; hence, learners were not getting study materials relevant to their subjects. It should be noted that learners do pay for these study materials. When they miss study materials, learners find themselves paying doubly to get the same materials.

This finding concurs with Mahai's (2005) findings. On her study, she found that study materials were scarcely and untimed provided to OUT learners in Mwanza and Kagera Regional Centres. This study suggests that the critical shortage of study materials at Zanzibar Regional Centre needs to be quickly addressed.

4.5.7 Support Services that Learners Feel they Need Immediate Improvement

As it has been noted above, learner support services are important in distance learning. Having the knowledge that learner support services are not adequately provided at the centre, the researcher asked for the learners' views on the support services they thought they needed immediate improvement. Most of the learners mentioned ICT facilities, learning environment at the centre, face-to-face sessions, library services and study materials as areas, which needed special attention so as to improve the quality of their learning. It should be noted that, currently, in distance learning, ICT services are an important gear in achieving learning objectives. However, as it has been noted above, this study found that majority of the learners were complaining about receiving ineffective ICT services. Consequently, they were facing difficulties during registration processes and in accessing learning materials. Also, OUT staff expressed their concern for failing to activate learners' accounts regularly and show the applicants the University's regulations and procedures because of low internet connection. The following are the examples of comments from the learners:

The learner support services which I miss most are internet and computer skills. Also, I do not get assistance from Instructors (Interview with Salama; Student at Zanzibar Regional OUT Centre).

The learner support service which I miss most is face to face service (Interview with Dulla; Student at Zanzibar Regional OUT Centre).

The learner support service which I miss most is the updated study materials (Interview with Dulla; Student at Zanzibar Regional OUT Centre).

Basically, distance learning allows learners to control their learning. It gives them flexibility to learn wherever they are (Messo, 2014). Hence, the learning institution is expected to facilitate learners with all the necessary learning materials and leave the

issue of learning environment in the hands of learners themselves. For this reason, it is argued here that learners' complaints directed at the centre's poor learning environment is an indication that learners were not aware of their responsibilities on distance learning mode.

Also, it is possible that these learners were living in the environment, which did not support learning (Messo, 2014). Thus, they depended on the centre's environment. Other issues such as improvement of ICT facilities, face to face sessions, library services, and ensuring that study materials were available, were supposed to be in the hands of OUT. Therefore, it is suggested here that OUT management should take charge to improve the situation so as to encourage learners to continue with their studies.

4.5.8 Other Challenges at the Centre

It is noteworthy that the introduction of OUT-regional centres aimed at decentralizing academic services by bringing them closer to stakeholders, especially learners. It has been argued in this dissertation that learner support services are like the backbone to distance education. In this study, several challenges related to learner support services have been discussed. This section discusses other challenges, which were seen to contribute to poor achievements at the centre.

In this study, there was a concern raised by the DRC that some learners lacked readiness to learn through a distance mode. She said:

We are trying very hard to provide the learner support services, but some learners are not ready to learn through the distance mode. They find it difficult to them to fit in this kind of learning (Interview with DRC).

According to the comment above, special sensitization programmes should be conducted to make learners more aware and feel comfortable to study through distance mode. Also, the OUT management should insist its workers to be ready to help learners where needed. It is also suggested that distance learning should be taught at secondary school level to make students aware of distance learning mode.

Another challenge raised by OUT staff was about having a large number of computer illiterate learners. Some of them said:

The main challenge that I face is that a large number of learners are computer illiterate (Interview with Juma, the Admission officer).

The learners only use online library. However, the problem is that, not all of them are able to use online learning service. There is still a group of learners who need the library services. They need hard copies in their studying. To cope with this situation, they incur some costs in downloading and printing study materials. Due to this, they find it difficult to learn through the Distance Learning system (Interview with DRC).

The issue of computer illiteracy in distance learning is common due to lack of computer facilities to large number of distance learning centres and among distance learners themselves. One would argue that having computer illiterate learners at the university level might be contributed to by having no ICT curriculum at lower level schools in Zanzibar since ICT education was not taught in primary or secondary schools before. It has been noted that in Zanzibar, ICT education has recently started to be taught in primary schools as a way to prepare skilled learners to make them cope with modern Science and technology.

Lack of dependable electricity was also mentioned as one of the hindrances in the provision of quality learning support. It was revealed that power cuts at the centre

tended to affect service provision to learners. Regarding this situation, one lecturer commented:

The challenges I face in the process of teaching or assisting my learners include lack of reliable electricity and internet. These make it difficult to communicate with my learners (Interview with Maganga; Lecturer).

Similar complaints were presented by other OUT staff at the centre. For instance, the DRC raised this concern:

We are experiencing frequent power cuts which to large extent badly affect learners in their learning process and using of the available support services at the centre (Interview with DRC).

According to the comment above, the problem of unreliable electricity was noted to be a serious obstacle to teaching and learning processes. In order to ensure that the centre's activities were carried out (without stopping at a certain point due to power interruptions, the centre may consider of installing a standby generator. This would be important due to the consideration that distance learners were usually coming from far places to centre for the purpose of getting particular services they needed. Therefore, when they came to centre and they were not given the services they needed due to power cuts; they were negatively affected in terms of wasting their time and incurring extra costs such as those related to accommodation and food while waiting for the services they needed.

4.6 Chapter Summary

This chapter has discussed issues related to quality of learner support services. It has presented and discussed the research findings including the availability of learner support services at the OUT's Zanzibar Centre. Both learners and OUT staff have identified various issues related to learner support services at the centre. It has been

made clear in this chapter that the learner support services at the centre are not satisfactory. As argued by the conceptual framework of this study, this situation might be hindering the development of qualified distance learners at Zanzibar Regional Centre. The findings suggest that there is a need to improve the available learner support services at the centre so as to boost learners' achievements.

Apart from identifying the available support services, the chapter has highlighted several challenges hindering of learner support services at the centre. Some of these challenges include power cuts, poor internet connections, many students being computer illiterate, inadequacy of study materials, lack of computer laboratory, and poor communication between learners and lecturers. This chapter has also discussed the common means of communication used by learners and OUT staff. These include: Moodle system, face to face, internet, mobile phones, emails and social media (Whatsapp).

CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Summary of the Study

This research investigated the quality of learner support services at the OUT, Zanzibar centre. With the conceptual framework chosen for the study, it was expected that examining the provision of learner support services would capture the major issues affecting or facilitating distance learning in the centre. The study was guided by one (major) research objective: To investigate the quality of the available learner support services in ODL and their relevance to OUT learners – Zanzibar Regional Centre.

The data collection process was guided by three research questions: What are the available learner support services for OUT students at Zanzibar Regional Centre? What are the learners' views on the quality of the available learner support services at Zanzibar Regional Centre? How relevant are the available learner support services to learners? The study employed the interpretivist research paradigm and a qualitative research approach. The study also employed a case study design, which is relevant to qualitative approach. In this study, 21 participants were individually interviewed. The data from interviews were supplemented by observation method.

The study found that the most used support services at the centre were Moodle system, social media, emails and mobile phones. This study has highlighted various challenges related to learner support services at Zanzibar Centre. Such challenges include poor ICT and library services at the centre, which are assumed to limit learners' performance. Other challenges are less number of lectures given to students

at the centre compared to their number. Given this situation, the study argues that it is very difficult for learners to get assistance from their lecturers as they deserve.

Lack of stable electricity and internet services at the centre was revealed to be another challenge which was hindering the performance of both learners and OUT staff in accomplishing learning goals. Also, this study suggests that although the majority of learners were using ICT service, the views from the instructors were that there were a large number of learners who were still computer illiterate. This was seen to hinder the teaching and learning processes. It was also found that some students complained about missing library services at the centre. It was also noted that lack of library services forced learners to use online services, which included search engines, to find study materials. It was yet revealed that some of them opted to get library services from the main government library, where sometimes they missed relevant books for their subjects. However, such learners' problem can largely be associated with their being computer illiterates.

5.2 Conclusions of the Findings

5.2.1 The Available Learner Support Services in the Zanzibar Regional Centre

The researcher assessed the quality of learner support services within the Zanzibar Regional Centre. Based on the findings of this study, the available learner support services included some kind of internet services, occasional face to face sessions, use of mobile phones and online learning facilities. The online learning facilities (Moodle and SARIS systems) and mobile phones were seen to be effectively used by learners in their learning. Internet services and face-to-face sessions were reported to be

partially used at the centre because of the challenges associated with them as explained in Chapter Four.

5.2.2 Learners' Views on the Quality of the Available Learner Support Services

The findings of this study reveal that learners were not happy with the quality of the available learner support services. Most of the learners claimed that some important services were not available, and those, which were available, were not being effectively provided. For instance, the library service was not available at the centre and the ICT services were also not being properly provided.

5.2.3 Relevance of the Available Learner Support Services

Based on the findings of this study, it can be concluded that the available learner support services at the centre were relevant, but they were inadequately provided.

5.3 General Conclusion

This study investigated the quality of the available learner support services within the Zanzibar Regional Centre. Based on the arguments given in Chapter Four and conclusions given in Section 5.2.2 and 5.2.3 (of this chapter), it is argued here that the quality of learner support services within the Zanzibar OUT Centre is inadequate; hence there is a need to improve the situation.

5.4 Recommendations for Action

Recommendation 1

It is important for the Open University of Tanzania to strengthen the computer laboratory and ICT services in the centre. It is important to make sure that quality internet services are available at the centre throughout the year.

Recommendation 2

There is a need to ensure that library services are available in the centre, and that they are given with adequate and up to date learning materials.

Recommendation 3

This study recommends on the strengthening of the face-to-face sessions to enable physical interaction among learners and lecturers to become more meaningful. It is suggested here that there is a need to provide such (face to face) services more than once in a year. This can be possible if the face-to-face sessions are decentralized, arranged and provided in the regional centre. There should be proper and effective channels in place to inform learners about the dates for face-to-face sessions to enable all learners participate effectively.

Recommendation 4

The findings revealed a lot of complaints lodged regarding poor communication between learners and OUT members of staff. Hence, this study recommends an improvement in communication ways between learners and their lecturers, and between learners and the OUT management in order to achieve the learning objectives.

5.5 Recommendations for Further Research***Recommendation 1***

This qualitative study was carried in only one OUT centre (Zanzibar Centre). Hence, there is a need to conduct further researches related to quality of learner support services in other OUT regional centres.

Recommendation 2

This study suggests that OUT has been using online platforms to facilitate distance learning. This calls for the need to assess the achievements of such platforms. Hence, it is recommended here that another study can be carried out to explore the success and challenges of online learning facilities in the Tanzanian context.

Recommendation 3

There is a need to conduct research on the impact of learner support services provided to ODL centres in Tanzania in order to improve the quality of distance education.

5.6 Limitations of the Study

While conducting this study, the researcher faced various limitations. The following are the limitations of this study:

- (i) Missing some participants (ICT technician and Librarian) during interviews. The researcher decided to interview a Records officer on behalf of the ICT personnel for the sake of fulfilling the needs of the study. The record officer was able to provide relevant information.
- (ii) Getting the learner-participants to interview was also a difficult situation to the researcher considering that most of the ODL learners were living far from the OUT centres. Sometimes the researcher had to spend all the day at the centre and get no one to interview. To deal with this challenge, sometimes the researcher had to follow the participants at home after contacting them.

- (iii) Lack of reliable internet was the limitation which to some extent hindered the study from being completed on time. It was difficult to send and receive the work from the supervisor in the first days. To deal with this challenge, the researcher had to buy a new modern for internet service.

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APPENDICES

Appendix I: Interview Guide: Learners

Research: The quality of learner support services in ODL: The case of Open

University of Tanzania – Zanzibar Centre

Interview/topic guide: Sample questions

| SN | Questions |
|----|---|
| 1. | What are you studying at OUT? |
| 2. | What do you know about learner support services? |
| 3. | What kind of learner support services do you get in your studies? |
| 4. | Are you happy with the support services that you get? Why? |
| 5. | Which services do you think you miss most? |
| 6. | Are you satisfied with the organization and management of support services provided? Why? |
| 7. | How many times are you provided with face-to-face sessions? Are you happy with the sessions? Why? |
| 8. | Do you get study materials on time? If not, what should be done to address the problem? |
| 9. | Are the study materials sufficient and available for your units? If not, what do |

| | |
|-----|---|
| | you do to solve the problem? |
| 10. | How often do you use the library services? Are you happy with the library services offered? Why? |
| 11. | How often do you use ICT services? Are you happy with ICT services offered? Why? |
| 12. | How do you communicate with your lecturers? Are you happy with the way you interact with your lectures? Why? |
| 13. | Do you get academic advice on time when needed? If yes, how? If not, why? |
| 14. | How useful is the academic advice you get for your study's success? |
| 15. | Have you ever been in need of guidance and counselling services? If yes, did you get them? If you not, why? If you got them, were you happy with the services? Why? |
| 16. | Do you have anything else that you would want to share as far as "learner support services" are concerned? |

Thank you for your cooperation!

Appendix II: Interview Guide: Regional Centre Director (DRC)

Research: The quality of learner support services in ODL: The case of Open
University of Tanzania – Zanzibar Centre

Interview/topic guide: Sample questions

| SN | Questions |
|-----|--|
| 1. | How many students have been registered in your centre? |
| 2. | What kind of learner support services do you provide in your centre? |
| 3. | What are the mostly used support services (by the learners) in your centre? Why do you think they are mostly used? |
| 4. | Do you think the lecturers are adequate in your centre (in proportion to the number of students)? If not, How does the situation affect the learning process to your students? |
| 5. | How do the lecturers provide learner support services in your centre? |
| 6. | Are you happy with the consultations, guidance and counselling service offered to individual learners? Why? |
| 7. | Do you think the study materials are adequately available in the centre? If not, how does it affect the teaching and learning processes? |
| 8. | Do you offer the library services at the centre? If yes, are you happy with the services offered by the library? Why? If you do not offer the library services, why? |
| 9. | Do you offer ICT services in your centre? If not, why? If yes, do you think the ICT services provided are enough for the learning purposes? Why? |
| 10. | Do you offer the face-to-face sessions to all courses that you provide in the centre? How often do you offer the sessions? If you do not offer (to some courses), why? |
| 11. | What challenges do you face in providing and managing learner support services? |
| 12. | Are you (generally) happy with the learner support services provided in your centre? Why? |
| 13. | Do you think the learners are satisfied with the support services provided? Why? |
| 14. | Do you have anything else that you would want to share as far as “learner support services” are concerned? |

Thank you for your Cooperation

Appendix III: Interview Guide: Lecturers

Research: The quality of learner support services in ODL: The case of Open

University of Tanzania – Zanzibar Centre

Interview/topic guide: Sample questions

| SN | Questions |
|-----|---|
| 1. | What are your main functions as the OUT tutor? |
| 2. | Which faculty do you serve? |
| 3. | Which department do you serve? |
| 4. | Which subject(s) do you teach? |
| 5. | How often do you communicate with your students? (Daily, weekly, monthly, yearly). Do you think this is enough? Why? |
| 6. | How do you communicate with your students? Are you happy with such communication? |
| 7. | Apart from tutoring, what other learner support services do you provide? |
| 8. | Do you offer academic advice to your learners? If yes, how do you provide it? |
| 9. | Are you satisfied with the help/support services you offer to your learners? Why? |
| 10. | What is your comment on the quality of library and ICT services provided in the centre? |
| 11. | Do you think the support services that OUT provides to learners are enough? Why? |
| 12. | Are you happy with the quality of study materials provided to learners? Why? |
| 13. | How do you provide assignments to your learners? Do you get feedback from learners on time? |
| 14. | Are you happy with the way learners respond to the assignments that you provide? Why? |
| 15. | What challenges do you encounter while providing support services in distance learning? |
| 16. | Do you have anything else that you would want to share as far as “learner support services” is concerned? |

Thank you for your cooperation!

Appendix IV: Interview Guide: Admission officer, OUT Secretary, Records

Officer and Human Resource Officer

Research: The quality of learner support services in ODL: The case of Open University of Tanzania – Zanzibar Centre

Interview/topic guide: Sample questions

| SN | Questions |
|-----------|--|
| 1. | What are your main functions in the OUT centre? |
| 2. | Which faculty do you serve? |
| 3. | Which department do you serve? |
| 4. | Do you teach any subject(s)? |
| 5. | How often do you communicate with your students? (Daily, weekly, monthly, yearly). Do you think that is enough? Why? |
| 6. | How do you communicate with your students? Are you happy with such communication? |
| 7. | Apart from duties, what other learner support services do you provide? |
| 8. | Do you offer academic advice to your learners? If yes, how do you provide it? |
| 9. | Are you satisfied with the help/support services you offer to your learners? Why? |
| 10. | What is your comment on the quality of library and ICT services provided in the centre? |
| 11. | Do you think the support services that OUT provides to learners are enough? Why? |
| 12. | Are you happy with the quality of study materials provided to learners? Why? |
| 13. | Do you provide assignments to the ODL learners? |
| 14. | Are you happy with the way learners respond to the assignments that you provide? Why? |
| 15. | What challenges do you encounter while providing support services in distance learning? |
| 16. | Do you have anything else that you would want to share as far as “learner support services” are concerned? |

Thank you for your cooperation

Appendix V: Research Clearance Letter

THE OPEN UNIVERSITY OF TANZANIA

DIRECTORATE OF POSTGRADUATE STUDIES



Our Ref: PG2017995630

31st October 2019

Deputy Vice Chancellor Academic (DVC AC),
The Open University of Tanzania,
P. O. Box 23409,
DAR ES SALAAM.

RE: RESEARCH CLEARANCE

The Open University of Tanzania was established by an Act of Parliament No. 17 of 1992, which became operational on the 1st March 1993 by public notice No.55 in the official Gazette. The Act was however replaced by the Open University of Tanzania Charter of 2005, which became operational on 1st January 2007. In line with the Charter, the Open University of Tanzania mission is to generate and apply knowledge through research.

To facilitate and to simplify research process therefore, the act empowers the Vice Chancellor of the Open University of Tanzania to issue research clearance, on behalf of the Government of Tanzania and Tanzania Commission for Science and Technology, to both its staff and students who are doing research in Tanzania. With this brief background, the purpose of this letter is to introduce to you **Mr. HASSAN, Mzee Shirazi Reg No: PG2017995630** pursuing **Master of Education in Open and Distance Learning (MED ODL)**. We here by grant this clearance to conduct a research titled *"The Quality of Learners Support Services in ODL"*. He will collect his data at your area from 21st October 2019 to 25th December 2019.

In case you need any further information, kindly do not hesitate to contact the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Academic) of the Open University of Tanzania, P.O.Box 23409, Dar es Salaam. Tel: 022-2-2668820. We lastly thank you in advance for your assumed cooperation and facilitation of this research academic activity.

Yours Sincerely,

Prof. Hossea Rwegoshora
For: VICE CHANCELLOR
THE OPEN UNIVERSITY OF TANZANIA

Appendix VI: Plagiarism Report

Dissertation

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