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Effectiveness of Learner Support Services for the Namibian College of Open Learning.

1. Introduction

The Namibian College of Open Learning (NAMCOL) is a semi-autonomous educational institution created by an Act of Parliament (Act 1 of 1997) and falls under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture of Namibia. The College's core activity has traditionally been its Secondary Education programme which enables those who cannot or do not wish to attend formal schools to study for either the Namibia Junior Secondary Certificate (JSC or Grade 10) or the Namibia Senior Secondary Certificate (NSSC or Grade 12). In line with its Act, the College has, of late, diversified its offerings to include tertiary level programmes in disciplines of early childhood development, community development, local government administration, youth development, psychosocial support and business management as well as vocational and technical programmes in disciplines such as computer training, Automotive Mechanics, Welding and Metal Fabrication, Plumbing and Pipe-fitting, Office Administration, Basic Computer Literacy and English Communication. These programmes have been introduced to address the diverse training needs in the country. The professional programmes are accredited by the Namibia Qualification Authority (NQA) and some of the programmes are already registered on the National Qualifications Framework. The secondary education study materials conform to the curricula of the Namibian Junior and Senior Secondary Certificates and examinations are the same as those administered in the formal school system. In 2014, the institution's enrolment had soared to over 38 000 students, making it the biggest single distance education provider in the country. Given this mammoth enrolment, the contribution of the College in forging national development cannot be overemphasised.

In order to ensure that it continues to meet its national mandate effectively enough, NAMCOL monitors and evaluates its programmes and services on an ongoing basis. Thus, the institution invests much of its resources in the delivery of quality services to its learners. For this reason the College commissioned a study on the learner support services it provides to learners in early 2014. The study was aimed at collecting evidence-based information on the quality of services NAMCOL offers to its learners.

1.1 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the learner support services quality study was to assess the nature, appropriateness and quality of learner support services offered to learners pursuing various programmes offered by the College. The study highlights the quality, adequacy and appropriateness of the learner support services at NAMCOL. The findings will lead to a re-positioning of NAMCOL's learners support services.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

The main objective of the study was to identify and evaluate the quality of learner support services at NAMCOL.

The study had the following auxiliary objectives:

- Identify key factors required to improve learner support services provided by NAMCOL; and
- Provide research based information on the Learner Support Services for decision making process,
- Make recommendations on the improvement of learner support services at the College.

The following guiding research questions were used to focus the study:

- What is the nature of NAMCOL's learner support services?
- To what extent do learner support services meet the needs of learners?
- Do all learners receive the planned services?
- What are the key factors that are required to improve learner support services at NAMCOL?

2 Learner Support: Perspectives from the Literature

The strength of an institution's learner support system determines its ability to meet the "three presences" that are critical success factors in distance learning, namely teacher presence, social presence and cognitive presence. Social presence is about maximising dialogue in order to avoid subjecting distance learners to isolated learning spaces that are boring and frustrating. Cognitive presence is an act of the mind; it is about mental processing of information perceived/gained through experience and reflecting upon that information in order to construct new knowledge. Reflection is triggered off by developmentally-conceived learning activities that encourage the learner to think about what he/she has done or said or written in a critical manner. For this to happen, appropriate conditions that encourage such mental engagement have to be created. Thus, the fundamental purpose for learner support is to create conditions where teacher presence, social presence and cognitive presence interplay in the process of learning. This is a socially contrived environment achieved by employing multiple strategies that often include the human agent as well as the technological medium. But what exactly is learner support?

2.1 Learner Support – concept and practice

Learner support is defined as the resources which learners can access in order to carry out planned learning processes (Garrison and Bayton, (1987) cited in Usun, 2004). In distance education, support is concerned with a range of human and non-human resources to guide and facilitate the educational transaction (Garrison, 1989). According to Sweet (1993:12) "...learner support is the interface between the institution and its learners". Thus, irrespective of where they are, learners need to feel the presence and influence of the institution in their learning activities. Sweet (1993), places emphasis on the contextual nature of learner support services offered by an institution. He argues that student support services must be constructed in the context of the almost infinite needs of the learners; are dependent on the educational ethos of the institution; on the dispersal of the student body and the curriculum; and on the generic differences in the student body which it has been set up to serve.

Sweet (1993)'s notion of learner support is premised on the changing pedagogical practices that are associated with the evolution of distance education from the industrial mode in which learners were passive recipients of knowledge to more interactive forms of learning where learners search for and construct their own knowledge. Based on this notion of students as constructors of knowledge, Sweet argues that support services need to maintain their involvement in the remediation of student problems but, at the same time, they must become more active in promoting the intellectual development and well-being of students. "The focus for this altered role is the promotion of interaction among and between students and instructors through either mediated or face-to-face means" (Sweet, 1993:1)

Tait (2002)'s view of learner support is that it is "... the range of services both for individuals and students in groups which complement the course materials or learning resources that are uniform for all learners, and which are often perceived as the major offering of institutions using ODL".

Tait (2002) categorises the functions of student support into cognitive, affective and systemic functions. Cognitive support entails supporting and developing learning through the use of standard and uniform elements of course materials and other learning resources for individual students. Affective support involves providing an environment which supports learners, creates commitment and enhances self-esteem. Systemic support is about establishing administrative processes and information management systems which are effective, transparent and student-friendly, (Tait, 2002:288). Thus, in Tait's view learner support should be comprehensive enough to cater not only for the mental enrichment of learners but also for the psychological, social and affective needs. Apart from targeting groups, learner support should also target individuals. This presupposes providing a wide range of support services within an institution.

2.2 Why learner support in ODL

Most learners want support and interaction in their learning process, except for some 10% of students with personality types that may not want interaction with other students. The other 90% may look forward to it but demands on time and place prevalent in the lives of adult learners may constrain accessing such support services;

Learner support, especially guidance and counselling, tutor support, effective information and administration are all affective forms of support which reinforce learners' sense of confidence and reduce drop-out rate; and

Learner support activities like tutoring in group work in tutorial centres or online and comments in marked assignments (termed 'mediation') have a positive impact on the learning process "Tait (2002)".

As highlighted above, in ODL, learner support activities are aimed at reducing the transactional distance between the tutor and the learner in order for the latter to achieve his/her learning objectives. Therefore, learner support in its many forms is aimed at enhancing the conversation between the learner, the tutor and the subject content.

2.3 Learner Support activities

A number of learner support activities are documented in the literature, although emphasis is placed on the context of an institution. Some of the support activities drawn from the literature include:

- Preparation for the challenges of distance learning
- Career guidance and counselling
- Remedial interventions such as responsible open admission programmes to help underprepared students achieve success (academic skills development included)
- Continuous administrative support in the form of timely, accurate and accessible information to assist with all phases of the learning process (from application to graduation)
- In-text support as part of well designed, integrated and structured courseware promoting dialogue between lecturer and student
- Feedback to students on their learning
- Study groups and centres – actual or virtual (electronics).

3 Research Design and Methodology

In this study, both quantitative and qualitative methods of collecting data were used. The mixed methods approach to the study was advantageous in that whilst it allowed eliciting information from a large group of learners in the shortest possible time, it also provided an opportunity for not only probing some of the views raised by learners, but also triangulating the research data.

NAMCOL learners were the key respondents in this study. This is primarily because learner support is the hallmark for both student retention and academic success in distance learning, and students' views on the appropriateness, adequacy and usefulness of support services are the best indicators for the quality of such provision. In order to reach as many students as possible and draw reliable and valid conclusions, a questionnaire was administered amongst students on their views on learner support services they get from the College. In undertaking studies where conclusions are based on people's opinions, it is always useful to achieve some form of data triangulation. Over and above surveying students' views, opinions of key NAMCOL staff were also sought. Thus, a similar survey was administered amongst NAMCOL tutors throughout the regions in order to source their opinions on learner support services at NAMCOL.

Targeted interviews were also conducted with all the four regional managers from NAMCOL regions, one Area Coordinator from each of the four NAMCOL regions, Distance Education Coordinators based at NAMCOL headquarters, the Learner Support Manager and the Deputy Director for Learner Support also based at the headquarters. Thus, whilst the current study was largely quantitative, it also had a qualitative dimension that helped bolster the research data. As highlighted above, an important strength of this design is that it allowed for both data as well as methodological triangulation.

3.1 Sampling

The population for the study consisted of all registered students of the College in the 2014 academic year, excluding students registered on the Technical and Vocational programmes. The latter programmes are new programmes where students have not had enough experience with NAMCOL services to be able to give useful opinions on the College's learner support services. The population for the study therefore consisted of NAMCOL secondary and tertiary level programmes.

Apart from selecting a sample of the correct size, in order to allow generalisation of findings, the sample should also be truly representative of the population in terms of population characteristics. Thus, the sample for the study was selected by programme of study, by regional distribution and by rural and urban location of the students. In arriving at the appropriate sample size, over and above being guided by the formula cited above, the researcher also had to make allowance for possible spoiling of questionnaires and cases of non-return of completed questionnaires. Thus, the calculated sample had to be increased by a reasonable margin for this purpose.

4 Collection of Quantitative Data

4.1 Fieldwork and data capturing

The bulk of the fieldwork was conducted over a period of two weeks, with a little bit of mopping up taking place in the third week. All completed questionnaires were sent to Windhoek for data capturing by the Windhoek-based fieldwork manager, working with a few data capturers. To facilitate capturing of data in a form that would allow analysis, data capturing spreadsheets were prepared in advance and sent to the data capturers. The spreadsheets allowed for checking the accuracy of data captured.

After all the survey data were captured, the spreadsheets were sent to the research manager for analysis and write up.

5 Collection of Qualitative Data

5.1 One-to-One interviews

The researcher chose to interview some stakeholders on a one-to-one basis mainly because of the positions they occupy in the planning and implementation of learners support services at NAMCOL. Where a respondent was understood to play a central role in the planning and monitoring of learner service provision, a one-on-one interview was considered the most appropriate method of eliciting his/her individual views, opinions and concerns.

5.2 Focus group interviews

For this study, the only participants who were involved in focus group interviews were Distance Education Coordinators at the NAMCOL headquarters. These were selected on the criteria that they would have something to say on the topic, had similar socio-characteristics and would be comfortable talking to the interviewer and each other on issues pertaining to the planning, implementation and monitoring of learner support services at NAMCOL. The rest of the interviews were conducted on a one-on-one basis, either face-to-face or telephonically.

6 Findings of the Study

6.1 Student awareness of College services

NAMCOL offers a wide range of support services to its learners throughout its four regions. Key amongst these services are the following: Study guides for the courses enrolled, Tutors' comments on marked assignments, Face-to-face tutorials, Telephone communications with tutors, Tutorial letters, Orientation workshops, Academic counselling and Study groups.

It is noteworthy that over and above the above-listed services, there are many other learner support services NAMCOL extends to learners. This study surveyed learners' opinions on at least 39 different types of support services. In order to meet the needs of the wide range of learners at the College, some services are targeted at particular programmes and not necessarily others. For instance, the regular face-to-face tutorials, events such as prize giving ceremonies and open days are targeted at secondary education learners whilst graduation ceremonies, practicums, mentor sessions and extra support classes are targeted at learners on the professional programmes. Most of the services are however open to all learners in the College, irrespective of the programme they pursue.

An interesting point to note is that NAMCOL acknowledges the advent of educational technologies and is making concerted effort to embrace the technology to improve its learner support services. Amongst the many services extended to learners are the use of email for communicating with learners, internet access for searching for enrichment learning materials including open education resources, use of the NAMCOL website to access pertinent information relating to learners' studies, use of video recorded information and radio tutorials. The institution has established a recording studio at the Yama Yetu Centre located at the Headquarters in Windhoek. The College also put in place a bulk SMS facility that facilitates instant communication with learners.

The majority of the respondents (91.2%) indicated that they are aware of the NAMCOL study guides/course books. This confirms NAMCOL documentation that all learners who register get a study pack right at the beginning. These are materials that cover the subject syllabuses being followed. Apart from study guides, learners are aware of comments in tutor-marked assignments (51.2%), face-to-face tutorials (47.8%), telephonic contacts with tutors (45.7%), tutorial letters (40%), orientation workshops (39.9%), academic counselling (38%) and study groups (37.8%).

It is also interesting to note that only 9.8% of the respondents were aware that they can communicate with Area Coordinators by telephone and only 4.6% were aware of NOLNET centres. It appears from the survey data that most of the learners are not aware of email, internet and website facilities offered by the College. A paltry 6.4%, 16.9% and 13.9% respectively showed awareness of these technology-related services. The same applies to video recorded information and computer-assisted/web-based learning services, which had 9.5% and 14.8% awareness respectively.

To enable students to communicate directly with the Headquarter staff whenever there is need, NAMCOL put in place a toll-free call line.

6.2 Use of NAMCOL learner support services

In order to establish the extent of usage, learners were asked to indicate which services they have used during their studies at the College. The top six services most used by students, in their order of priority are face to face tutorials (76.9%), Study Guides/Course Books (73.5%), comments from tutors on tutor marked assignments (61.0%), orientation workshops (53.7%), telephone contacts with tutors (47.7%), and study groups (44.0%).

The six services learners reported they make least use of are NOLNET centres (1.9%), Email (1.9%), Toll-free line (1.9%), Video Recorded Information (3.7%), Audio Recorded Information (5.8%), and Radio Tutorials (10.9%). This is not surprising, as the more one is aware of the existence of something the more they are likely to use it, if they perceive it useful. It is also clear that the services students know about least (email communication 6%, toll free line 7%, video recorded information 9%, telephone communication with Area Coordinator 10%, audio recorded information 11% and NAMCOL website 14%,) also have low usage levels.

6.3 Accessibility of learner support services

Learner responses suggest that although they are aware of the existence of internet in the College, they do not seem to make much use of the service. Further investigation is required in order to establish reasons why this is the case. Learner support services with the lowest accessibility levels are the toll-free telephone facility, mentor sessions, field trips and telephone contact with Area Coordinators.

It is interesting to note that learner survey show that of all the 39 support services included in the survey instrument, none of them has an accessibility rate of less than 50%. The least accessible service were the toll-free facility with 52.3%, mentor sessions with 53.4% (only applicable to learners doing CWCY and CED), field trips with 53.8% and telephone contact with Area Coordinators with 55.7%. If all the 39 learner support services are categorised according to their accessibility ratings, 6 of them fall in the 80% + category, 11 in the 70-79% category, 16 in the 60-69% and only 6 in the 50-59% category.

6.4 Tutorial letters

Tutorial letters are an important teaching strategy in distance learning. The management of this facility therefore determines the extent to which learners benefit from it. In this study, learners were asked to indicate whether such letters reach them timely, whether they find the language used easy to understand and whether they find the information therein useful. A summary of learner responses shows that generally, learners are happy with the tutorial letters; they get the letters in time, they understand the language used and they also find the information useful for their studies.

6.5 Tutorial Services

Over and above tutorial letters and learning materials, NAMCOL has other forms of tutoring distance learners so as to boost support for learners. This includes face-to-face contacts with tutors, a very important social aspect of learning. Generally NAMCOL tutors are readily available to learners.

Learners find the forms of communicating with tutors suitable, they find the interactions informative and they always feel free to approach tutors seek help.

6.6 Reasons for dropping out

It is interesting to note that 15% of the surveyed learners indicated that they considered dropping out of their studies at NAMCOL at some point. The reasons given for entertaining such thinking were varied, although most of them were tutor-related. Tutor absenteeism, laxity in tutoring, ridiculing learners and using derogatory language are unfavourable forms of behaviour that discourage instead of encourage learners. On the contrary, tutorial functions in distance education should, amongst other things, serve to encourage and motivate learners.

6.7 Multimedia

In this study, learners' views were sought on the benefits of video clips and radio tutorials offered by the College. The results shows that nearly 47% of the respondents felt that learning video clips are not clear and 45% didn't think the video clips are informative enough. About 42% of the surveyed learners do not find radio lessons useful for their studies, nearly 47% think that the radio lessons are not clear and hence 45% indicated that they do not listen to them often. Review of learning video clips and radio tutorials appears to be necessary in order to ensure that these forms of supporting learners are effective and meet learners' expectations and needs.

6.8 Improving Learner Support at the College

Learners suggest that whilst the learning materials provided by the College are good, learning resources should be diversified (beyond study guides). In line with this suggestion is the need to improve access to library resources. This is probably an aspect that requires collaborative efforts with other educational institutions and/or government departments.

A good number of respondents also suggested examination question booklets as an important way of supporting learners with mastering examination skills. Regular practice in answering typical examination questions, with the support of tutors and other peers goes a long way in equipping learners with appropriate examination skills.

As highlighted above, learners feel that there is a lot that has to be done in order to improve the services offered by NAMCOL tutors. The suggestions include providing more tutors, improving commitment by tutors, improving tutor attendance and tutor effectiveness in supporting learners. A strong and effective tutorial team is important at NAMCOL, especially given how learners ranked the importance of this tutorial service in terms of its accessibility and how useful they find it for their learning purposes.

6.9 The plight of physically challenged learners at the College

This study also tried to establish whether there are any learners at NAMCOL who are physically challenged, and if sufficient support services are provided for them. Of the 674 learners used in the sample, 6.2% indicated that they were physically challenged whilst 6.8% of the respondents indicated that they knew of a learner who was physically challenged. The most common physical problems mentioned are visual and hearing impairment. Some learners reported that they can't walk and so they use wheelchairs. One indicated that he/she was born without four fingers on the left arm whilst another respondent indicated that he/she has no arm. One learner reported that she/he knows one NAMCOL learner who has Down syndrome.

7. Recommendations

- A suite of mitigating measures is proposed in this study, and this includes:
 - ✓ regular induction of tutors on ODL pedagogy,
 - ✓ empowering tutors to offer first level counselling to learners, particularly academic counselling (study techniques, time management, reading and writing skills etc.)
 - ✓ effective monitoring of tutors to ensure attendance and punctuality for tutorial classes
 - ✓ monitoring of marking of assignments to ensure effective teaching feedback is given to learners and timely
 - ✓ constant appraisal of tutors to ensure full commitment to NAMCOL learners. This can be accompanied by a rewarding system for best performing tutors (eg. best performing award of the year)
 - ✓ improving professional handling of distance learners by tutors (avoiding ridiculing distance education learners, avoiding derogatory language when dealing with the learners, comparing distance learners to face-to-face learners etc.).
- More should be done to make the College more inclusive of learners with more physical challenges, especially in regions where such learners currently exist.
- NAMCOL should make learners understand that they are open and distance learners different from the conventional school learners, and that they need to take full responsibility of their learning which is largely independent learning. Face-to-face tutorials and consultations with tutors are only a small component of their learning processes.
- Moving faster towards technology-supported services, firstly because this is the general trend internationally and secondly because of the fast penetration of technology into communities in the sub-Saharan African region, and the potential for the cost of both broadband and hardware to go down in the near future.

Conclusion

It is evident that an important aspect of learner support in distance education is the human element which is an essential ingredient of learning. It is clear from arguments on e-learning that whilst technology is a valuable medium of learning, the human element is critical in terms of creating the right environment for learning to take place. This is particularly true with young learners who are of school going age. About 58% of the sample used for this study consisted of learners under the age 20. These are young people who typically prefer to learn in a social environment where they exchange face-to-face with tutors and with their peers. Where technology is involved, the role of the tutor/teacher in structuring Web content, in designing learning activities that promote high order thinking skills, and in providing an opportunity for sharing and collaborating remains central in online learning. Learner support services at NAMCOL consist of both technology-supported services (like telephone calls, Short Message Services (SMS), email, Learning Management System (LMS) and website) as well as direct human contact services (like regular tutorial encounters, vacation workshops, mentor sessions and study groups). Specially designed paper based study materials for independent study are also extensively used at NAMCOL. These materials are in the form of study guides/course books and have the “teacher” built into them.

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