

# LEARNERS' PERCEPTION ON THE QUALITY OF LEARNERS' SUPPORT SERVICES FOR IMPROVED ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

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## Abstract

Most dual mode institutions are faced with issues of quality characteristics when dealing with Learners' Support Services (LSS). Hence, this study investigated learners' perception on the quality of LSS in an Open and Distance Learning Institute, Southwest, Nigeria. Four research questions and one hypotheses guided this study. Descriptive research design was adopted for this research. The population for this study was 16,821 learners of the Institute. Simple random sampling technique was used to randomize 250 learners based on their years of study. A validated structured questionnaire was used as the instrument for data collection which was physically administered and retrieved from the learners. The research questions were tested using mean and standard deviation. A mean criterion of 2.50 and above was accepted while a mean below 2.50 criterion was rejected. The study revealed that learners rated learners' support services very low in providing cognitive, affective and systemic support. Also, the LSS provided is not adequate and not readily available for their academic needs and so they rarely utilize the LSS. The study recommends that relevant and easily accessible library services should be made available to the learners. Support services should be made flexible for learners to utilize at their convenience.

**Keywords:** Academic, Learners, Perception, Services, Support

## Introduction

Blended or Hybrid learning is an approach to learning where internet technologies are strategically integrated into face-to-face learning activities so as to facilitate learners' learning and thus achieve learning objectives (Graham, 2016). Allen and Seaman (2013) pointed out that a course can be categorized as blended if 30-79% of the proportion of course content is delivered via internet. Blended learning has grown exponentially over the past decade, particularly in higher education worldwide, and indeed, is now described as the new normal in higher education (Norberg *et al.*, 2011). Several studies have produced findings that suggest that blended learning helps improve learning outcomes whilst reducing dropout rates as it enables instructors use appropriate technology tools and resources to better engage learners outside the classroom (Papel, 2010).

The implementation of blended learning in higher education is however not often guided by any established standards or frameworks, but the common practice involves the provision of supplementary resources for courses that are taught especially in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) using an institutionally supported Learners Support System (LSS) (Sharpe *et al.*, 2012). This strategy is based on a general expectation that learners in the present digital age possess the needed technology skills as well as the self-directed learning abilities to participate meaningfully in the online component of blended learning courses (Ndubuisi, 2013). In most cases however, this turns out not to be true, particularly in under developing world conditions, as most learners enrolling in blended learning courses in higher education only have experience in the traditional face-to-face paradigm. Such learners thus need timely and effective support services if they are to overcome the challenges inherent in learning through internet technologies, and benefit from the blended learning experience (Ojo and Olakulehin, 2015).

Learner support is a mechanism to help the learner to learn. In conventional system, class room transactions, peer team interactions and library facility are components of learning. In ODL system, multimedia, print, audio, video, radio, TV, teleconferencing, videoconferencing, instructional package, face-to-face counseling, continuous assessment and hands-on-experience constitute learner support. Globally, the role of learner support in ODL cannot be underestimated (Brindley, 2014). Although efforts to enhance learner support in ODL are seen in both developed and developing countries, there are some differences in the nature of service delivery. In the USA for instance, the Institute for Higher Education Policy of USA focuses learner support in ODL on issues of institutional support (including electronic security measures like password protection, encryption and back-up systems); course development (involving guidelines used in course development, design, and delivery, and review of instructional materials); teaching and learning (including learners' interaction with tutors and peers through a voice-mail, email, feedback on assignments, and methods of effective research); course structure (outlining course objectives, concepts, and learning outcomes); learner support (information on admission requirements, tuition, books); faculty support

(tutor training and peer mentoring); and assessment (based on enrolment data, costs, innovative uses of technology, intended learning outcomes) (Phipps, 2011). Though these are considered the main learner support services to improve ODL, their provision varies between institutions depending on availability of support infrastructure like ICTs and staff skills.

In the case of federal universities in Southern Nigeria, learner support services focus on security, medical services, library, hostel, transport, and ICT services (Akpoiroro and Okon, 2015). In this case even sociopolitical environment influences the nature of learner support especially on issues of political security and transport which reflects the work and living environment in the developing countries especially in sub-Saharan Africa. In recent decades, learner support in Open and Distance Learning draws more and more attention, and is regarded as a theme of core importance to ODL at the present time (Nwagu and Ahmed, 2010). The LSS need to include areas of academic administration and other matters needed by distance learners to succeed in learning (Zuhairi *et al.*, 2020). The function of learner support services in reducing rate of dropout, increasing retention and improving the quality of learning has been recognized. In technology-enabled learning environments, learner support retains the importance ensuring the success of ODL learners and an integrated part to effective ODL (Gaskell, 2012).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Incidentally, the research literature on learner support when it comes to technology enabled, or facilitated instruction, tends to focus on the open, distance and online learning paradigm, with little or no mention of blended learning situations (Lim, 2017). Since the development of effective learner support services complements good learning materials to make Open and Distance Learning (ODL) programme achieve its objectives of supporting its clientele to be successful, one may ask how the distance learners perceive the available support services put in place for them in terms of meeting their learning needs. This is because it is one thing for ODL institutions to provide learner support services that they think would satisfy their learners' learning needs and another thing for the learners to have a similar perception given their peculiar circumstances. The researchers' experiences with learners shows that some learners are not satisfied with the provision of learner support services, for some, it is a not accessible and complex. While some learners are technophobic, some learners do not regard it as an important component of their learning. The desire to find out the distance learners' perceived satisfaction with available support services and their learner support needs spurred this study.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided the study.

1. What are the attitudes of learners towards the learners support service?
2. To what extent is the level of learners' satisfaction on the utilization of learners support service?
3. How do learners support service contribute to academic achievement of distance learners?
4. What are the possible ways of improving the quality of services rendered to learners?

### **Research Hypothesis**

**H<sub>0</sub>:** The learners support services have no significant effect on the academic achievement of learners.

**H<sub>1</sub>:** The learners support services have significant effect on the academic achievement of learners.

### **Research methods and participants**

This research study adopted a descriptive design. The population of this study comprises of all the undergraduate learners of the Distance Learning Institute, University of Lagos, Nigeria. Participants were selected from all levels across all the departments in the Institute. The sample includes 50 learners from each department using a simple random sampling technique. This made the sample size of the study to be 250. The instrument for data collection was a structured questionnaire. In order to ensure validity, the questionnaire was put through face validation and a pre-test for reliability. The data collected was analyzed using mean, standard deviation and t-test statistics. The mean was used to answer the research questions while the t-test statistics was used to test the Null hypotheses at 0.05 level of significance.

## Results

A total of 250 learners participated in this research and their demographic data is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1: Presentation of Demographic Information**

<b>Gender</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Male	117	46.08%
Female	133	53.92%
<b>Age Range</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
16-25years	71	28.40%
26-35years	85	34.00%
36-45years	57	22.80%
46years and above	37	14.80%
<b>Marital Status</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Single	137	54.80%
Married	109	43.60%
Divorced	2	0.80%
Widowed	2	0.80%
<b>Level</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
100	50	20.00%
200	50	20.00%
300	50	20.00%
400	50	20.00%
500	50	20.00%

Table 1 is the demographic information of the respondents where 46.08% of the respondents were male and 53.92% were female. The age range of 16-25 years was 28.40%; 26-35 years was 34% and 22.80% for ages between 36-45 while 46 years and above had the least of 14.80%. Learners whose marital status is single were 54.80%. Learners who were married had 43.60% while learners who were either divorced or widowed respectively stood at 0.80%. Learners in all the five programmes (Education, Economics, Accounting, Public Administration, Business Administration) had equal representation of 20% each. This result showed that majority of the respondents were female, young adults and unmarried.

**Research Question 1:** What are the attitudes of learners towards the learners' support services?

**Table 2: Learners' Attitudes towards Learners Support Service**

<b>Questionnaire Items</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SDev</b>
Distance learners feel the learning support services are not always available	2.10	1.00
Distance learners perceived they can handle everything by themselves; and they do not need the LSS	3.84	1.63
Learners are not willing to explore all the services provided by the LSS	3.21	1.31
Learners are always ready to make use of the learner support service	3.08	1.21
Learners only make use of LSS during examination and residential period.	3.92	1.73
<b>Mean (<math>\bar{X}</math>)</b>	<b>3.2</b>	

Table 2 shows that items 2, 3, 4 and 5 have mean scores that are above the cut-off mark of 2.50 that was regarded as acceptable limit while item (1) is below limit of 2.50 which is considered unacceptable. Therefore, this implies that learners have a negative attitude towards the learning support services and consider it not available.

**Research Question 2:** To what extent is the level of learners' satisfaction on the utilization of learners' support services?

**Table 3: Level of satisfaction on Utilization of Learner Support Services**

<b>Questionnaire Items</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SDev</b>
LSS is only used for academic support	3.10	1.50
When learners are faced with any challenge in Distance Learning, the LSS is the first point of contact	2.94	1.44
Learners do not make use of the LSS because it is not easily accessible	3.97	1.70

LSS is accessed only at the beginning of new session	2.05	1.21
Most learners do not find the LSS useful	2.08	1.32
<b>Mean (<math>\bar{X}</math>)</b>	<b>2.83</b>	

Table 3 reveals that the learners only accessed the LSS at the beginning of the academic session while through and during the study period most learners do not find the LSS useful. With an average mean of 2.83 the level of satisfaction on the utilization of the LSS appears to be high.

**Research Question 3:** How does learners support system contribute to the academic achievement learners?

**Table 4:** Learner Support System Contribution to Academic Achievement

Questionnaire Items	Mean	SDev
LSS makes studying and academics comfortable in Distance Learning	3.40	0.32
LSS has no effect on the academic achievement of learners	2.01	0.51
LSS renders services that makes academics fun	3.07	1.02
Using the LSS increases knowledge on the use of internet and computers for studying	3.15	1.01
The use of learner support services improves zeal for academic research	3.80	1.32
<b>Mean (<math>\bar{X}</math>)</b>	<b>3.09</b>	

The result on Table 4 showed that the LSS has an effect on academic achievement of the learners.

**Research Question 4:** What are the possible ways of improving the quality of services rendered by learner support service?

**Table 5:** Improvement on the services rendered by the Learner Support Services (LSS)

Questionnaire Items	Mean	SDev
LSS should be an online application that can be used on any device	2.56	1.01
The use of LSS should be part of the orientation programme	2.84	1.13
Learner support service should include the use of phone calls for complaints.	3.21	1.31
LSS should have a constant social media learners' help link.	3.08	1.21
Learners should be allowed to make use of all the LSS anywhere	3.92	1.73
<b>Mean (<math>\bar{X}</math>)</b>	<b>3.12</b>	

Table 5 shows that mean scores are very high and above 2.50. this implies that there is need for a robust learner support services that will assist the learners to cope and navigate successfully in their academic pursuit. Majority of the respondents also concur to orientating new entrants on the use and importance of the learner support services. The respondents also agree that use of phone calls and social media will improve the quality of learner support services

### Test of Hypothesis

**Hypothesis:** The learners support services has no significant effect on the academic achievement of learners.

**Table 6:** Level of significance in Learners' Support Services and Academic Achievement

Variables	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	df	r-cal	r-tab	P	Inference
<b>Effect of Learner Support System</b>	250	43.67	8.180	0.5	0.255	0.195	0.05	Significant
<b>Academic Achievement of Learners</b>	250	49.67	16.93					

The result in Table 6 revealed that there is a poor relationship between the LSS and academic achievement of the learners. Hence, this implies that learners support services has no significant effect on the academic achievement of learners.

## Discussion

In Open and Distance Learning, the learners' support services (LSS) play a vital role in the academic success of the learners. This study looked into the perception of learners on the quality of learners support services obtained in the sampled tertiary institution. The results revealed that the attitudes of learners towards the learners support services was low and need to improve upon. Learners feel that they can handle all academic-related issues by themselves. In addition, learners only make use of the learners' support service at the beginning of an academic year. Falode *et al.* (2020) pointed that, an increase in learners support services will amount to retention of the already enrolled ODL learners and facilitate completion rate. This implies that learners' attitudes toward the learners support services will bring about a positive correlation once the services meet their needs.

On the level of satisfaction on the utilization of the LSS, the learners showed a positive level of satisfaction with the utilization of the LSS. Although, they do not find it easily accessible. The finding did not correlate Kaur (2016) who revealed in their study that majority of learners were not satisfied with the support system provided to them in higher education institutions as such they had negative attitude towards ODL. Furthermore, the learners perceived that the LSS can only be useful to them academically particularly during examination period alone. This is inclined with Cowden and Sze, (2012) when they find out that, "what learners think and feel about any learning tool might indeed affect their learning behaviour and learning outcome".

The study revealed that the LSS has a positive effect on the academic achievement of the learners. The learners agreed that the utilization of the LSS increase their knowledge on the use of the internet and improves the zeal for academic research. This supports the study of Shikulo and Lekhetho (2020) who stated that effective learners support services makes ODL learners able to cope with both academic and personal pressures; and results in higher education institutions providing quality education and learners' satisfaction.

On the ways of improving the quality of support services rendered to learners, the learners agreed on the need for a robust LSS such as orientation programme for new learners and readily accessible services that will enable learners navigate successfully in their academic pursuit. This correlates the report of Dlamini *et al.* (2021) who posted that key areas such as orientation of new students, academic, psychosocial, technological, online learning and administrative support as well as support for vulnerable students such as those with disabilities in LSS can enhance satisfaction of learners in ODL. Shonhiwa and Ndudzo, (2016) had earlier reported that the quality of student support services can be used to judge the effectiveness of an institution. This further correlates the report of Zuhairi *et al.* (2020) who argued that technology has enabled the development of a flexible, interactive, and personalised learning environment yet student support services have remained the same yet these environments require new ways of providing learning support for open, distance, and online students

## Conclusion

In conclusion, improving quality of learner support services and learner characteristics have a considerable influence on academic performance of distance learners. While quality learner support services provide cognitive, affective and systemic support to the learner and, therefore, the learning environment, learner characteristics determine the way the learner takes advantage of that environment to realize academic success. However, limited access to and inadequate provisions of learner support services inhibit their full contribution to academic performance. Thus, policy and practical interventions aimed at improving academic performance must be directed at both learner support services and learner characteristics.

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