

## LEARNER SUPPORT SYSTEMS AND BLENDED ODL PROGRAMMES

*Author: Imam, Abdurrahman (2348032874064)*

*Co-Author: Bello, Idris (2348036967483)*

*Co-Author: Oche, Ori (2348169808512)*

*Federal Polytechnic Kaduna*

*Computer Science Department & Directorate of ICT*

[imamabdul@kadunapolytechnic.edu.ng](mailto:imamabdul@kadunapolytechnic.edu.ng)

[i.bello@kadunapolytechnic.edu.ng](mailto:i.bello@kadunapolytechnic.edu.ng)

[ori.oche@kadunapolytechnic.edu.ng](mailto:ori.oche@kadunapolytechnic.edu.ng)

### ABSTRACT

*This paper has analysed the status of Nigerian Tertiary Institution in relation to support systems for learners, and blended open and distance learning (ODL) with technological advancement and innovation in quality of the contents, affordability, accessibility, flexibility and self-assessment. It focuses on review and enhancement of the existing resources and solutions, and strategies of designing in-house, more user-friendly, self-motivated driven application that will make users/learners develop interest in it. It is proposing a solution to be developed by the learners themselves under supervision of their assigned project supervisors (lecturers of the Universities), in addition to outsourced technology and applications as support systems for learners. The blended open and distance learning will pave a way for slow, average, and fast learners to learn at their own pace until they cover their curriculum and a suitable environment will make some fast learners to explore more concept or ideas, be more creative and innovative.*

**Keywords:** Learner, support, blended, open, distance, learning

## **1.0 Introduction**

With the current education system in the Nigerian tertiary institutions, there is need to look at different angles of reforming it through adopting better educational strategy considering accessibility and affordability, as well as effective IT driven application in enhancing the quality of the education. Open and distance learning serves as a gateway for e-learning and blended education systems.

One of the main areas to which every educational institution in the world pays attention is the application of technology in education, which improves its activities towards academic excellence by making the academic atmosphere conducive for successful teaching and learning processes. In this digital age, no university can claim to use information and technology without learner support systems that assist students in studying at their own timetables or leisure time and speed.

The aim of this paper is to review the current status of research on these three issues and to propose recommendations for further research on open distance education support for learners. The learner-centred approach and cost-effectiveness of learner support are some crucial topics that have emerged as part of the areas of this research on learner support, based on a thorough analysis of the literature.

## **2.0 Open Distance Learning Programmes**

In 1728, one of the earliest attempts was advertised. This was for "Caleb Philipps, Teacher of the new method of Short Hand" in the Boston Gazette (a Boston newspaper), who searched out students who wanted to learn by weekly mailed lessons. Some of the researchers argue that distance education originated in 1840 by Sir Isaac Pitman, who taught his students through mailing a text of shorthand on postcards. A few major advances have affected and pushed distance learning forward since the late 1800s. In 1873, in Boston, Massachusetts, Ana Eliot Ticknor founded the official correspondence education program, named the Society to Promote Home Studies. The University of Queensland in Australia then set up its Department of Correspondence Studies in 1911, which also relied on the postal system (Holmberg, Börje 2005).

The technique of using a postal system continued until the middle of the century, when Forbes article states that "Chicago public television station WTTW, in collaboration with the local Board of Education, televises college courses in 1956 and more than 15,000 students enrolled in five years". Sunrise Semester was launched by New York University and CBS, which also provides TV courses for credit, and issued a bachelor's degree to a housewife through these TV courses in 1962. New York Times runs an article congratulating the housewife on successful completion of the programme.

The next major invention to revolutionize distance education after television was the personal computer with internet capabilities. The University of Phoenix opened a fully online educational institution in 1989, offering both bachelor's and master's degrees. Jones International University, which became the first accredited and entirely web-based university, was founded by entrepreneurs Glen Jones and Bernard Luskin in 1996.

Distance learning (DE) and open distance learning (ODL) are interdisciplinary areas that have arisen in human history. In both areas, technology has played an important role and it is evident that as technology advances, both fields are changing in line with developments by

providing learners with new learning opportunities. Distance learning has been viewed in the past as an inferior option to conventional physical education, with a focus on face-to-face rather than the result.

## **2.1 Objectives of Open Distance Learning in Nigeria**

With the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) becoming the first educational institution to start open and distance learning, which was founded in 1983, the number of universities (including but not limited to University of Nigeria Nsukka; University of Ibadan; ABU Zaria; and State University Lagos) and other tertiary institutions offering open and distance learning has been growing. If it has not already changed, public perception of open and distance learning is changing, and distance education is considered today to be a significant and increasingly important part of higher education. In Nigeria, there are national diploma programmes that have begun to emerge offered by polytechnics such as Federal Polytechnic Kaduna (Open Distance and Flexible e-Learning, ODFeL), not just universities offering degrees and masters programmes. Distance learners have become more nuanced, varied, and challenging than ever before and they need much more than well-designed learning content.

The revised national education policy (Federal Republic of Nigeria, FRN 2004) set out in detail the purpose of distance learning to be:

- a) Provide access to quality education and equity in educational opportunities for those who otherwise would have been denied.
- b) Meet special needs of employers by mounting special certificate courses for their employees at their work place.
- c) Encourage internationalization especially of tertiary education curricula.
- d) Ameliorate the effect of internal and external brain drain in tertiary institutions by utilizing Nigerian experts as teachers regardless of their locations or places of work.

In order to achieve these objectives, it is specified that Nigeria's federal government must ensure that distance education programs are equal in structure and status to those provided through face-to-face teaching and that Nigeria's distance education program is promoted and governed by the government (Mudasiru, Olalere 2006).

## **2.2 Learner Support Systems**

The framework of learner support is quite a vague term and has varied from one researcher to another in its meaning. Some researchers see infrastructure and interactivity as important in identifying support for learners, while others concentrate more on individualizing or customizing programs (Garrison & Baynton, 1987; Tait, 1995; Thorpe, 1988).

The definition of supplementary versus holistic approaches to assist learners in distance learning environments was introduced by Robinson (1995) and Tait (1995). The former has a limitation of assisting learners with an add-on to course materials or other experiences of learning while the latter considers it to be a key element that pervades the entire education programme.

Learner support is all about having access to both opportunities and possibilities that contribute to lifelong learning from this complementary viewpoint (Reid, 1995; Smith, 2000). It expands the range and length of services and emphasizes the importance of providing pre-enrollment and post-graduation stages with quality information, advice and guidance.

### **2.2.1 Learner Support Components**

This research is underpinned by extensive model created by Keast (1997). Four distinctive forms of distance learner support were established by him:

- a) administrative support;
- b) instructional support;
- c) technical support; and
- d) counselling or tutorial support.

This list of components by Keast does not cover all facets of learner support such as library support, except other essential components. Nevertheless the main roles of learner support are encapsulated and most of the support systems proposed by other researchers or practitioners come under the categories of Keast (Aoki & Pogroszewski, 1998; Frieden, 1999; Reid, 1995; Sache & Mark, 2000; Tait, 1995)

### **2.3 Tutorial Support**

Academic or tutorial support components are primarily based in the U.K. on the Open University model, where students have access to local study centres and tutors who track their academic progress and assist to solve their academic problems (Sahoo, 1993; Watkins & Wright, 1991). Academic support gears concentrate on promoting collaborative learning and increasing interactivity between distance learners and lecturers or among themselves in more recent web-based distance education programs. Examples of such programmes include syndicates or learning groups, on-demand teacher support, seminars to help students improve particular skills or bridge ability gaps, supervisory support for research projects, and learning contracts (Carnwell, Lyall & McNamara, 2000; Carlson, Downs, Repman, & Clark, 1998).

### **3.0 Administrative Support**

Administrative support systems include managing basic program functions, such as admissions, registration, course scheduling, student records, and financial transactions, according to Frieden (1999). As web-based database systems have become more open and students are given more access to and control over the overall administrative process, these resources are also taken for granted. However, administrative support services cause the greatest dissatisfaction for distance learners when they are not carefully arranged.

### **3.1 Technical Support**

Technical support is described by Abate (1999) as monitoring the efficient operation of distribution media and providing technical assistance. While several research studies have been carried out on the use of new technologies in the design and development of distance learning courses, few of them are specifically focused on the use of new technologies to provide distance learning support services.

Examples of technical support resources include providing students with a toll-free number to contact technical support staff who enable faculty to arrange online office hours via e-mails or other electronic communication methods, and dedicating additional on-campus facilities to support the off-campus population.

### **3.2 Counseling Support**

Support for therapy covers different aspects of guidance and consulting. The emphasis of such services appears to be on how to deal with academic issues and/or career advising in correspondence studies or other delivery media with more individualistic interfaces. Counseling support systems also address ways to develop communication skills and increase interactivity in many web-based distance education programs, even helping students network with alumni and create a sense of community (Aoki & Pogroszewski, 1998).

In order to familiarize them with the programs that are available, many institutions often need orientation sessions that carry distance learners to campus. These sessions will offer an opportunity to learn about the interfaces used to access the programs and to connect with on-campus support staff (Thompson, Winterfield, & Flanders, 1998).

### **3.3 Library Support**

To achieve academic excellence in post-secondary education, access to appropriate library facilities and resources is necessary. Distance learners must also be entitled to library facilities and resources similar to those offered in conventional college environments for students. Traditional on-campus library facilities, however, frequently fail to fulfill the library criteria of distance learners.

In response to such inequalities, the Association of College and Research Libraries (2000) has proposed a set of guidelines for distance education services to ensure that library support meets the needs of students in fulfilling course assignments (e.g., needed and additional readings) and as necessary to accommodate other information needs. Some basic examples of such library facilities include regional cards for borrowers, membership of consortia between academic libraries and fax/online capabilities for timely document delivery. (Aoki & Pogroszewski, 1998). Stephens (1996) emphasized in his analysis of the literature on distance learning library support that what is in great need of library support is not only books and journals per se, but also providing students with guidance and other resources to help them perform independent library study. Distance library programs need to be more personalized and empowered for distance learners to be able to fill the void. Examples of such facilities, including the provision of toll-free telephone numbers for the library help desk and links to several databases and an online public access catalog, were suggested by Aoki and Pogroszewski (1998). A combination of special funding arrangements, strategic planning, and promotion is important to provide such facilities, as many researchers and librarians have long indicated (Smith, 2000).

### **4.0 Findings**

Many researchers have projected that technical developments would promote the provision of quality support services with improved interactivity and automation (Bates, 1994). However many problems remain the same with all these drastic improvements in terms of course delivery, from communication to audio/video conferencing systems and the Internet, with the technology having the ability to add another source of trouble. Some of the remaining distance education learner support problems are more important and have greater consequences for future study than others.

#### **4.1 Learner Support System Cost-Effectiveness**

The first thing to consider is how to scale customized support services cost-effectively. Support programmes need to be more individualized to better serve the diverse needs of different distance learners (Brent, 1999; Sahoo, 1993). However, the provision of such services is not an inexpensive proposition, and the underlying presumption is that the greater the commitment to the provision of support services for learners, the greater the rate of completion and/or learning outcomes (European Commission, 1996).

There are very few studies in this field that provide guidance and most of them concentrate on cost analysis of technology infrastructure (Brent, 1999; Rumble, 1999; Whalen & Wright, 1999). While these cost assessment studies provide policymakers with some insight into the types and range of costs associated with distance learning, in general, from this wider context, we can only conclude how much it would cost to provide such support services.

It is also even more difficult to calculate the cost-effectiveness of such support services because there are relatively few references to direct and indirect costs associated with different support services (Tait, 1995; Wagner, 1999). The mission and goals of the organization concerned are often determined by the question of cost-effectiveness in the provision of learner support services. For instance, the institution is more concerned with services or income from the provision of distance learning programmes. If the support system is designed to do more with less, the cost-effectiveness of learner support is likely to be achieved and this requires some ingenuity on the part of institution (Hickman, 1999).

#### **4.2 Adopting Learner-Centred Approach**

The need to take into account method of approach while planning to design and implement a learner support programmes. No one can understand better than the students themselves the challenges that distance learners have to go through. However, learner support is focused on top-down provision rather than review of learner needs in many organizations providing distance education programs (Sache & Mark, 2000; Scalzo et al., 2000; Tait, 1995).

It does not seem unreasonable to say that there is an overwhelming trend within the sector to deliver distance learning systems from the point of view of the educational institution rather than student learning at a distance (D. Sewart, 1987).

#### **5.0 Conclusion**

This paper concludes that the best way to employ existing learner support system and adopt open distance learning programmes is by modifying the solutions. However, engaging students and lecturers (researchers and developers) to develop in-house application is the best alternative solution, considering affordability, accessibility, flexibility and self-assessment in the design and development stages. There have been frequent and loud statements that the provision of adequate learner support services would improve the quality of learning as well as student retention and satisfaction. In addition to the learner support systems, provision of blended open distance learning proves to be better way of addressing drawbacks in online programmes and traditional classes, which relatively correlate the separate programmes for better solutions.

Finally, in the design and implementation of learner support systems, potential research needs to take a learner-centred approach and build ways to define, assess, synthesize and evaluate student needs and consistently adjust the support system to those needs.

## References

- Abate, A. K. (1999). *Support services for distance education*. Retrieved August 22, 2003, from <http://eduport.com/>
- Aoki, K., & Pogroszewski, D. (1998). Virtual university reference model: A guide to delivering education and support services to the distance learner. *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration*, 1(3). Retrieved August 21, 2000, from <https://uwgonline.westga.edu/~distance/ojdla/fall13/aoki13.pdf>
- Bates, A. W. (1994). Distance education. In T. P. Husen & T. N. Postlethwaite (Eds.), *The international encyclopedia of education* (2nd ed.) (p. 87). Oxford: Elsevier Science
- Carlson, R. D., Downs, E., Repman, J., & Clark, K. F. (1998, March, 1998). *So you want to develop web-based instruction: Points to ponder*. Paper presented at the SITE 98: Society for Information Technology & Teacher Education International Conference, Washington, DC.
- Garrison, D. R., & Baynton, M. (1987). Beyond independence in distance education: The concept of control. *American Journal of Distance Education*, 1(3), 3-15.
- Holmberg, B. (2006). *Growth and structure of distance education* (3rd ed.). London: Croom Helm
- Keast. (1997). Toward an effective model for implementing distance education programs. *The American Journal of Distance Education*, 11(2), 39-55
- Reid, J. (1995). Managing learning support. In F. Lockwood (Ed.), *Open and distance learning today* (pp. 265-275). London: Routledge
- Sahoo. (1993). *Higher education at a distance*. New Delhi: Sanchar Publishing House.
- Smith, R. (2000, August). *Library? What library? Building research requirements into distance courses*. Paper presented at the 16th Annual Conference on Distance Teaching & Learning, Madison, Wisconsin
- Tait, A. (1995). Student support in open and distance learning. In F. Lockwood (Ed.), *Open and distance Learning today* (pp. 232-241). London: Routledge
- Watkins, B. L., & Wright, S. J. (Eds.). (1991). *The foundations of American distance education*. Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company