

Students' Perception of the Quality of Learner Support Services in National Open University of Nigeria

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Abstract

Learner support is an important benchmark of open and distance learning because of the character of the learners and the temporal separation of the learner and the teacher. But the level of importance attached to these services and the level of satisfaction may vary according to gender. Thus this study examines the perception of students on the quality of learner support services in Port Harcourt study centre of NOUN. Two research questions and two hypotheses were posed and tested. The methodology adopted is a descriptive survey method, the instrument for data collection was questionnaire and the statistical tools used were mean, standard deviation and t test. The result of the test of hypotheses indicates that there were no significant differences in the level of importance and level of satisfaction between male and female learners. However, the study indicates that male learners attached less importance to learner support services and are less satisfied with the quality of the services. Our conclusion is that given the high mean score of the level of importance and the low mean score for the level of satisfaction the quality of learner support is not as high as the students would expect. This therefore calls for an improvement in the quality of learner support services to sustain learners' commitment and continuity in the programme in NOUN.

Keywords: Learner Support Services, Distance learners, Adults, Tutorials

Introduction

Open and distance learning in Nigeria is not new; the earliest and pioneering effort in open and distance learning was by correspondence colleges based in London. Later the City Correspondence College Lagos and the University of Ibadan Extra Mural Studies Department were the first indigenous institutions that provided open and distance learning preparing candidates for London General Certificate Examination (GCE) Ordinary and Advance Levels and the award of university degree respectively. According to Iherjirika (2003) the University of Ibadan distance programme had a false start and was widely criticised within the institution for lack of confidence in the quality of distance learning, the quasi-permanent separation of the learners from the educators and the weak infrastructural base for delivery. In 1982 the Federal Government of Nigeria joined in the wave of open learning by establishing the National Open University (NOU). This university was closed down two years later by the military government because of various defects and reasons which the government felt should be corrected (National Open University of Nigeria, 2007). Also in the late 1990's several universities established satellite campuses and study centres in major cities throughout the country using primary and secondary school buildings with classes organised on weekends. This was widely criticised by the public and the academia. The system became a public discourse with two opposing camps one eulogising the system for accommodating the mass army of university applicants who could not secure placement in the regular programmes of the universities because of the limited spaces available in the universities and the bottleneck associated with Joint Matriculation Examination. In the other camp were those who criticised the system for providing substandard open and distance learning and the provision of distance education without recourse to the basic principles of distance and open learning system. The National University Commission (NUC) a federal agency for regulating university education in Nigeria intervened in what then was considered as a chaotic system and ordered that all satellite campuses be closed down or the universities operating such campuses be sanctioned. Later the Federal Government through the Federal Ministry of Education organised several conferences and workshops in Lagos and Abuja (Abuja workshop was organised in collaboration with UNESCO on June 4-7, 2001) on open and distance learning leading to the formulation of a new national policy on open and distance education. Some of the conferences were organised in collaboration with the Commonwealth of Learning. Following this new policy, the Federal Government revisited the National Open University act and established the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) in 2002 with centres in over 30 cities in Nigeria and with student population of over 50,000.

Distance learners are predominantly adult learners (Dabbagh, 2007 and Galusha, 1997). As adult learners, they are most often quite busy and prefer flexible learning system which will allow them learn and work as well as learn and engage in other life activities. Adult learners do have special problems some of which

could be political, psychological, physiological, economical and cultural which impose varying degree of learning difficulties (Oyedemi, 1988; Home & Hinds, 2000; Barikor, 2002; and Galusha, 1997). Similarly adult learners because of their diverse backgrounds and learning needs do encounter such barriers like age related sickness and time constrain due to social, economic and family chores. According to American Council on Education (2008) adult learners have more challenging learning difficulties arising from their demographic characteristics, attitudinal patterns, and structural designs of the learning activities. According to Boud, Cohen and Walker (1993) as cited in Michelson (2011) adult learners experience can be a trap which limits learning. This perhaps is possible because of adults' perception of difficulties encountered in initial learning at tender age and later life experiences.

Women with family responsibilities are one such group whose needs differ. Not only do these women retain their primary responsibility of family work, most of them continue their employment or small scale business to support their family. Burns and Gabrich (2001) observed that when women enter colleges their role demand expands. They face pressure from their family, spouse, home, and employers. American Council on Education (2008) pointed out that because of these problems most adults do not engage in formal learning activity, however when they do, these difficulties have been responsible for increasing rate of adult dropout in most adult learning institutions including distance learning programmes. Home *et al* (2000) pointed out that more often than not more women drop out of university than men for non-academic reasons. These role strains can be reduced through institutional support according to Mikolaj and Bogg, (1991) cited in Homes *et al*, (2000).

In open and distance learning as an independent learning system with emphasis on self-directed learning the onus of learning lies with the learners. The learners have to develop a better self-concept and coping strategy to overcome isolation, lack of regular peer group interaction, and the absence of close supervision and direction by the tutor. This is because open and distance learning entails the physical separation of the learners and the teachers during the learning process. This separation could result in a serious disconnect without learner support services to solve the diverse learning difficulties.

The term learner support refers to the services provided to distance learners so that they can overcome barriers to learning and complete their studies successfully (Gatsha & Evans, 2010). According to Gatsha *et al* learner support service is an academic assistance given to a learner enrolled for a distance education programme in order to enhance performance and ensure completion. Simpon (2002) pointed out that activities that make up learners support services in the open and distance learning are: orientation seminar, group tutorials, assignment feedbacks, tutorial letters, radio broadcast, mock examination, individualized help by tutors, weekend tutorials, study skills and motivational seminars. Some of these activities are part of the learner support services provided by the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN). The philosophy and overriding objectives of the NOUN support service is the need for the learners to be contacted and counselled concerning issues such as study and learning ethics by the facilitators, the need to offer learners help to plan a study programme so that they will maintain study commitment and not drop out and the need to be counselled on their performance after evaluation. According to National Open University of Nigeria (2007) learners bring their previous study approach to bear in their attitude to learning and the learners encounter a number difficulty in rejoining academic life and the world of learning. Some of the difficulties encountered by the distance learners are: locating the first contact, selecting and registering course, assessing information, use of information technology, and understanding the Open University programme. The mode of instructional delivery in NOUN includes printed material, audio tapes and videotapes, CD-Roms and tutorial sessions. The rate of non-completion in NOUN programmes seem to be high and the students tend to complain so much about the recently introduced e-examination system in spite of the orientation programme and other support services provided by NOUN through its numerous study centres. Despite the importance of learner support services, most research on support services focus on the forms of the services and not on the importance attached to it by either the male or female learners as well as the level of satisfaction across gender. It is against this backdrop that the researchers investigated students' perception of the quality of learner support services provided for the distance learners in the NOUN.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the distance learners' perception of the quality of learner support services in NOUN. The specific objectives of the study are:

- I. To examine the extent of the importance male and female distance learners attached to the various learner support services in NOUN.
- II. To examine the extent of the level of male and female distance learners satisfaction with the various learners support services in NOUN.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the conduct of the study:

- I. What is the extent of the importance male and female distance learners attached to the various learner support services in NOUN?
- II. What is the extent of the level of male and female distance learners' satisfaction with the various learner support services provided in NOUN?

Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were tested in this study at 0.05 level of significance:

HO1: there is no significant difference in the extent of importance male and female distance learners attached to various learner support services in NOUN.

HO2: there is no significant difference in the extent of male and female distance learners' level of satisfaction with the various learner support services in NOUN.

Methodology

The study was carried out in Port Harcourt study centre of the National Open University of Nigeria. A descriptive survey research design was adopted. The survey research design focuses on people; their opinions, attitudes and behaviour (Gale, Gall & Borg, 2003). The survey research design was adopted because the study involved collecting data from a sample of distance learners regarding the importance they attached to and the level of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with learner support services in Port Harcourt study centre of NOUN. The choice of Port Harcourt for this study is because Port Harcourt has one of the highest students' enrolments in NOUN. The population of the study consisted of the total of 764 distance learners in Port Harcourt study centre. The proportionate and stratified random sampling techniques were adopted in determining the sample size. 30 per cent of the target population constitute the sample of the study. The bases of stratification are sex, level of studies and course of study. The proportionate sampling was adopted to ensure fair representation of all gender and those in bachelor's degree and postgraduate degree level. The sample size for the study is 229 distance learners made up of 104 male adult distance learners and 125 female adult distance learners. Thus the questionnaire was administered to 104 male learners and 125 female learners.

The instrument for this study was questionnaire made up of 22 items structured on a 4 point rating scale. The first section of the instrument which has to do with the importance the learners attached to the various support services has the following options: to a great extent (GE) = 4; to some extent (SE) = 3; to a low extent (LE) = 2; Not at all (NA) = 1. The second section of the instrument which has to do with the level of satisfaction or dissatisfaction has the following options: Strongly Satisfactory (SS) = 4; Satisfactory (S) = 3; Dissatisfactory (D) = 2; Strongly Dissatisfactory (SD) = 1.

The content validity of the instrument was validated by two experts in Adult Education with specialization in Distance Education as well as a Counsellor in NOUN. The reliability of the instrument was established using test retest method and Crobach's alpha procedure was used to calculate the level of reliability and a co-efficient value of 0.75 was attained. The validated questionnaire was administered with the assistance of tutorial facilitators. All the questionnaires were properly filled. The data collected were analysed using mean and standard deviation (SD) to answer the research questions. Any mean score equals or above 2.5 is accepted as either important or satisfactory. While any mean response from 2.49 and below are rejected and as such regarded as less important or less satisfactory. The hypotheses were tested using a t-test at 0.05 level of significance.

Results

Extent of the importance male and female distance learners attached to the various learner support services in NOUN

Table 1: Extent of the importance distance learners attached to learner support services

S/N	STATEMENT	Female Learners			Male Learners		
		X	SD	Remark	X	SD	Remark
1	The provision of learning materials like course materials is very important	2.79	1.134	Accepted	2.94	1.171	Accepted
2	The provision of weekend tutorials sessions is very important	3.03	1.073	Accepted	2.98	1.009	Accepted
3	The provision of administrative support services for course	2.98	1.04	Accepted	2.84	1.133	Accepted

	registration is very important						
4	The provision of counselling services is very important	2.75	1.15	Accepted	2.56	1.044	Accepted
5	Orientation programmes are very important for new students and necessary any time an innovative programme is introduced	2.44	1.104	Rejected	2.97	1.113	Accepted
6	Motivational workshops for students is very important	2.88	1.105	Accepted	2.46	0.989	Rejected
7	Orientation for E- examination is very important	2.92	1.245	Accepted	3.07	0.997	Accepted
8	Information from NOUN Website is very important	2.73	1.036	Accepted	2.05	0.998	Rejected
9	Assignment/TMA feedback is very important	2.57	1.112	Accepted	2.25	1.098	Rejected
10	the provision of virtual library is very important	2.15	0.933	Rejected	2.12	1.006	Rejected
	Grand Mean	2.72	1.224		2.62	1.056	

Table 1 shows that 6 out of the 10 items were considered as important learner support services by male adult learners in NOUN Port Harcourt Study centre; while all were considered important except two by the female adult learners. The table shows that provision of learning materials, provision of weekend tutorials, provision of administrative services, provision of counselling services, orientation programme at the beginning of the programme, and orientation for E-examination are considered important by the male respondents. On the other hand, female learners considered all of these as important except orientation programmes for at the beginning of the programme. The female respondents also considered as important information from the University website, and assignment/TMA feedback.

The Extent of Learners' Satisfaction with the Provision of Learners Support Services

Table 2: The Extent of Learners' Satisfaction with the Provision of Learners Support Services in NOUN

S/N	STATEMENT	Female Learners			Male Learners		
		X	SD	Remark	X	SD	Remark
1	To what extent are you satisfied with the time when the learning materials (course materials) are provided?	2.37	1.09	Rejected	2.31	1.14	Rejected
2	To what extent are you satisfied with the quality of the content of the course materials?	2.77	1.15	Accepted	2.60	0.89	Accepted
3	To what extent are you satisfied with the quality of the production of the course material?	2.68	1.12	Accepted	2.76	1.18	Accepted
4	To what extent are you satisfied with the administrative support services provided by the study centre office in respect of course registration?	2.28	1.05	Rejected	2.27	1.09	Rejected
5	To what extent are you satisfied with the weekend tutorial sessions	3.00	1.03	Accepted	2.72	1.46	Accepted

	organised by the facilitators?						
6	To what extent are you satisfied with the counselling services provided in the study centre office?	2.31	1.06	Rejected	2.34	1.07	Rejected
7	To what extent are you satisfied with the orientation programme organised for new students?	2.76	1.09	Accepted	2.24	0.92	Rejected
8	To what extent are you satisfied with the motivational workshops for students?	2.38	1.05	Rejected	2.04	0.54	Rejected
9	To what extent are you satisfied with orientation for E- examination?	2.30	1.08	Rejected	2.61	0.67	Accepted
10	To what extent are you satisfied with the assignments/TMA feedbacks?	2.27	0.93	Rejected	2.69	1.57	Accepted
11	To what extent are you satisfied with the information posted in NOUN website?	2.68	0.97	Accepted	2.62	0.95	Accepted
12	To what extent are you satisfied with the provision of virtual library by NOUN?	2.24	1.13	Rejected	2.35	0.98	Rejected
	Grand Mean	2.50	1.06		2.46	1.03	

Table 2 shows that 5 out of the 12 learner support services were considered satisfactory by the female adult learners in NOUN Port Harcourt study centre, while 6 learner support services were considered satisfactory by adult male learner. The table shows that the male respondents are satisfied with the provision of the following learner support services: the quality of the content of course material, quality of production of course materials, quality of tutorial sessions, quality of orientation for e-examination, the manner of TMA feedback, and the information posted on the university website. The female respondents are satisfied with quality of content of course materials, quality of production of course materials, the quality and manner of orientation for new students and the information posted in website of the university whereas they are not satisfied with orientation for e-examination, and the manner of TMA for which their male counterparts are satisfied with.

Table 3: t-test calculation for the test of hypothesis 1

Source of Variance	NO	\bar{X}	SD	DF	t-cal	t-crit	Decision
Female adult learners	125	2.72	1.22	227	0.65	1.96	Accepted
Male adult learners	104	2.62	1.05				

The data in table 3 indicates that the mean response of the female adult learners was 2.72 while that of the male adult learners was 2.62. The data was further subjected to t-test analysis to find out whether there is a significant difference between the mean ratings of the extent of importance attached by the two groups to the learner support services provided by NOUN. The result of the analysis shows that t-calculated of 0.65 is less than the t-critical value of 1.96; hence the null hypothesis is accepted. This implies that both male and female adult learners in the National Open University of Nigeria attached the same importance to the learner support services provided by the university.

Table 4: t-test calculation for the test of hypothesis 2

Source of Variance	NO	\bar{X}	SD	DF	t-cal	t-crit	Decision
Female adult learners	125	2.50	1.06	227	0.026	1.96	Accepted
Male adult learners	104	2.46	1.03				

The data in table 3 indicates that the mean response of the female adult learners was 2.50 while that of the male adult learners was 2.46. The data was further subjected to t-test analysis to find out whether there is a significant difference between the mean ratings of the extent of importance attached by the two groups to the learner support services provided by NOUN. The result of the analysis shows that t-calculated of 0.026 is less than the t-critical value of 1.96; hence the null hypothesis is accepted. This implies that both male and female adult learners in the National Open University drive the same level of satisfaction from learner support services provided by the university.

Discussion

The findings of this study show that the provision of learner support services are of more importance to female adult learners than male adult learners in NOUN. The grand mean response of the female respondents is 2.72 while that of male is 2.62. This goes to affirm the fact that the female adult learners in the distance learning programme are most likely to have more learning difficulty than men and so needs more learner support services than men so that they can overcome barriers to learning and complete their studies successfully. The finding of this study further collaborates the assertion of Merdinger (1991) that it is not surprising that women dropout of university often than men for non-academic reasons or as Marlow (1993) puts it that women are more vulnerable to role strain; consequently according to Thorpe (2002) and Simpson (2002), personal, institutional and academic support is needed. However, the study shows that the provision of learning materials like course material, weekend tutorials, provision of administrative support system for student enrolment and registration were considered important by both men and women. This findings is in line with the observation of Usun (2004) that the importance attached to tutorial in spite of the fact that distance education is most often conceived as the physical separation of the learners and the teachers underscore the dependency on educational institution, the tutor and the surface approach to learning by Wheeler (2002) cited in Nyerere, Gravenir, and Mse (2012) as well as the need for cohort group support and clarification in the learning process.

Both male and female learners considered counselling service and orientation for E-examination as important, with the female respondents having the highest mean response in both. The importance of counselling service perhaps may be associated with the fact that the learners are self-directed learners with high need for internal and external motivation to learn. Where the motivation seems to be low the level of learning achievement drops. The counselling services enable learners to identify their learning needs and to reflect on their competence and expectations as regard the personal and professional commitment to succeed. On the other hand orientation for e-examination is considered important to acquaint the learners with computer based examination system which they are not very familiar with and to reduce some form of anxiety associated with those who are having such examination for the first time. The study also shows areas where there is wider variation in the level of importance attached to the various learner support services in NOUN among male and female learners. To the male adult learners e-examination has the highest mean score indicating that they attached more importance to e-examination orientation; whereas to the female adult learners weekend tutorial has the highest mean score indicating that weekend tutorial is the most important. The findings of this study further collaborates the observation of Oosthuizen, Loedolff and Hamman (2010) in South Africa that male students in open and distance learning regard all learner support areas as less important compared to female students

Male learners attached more importance to orientation programmes for new students than female learners. This perhaps may be as result of the need to socialize and interact with other learners, and to understand the distance learning system. However, a test of the null hypothesis indicates that there is no significant difference in the mean rating of the level of importance attached to the various learners support services.

The overall mean response of the extent of the level of satisfaction among the male and female learners in NOUN in the provision of learner support services is 2.50 and 2.46 respectively. This indicated that female learners have greater satisfaction in the provision of learner support services than male learners. This finding is in line with the observation of Oosthuizen *et al* that female students are more satisfied with learner support services than male students. However, the test of hypothesis 2 shows that there is no significant differences in

the level of extent of satisfaction in the provision of learner support services in NOUN among male and female learners. The study shows that both male and female learners were satisfied with the quality of content of course materials, the quality of production of the materials, the provision of weekend tutorials and the information posted on the school website. Weekend tutorial has the highest extent of satisfaction for both male and female learners. This indicated that effective and quality tutorials were provided at the study centre and the high dependence of the learners on the tutorials and course materials provided.

On the other hand the study shows that both male and female learners were not satisfied with the extent of the timing of the delivery of learning materials, the provision of virtual library, the provision of motivational workshop, counselling services and administrative support services. Most often course materials are either delivered late or are not available. It is reported that in some programmes students do not write examination in courses they have registered because the course materials are not available. Reading the course material would have been complimented with a virtual library but most of the students have no knowledge of the existence of such library and a few have been accessing it. Students can access the online library by logging onto <http://www.nou.edu.ng/noun/depts/elibrary/library2.htm> . Furthermore, wide differences were observed in the extent of dissatisfaction among male and female learners. Female learners were dissatisfied with the extent of provision of e-examination orientation and feedback from assignment/TMA, whereas the male learners were dissatisfied with orientation for new students. It is reported that Assignment/TMA(s) are centrally given and are most often delayed and sometimes it was given towards the examination or after the examination. When TMA (s) are given at such periods it will be of no consequence because the essence of the TMA is to ascertain the level of student's progression and the feedback process is to further guide the learner. The male adult learners are grossly dissatisfied with the provision of motivational workshop whereas the female learners have the highest dissatisfaction with the provision of virtual library.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Learner support service is an important element of distance education and the type of learner support services depends on the nature of the educational institution and the learners. Learner support services consist of a wide range of human and non-human resources that the learner needs to guide and facilitate learning in a distance education programme. These include weekend tutorials, counselling services, administrative support for student enrolment, provision of course materials, orientation programme and motivation workshops. The study found out that students support services are important to the learners but the importance attached to the various support services depends on the learners. This is why the standard deviation was quiet high indicating a relative large fluctuation. This means some students rated learner support very low, while others rated it very high on the importance and satisfaction scale. Thus from the findings it can be concluded that women attached more importance to learner support services and are more satisfied with the provision of learner support services provided by NOUN.

Of extreme significance is the conclusion that the mean rating of the importance attached by the learner was much higher than the mean rating of the level of satisfaction, which indicates that the quality of learner support services provided in NOUN is not as high as the students expected. Furthermore, the result of this study indicates that the quality of learner support services needs to be improved upon; that there should be prompt delivery of learning material and giving of assignment/TMA as well as prompt feedback for assignment/TMA; that more diversified learner support services should be introduced using such services like C-D Rom, internet web based instruction, video conferencing and that student be given opportunity to evaluate the support services provided on an annual basis. However, because of the limited population from where the sample is being drawn we cannot make sweeping generalization rather wider and elaborate study is require involving a most study centres of the National Open University of Nigeria.

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