

Learner Administrative Support Services and Retention of Students in Open Distance Learning Programmes: The Case of Selected Universities in Kenya

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Abstract

Across the globe, there is increased demand for Open Distance Learning as a result of advancement in growth of Information Communication and Technology. Open Distance Learning has been seen to be flexible and therefore the learners can study from anywhere, anytime and from the convenience. This has enable learners to juggle between social commitments, work, and still pursue education. However, Kenya faces low retention rates in Open Distance Learning programmes in most of the universities compared to face-to-face mode of learning. This study sought to establish the influence of learner support services and learner interactions on the retention of students in Open Distance Learning programmes at the selected Universities in Kenya. The study was guided by Tinto's Theory of Student Departure and Kember's Attrition Model from distance education courses. Pragmatism paradigm and cross-sectional survey design guided the study. The study targeted 1990 learners enrolled in the Bachelor of Education Programmes by distance education in University of Nairobi, Kenyatta University and Mount Kenya University in the year 2021. The study sample size was 322 Open Distance Learning students pursuing Bachelor of Education related degree programmes in the three selected universities using stratified random sampling. Data was collected using questionnaires. Regression analysis was used to test the research hypothesis at 95% confidence interval. The study revealed that program information ($t=2.760$, $P<0.05$), health services ($t=3.720$, $p<0.05$), financial support ($t=2.381$, $p<0.05$) and student records support services ($t=3.996$, $p<0.05$) were statistically significant predictors of retention of learners in Open Distance Learning programmes while support from staff was not ($t=0.314$, $p>0.05$). The study concluded that learner administrative support services have significant influence on retention of learners in Open Distance Learning programmes at the selected Universities in Kenya. The study recommends universities should make efforts and improve on any shortfalls. The study further recommends intensification of quality assurance activities basically to address administrative responsibilities of the university and staff to the students.

Keywords: Open Distance Learning, Learner administrative support services, learner interaction

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1. Introduction

Across the globe, there is increased demand for Open Distance Learning (ODL) as a result of advancement in growth of Information Communication and Technology (ICT) (Shah & Cheng, 2018; Wells, 2023). Open Distance Learning (ODL) refers to the delivery of learning and instruction to students separated by time and space from those who are teaching or training (Pregowska, Masztalerz, Garlinska, & Osial, 2021). ODL is normally done through various mediating technologies to transmit study materials. Delivery modes of ODL include correspondence, online provision, e-learning and blended learning, either synchronously or asynchronously (Simpson & Sanchez, 2018). Through ODL, employees have been able to learn new skills and also upgrade their knowledge and qualification for their day to day tasks in the labour market (Alvin, 2023).

Open Distance Learning has been seen to be flexible and therefore the learners can study from anywhere, anytime and from the convenience. This has enable learners to juggle between social commitments, work, and still pursue education (Katy, Barreda & Hein, 2021). ODL also best suits the portion of the population that is very mobile across the globe for it ensures that learning continues uninterrupted (Moore & Greenland, 2017). According to Musa, Rosle, Bararuddin and Siti (2020), ODL also provides flexibility to adult learners operating in unique circumstances. Another advantage of ODL includes autonomy of learners where the learners can plan and pace their learning depending on the available time they have (Aminudin, Navaratnasamy & Saman, 2019).

Despite the advantages of Open Distance Learning (ODL), the programme faces low retention rates in diverse contexts. Most ODL institutions with huge enrollments face high dropout rates and thus making the programme ineffective (Aminudin, Navaratnasamy, & Saman, 2019). Katy, Barreda and Hein (2021) argues that retention rates in ODL programmes is a serious challenge for colleges and universities across the globe. According to Perchinno, Bilancia and Vitale (2023), learners in ODL experience high attrition rates and low retention compounded by challenges in assignment completion, keeping up with learning tasks' timelines and poor student performance (Perchinno, Bilancia & Vitale, 2023). According to Nurmalitasari, Zalizah and Mohammad (2023),

ODL Students have a eighty-two per cent (82%) chance of completing a programme compared to while face to face learners who have a ninety per cent chance (90%) chance in the same programme.

This disparity gets more pronounced in African continent whereby the dropout rates is estimated to be more than 50% in ODL programmes (Nurmalitasari, Zalizah, & Mohammad, 2023). For instance, in Saharan Africa (SSA), ODL is characterized by high dropout rates and lack of administrative support (Musingafu, Mapurunga, Chiwanza, & Shupikai, 2015). In Kenya, through the Universities Act of 2012, Paper No. 1 of 2019, key policy documents, Kenya's Vision 2030, blueprints and strategic plans and curricula, ODL programmes have been enhanced with moderate ICT integration in learning (Napier, 2021). However, Kenya experiences low retention rates in ODL programmes (Wambua, Gakuu, Kidombo & Ndege, 2019).

Learner support services have been argued to influence the level learner retention in ODKL programmes across the globe and in diverse contexts (Friðriksdóttir, 2018; Dlamini, Rugube, Kunene, & Cosmas, 2021). Hakan and Serpil (2020) defines learner support services in Open Distance Learning (ODL) as the activities that are geared towards supporting students in undertaking educational activities. One of the major learner support in Open Distance Learning (ODL) is learner administrative support services. This dimension of learner support deals with ensuring functional operations of recruitment, enrollment, registration, instruction scheduling, keeping records, financial processes, student orientation, personal counselling, and technology issues.

Learner administrative support services are meant to address both academic and non-academic aspects of ODL. It is mostly targeted to help students by informing them of what is offered, guiding in choosing the semester courses in various departments (Wells, 2023). It involves raising awareness amongst students about the learner support services that are available. However, this type of support has suffered heavily on the premise of digitization of the administration processes. This leads to isolation and loneliness and if not addressed early in the course leads to discouragement and eventually drop out (Olugbara, Letseka, & Akintolu, 2023). According to Kisimbii, Gakuu and Kidombo (2020), if these learner administrative support services are not well planned and managed, students will bear the brunt in terms of frustrations and low-quality services which make them decide to withdraw from ODL programme. It is on this basis that the current study sought to establish the influence of learner administrative support services on the retention of students in ODL programmes at the selected Universities in Kenya.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Kenya faces low retention rates in Open Distance Learning (ODL) programmes in most of the universities compared to face-to-face mode of learning. Student dropout rate in ODL programmes in Kenya is between 10% - 20% higher compared to conventional learning. Across the Kenyan Universities, between 40% and 80% of ODL students prematurely withdraw from learning. Students pursuing ODL programmes related to the Bachelor of Education degree have been seen to have the highest attrition rates among universities in Kenya. High attrition rates results into academic progress disturbance leading to reputational damage to the ODL institutions and loss of money in the form of fees for the learners (Mutambo *et al.*, 2018; Ojo, 2021).

Institutions offering ODL programs have majorly focused on internet connectivity, inaccessibility to personal ICT gadgets and low ICT literacy as a way of improving learner retention which has yield insignificant results. There are scanty literature and inconclusive results from previous studies done in Kenya and with respect to Open Distance Learning (ODL) programmes. Most studies on ODL have been done with respect to academic performance and with no specific focus of learner administrative support services as well as learner retention which presents conceptual research gap. Some studies have been done outside Kenya and thus a contextual research gap (Itasanmi & Oni, 2020; Mutambo *et al.*, 2018; Ojo, 2021; Perera & Lekamge, 2021; Reju & Jita, 2018; Sunday A. Itasanmi *et al.*, 2020). The current study sought to bridge this research gap by establishing the influence of learner administrative support services on the retention of students in ODL programmes at the selected Universities in Kenya.

1.2 Objective of the Study

To establish the influence of learner support services and learner interaction on the retention of students in Open Distance Learning (ODL) programmes at the selected Universities in Kenya.

1.3 Research Hypothesis

H₀₁: Learner administrative support services have no significant influence on retention of learners in Open Distance Learning (ODL) programmes at the selected Universities in Kenya

2. Literature review

2.1 Empirical literature review

Learner administrative support services are those services that are aimed at assuring the smooth running of systems of delivering ODL (Aminudin, Navaratnasamy, & Saman, 2019). According to Alvin (2023), non-

academic support is more targeted to helping students by informing them what is offered, guiding the entire process of student recruitment, giving guidance on choosing the semester course in various departments. It involves raising awareness amongst students about the learner support services that are available (Dlamini, Rugube, Kunene, & Cosmas, 2021). According to Arhin, Wangeri and Kigen (2017) learner administrative support services in ODL bridge the gap between the previous education experience and the new University.

Administrative learner support services ensures adequate supply of information regarding choice and course registration requirements and plays a coordinating role. It ensures the efficient delivery of all the functions within the ODL fraternity (Aminudin, Navaratnasamy, & Saman, 2019; Adnan & Anwar, 2020). Learner administrative support services also includes the monitoring and supervising learner interactions, supporting students as well assessing the need for deployment of additional resources for practical skills development like science labs, computers and appropriate software (Rang'ara, 2015; Dlamini, Rugube, Kunene, & Cosmas, 2021).

Indicators administrative learner support services include program information, provision of health services, financial support services, staff Support and student records. Kisimbii, Gakuu and Kidombo (2020) observed that financial support services comprise financial statements, fees balances, information on sources of funding and loans, payment procedures and payment platforms, information booklets on scholarships, tuition costs, financial aid and bursaries. Further, Imam (2020) notes that financial support services enrolls the students on group welfare associations meant to address financial challenges. Financial support has been cited as having an impact on the retention of students from lower-income families (Li & Juliana, 2023). Fu (2022) further observed that ODL students drop out because of the many challenges they face, financial challenges being at the top of the list.

Students who perceive that the present benefits of education exceed the future anticipated returns on investment can be strongly motivated to enroll and stay on (Sneyer & Witte, 2018). Financial aid has been known to sort out student liquidity constraints. Financial subsidies can help disadvantaged students to get upkeep. These grant-supported students will feel motivated to continue learning. Though financial aid reduces working time, there is no evidence that this time is devoted to learning. Consequently, financial support may have negative effects on success as the low probability of completion students are extrinsically persuaded or enticed to enroll due to affordable tuition fees (Itasanmi & Oni, 2020; Mutambo *et al.*, 2018; Ojo, 2021; Perera & Lekamge, 2021; Reju & Jita, 2018; Sunday A. Itasanmi *et al.*, 2020).

Despite the importance learner administrative support services, Shah and Cheng (2018) however argue that learner administrative support services are important yet often ignored or even completely not run efficiently. According to Ayse and Sercin (2022), this type of support has suffered heavily on the premise of digitization of the administration processes. With respect to this, ODL requires prospective students to do everything online without giving due consideration to the vulnerable students who are already at a point of disadvantage. This situation results into 'DE deficit' which means that if all the academic aspects are well-taken care of, learners are still prone to the challenges of getting integrated into the new community (Simpson & Sanchez, 2018). This contributes to the widening of the transactional distance in distance learning. It is on this basis that the current study sought to establish the influence of learner administrative support services on the retention of students in ODL programmes.

2.2 Theoretical Literature Review

The study was guided by Tinto's (1975,1993) Theory of Student Departure and Kember's (1995) Attrition Model from distance education courses.

2.2.1 Tinto's Model of Institutional Departure

This theory was advanced by Vincent Tinto (1975, 1993). The theory borrowed from Spady's (1970, 1971), Conceptualization of Undergraduate Attrition Process. The major motivation of the theory was to seek an understanding of the longitudinal trend of acceptance into the academic community. Tinto argued that for the students to be fully assimilated into the new college, they needed to undergo stages of separation, transition, and incorporation. Tinto (1975, 1993) argued that these phases are characteristic of the first year of college enrollment. During separation, the learners are expected to collapse previous associations, for instance, secondary school friends, the family who have differing values, beliefs and conduct and embrace the new learning communities hosted in the new institutions. At the time of separating and leaving the old communities, the learner is said to be undergoing transition and the end of transition is confirmed by integration into the new college community of learning. The final edition of Tinto's theory (1993) postulates that the college community has two systems: academic and social. Tinto posited that retention and persistence are dependent on the integration into the two systems.

Tinto guided that educational integration is determined by grade attainment and academic growth, whereas social incorporation is examined by the interaction of the student with university community members. Further, Tinto (1993) postulated that a distance learner enters a new institution with predetermined goals and commitments. The theory suggests that the continuous change in these goals and determination influence the decision to leave or being retained. Tinto (1993) theory added an amendment to his earlier version and noted that

external commitments such as work, family and other responsibilities impact the initial and consequent goal modifications. This theory is relevant to this study because it focusses on the institutional factors which affect student retention, where learner support system comprising of administrative, academic, counselling and technical support are aspects of the institution. Further, this theory is about learner interactions with the learning institution resulting in social and academic integration. The theory recognizes the external factors within the context of the learner such as family, job commitments and how they affect the initial and subsequent goal commitments.

2.2.2 Kember’s Model of Student Attrition

This theory was advanced by Kember (1995) who reformulated it from Tinto’s (1975) model of Student Departure for Distance Education. Kember argues that factors from without the education institution influence retention of on-campus students significantly. He highlighted the importance of the factors emanating from job commitments, social circles, and family. Kember’s theory of attrition comprises of the tenets of entry behaviour, goal commitment, intellectual and social integration elements of Tinto’s (1975, 1993) model. Kember’s 1995 theory included social-economic background related to student, family, work environment and previous education experience of the student. The variables contained in Kember’s model appear to affect the elements of the components of the two preceding theories and therefore argued against the existence of a linear relationship with attrition (Kember, 1995). Student commitment and self-regulation were regarded to lead to two aspects of intrinsic and extrinsic dimensions.

According to Kember (1995), intellectual and social assimilation should be re-examined holistically to permeate all aspects of distance education like support systems, study materials, interactions of any kind and involvement of human and inhuman resources. To establish successful integration academically, one needs to examine factors of the academic setting, whereas community integration is evaluated against the ability of the learner to negotiate and juggle around part-time study with family, work, and social demands. This is critical to the possibility of persisting and completing a course (Kember, 1995). This model further postulated that there is a cost-benefit analysis to be done for a student to determine the rate of return on investment before deciding to continue or withdraw from studies. This theory was found suitable to the current study as it embraces all the factors and constructs of interest which embrace institution, learner and community and work-related factors and how they interact to influence retention of learners.

2.3 Conceptual framework

Figure 1 shows the study conceptual framework which shows the relationship between learner administrative support services and retention in ODL programmes.

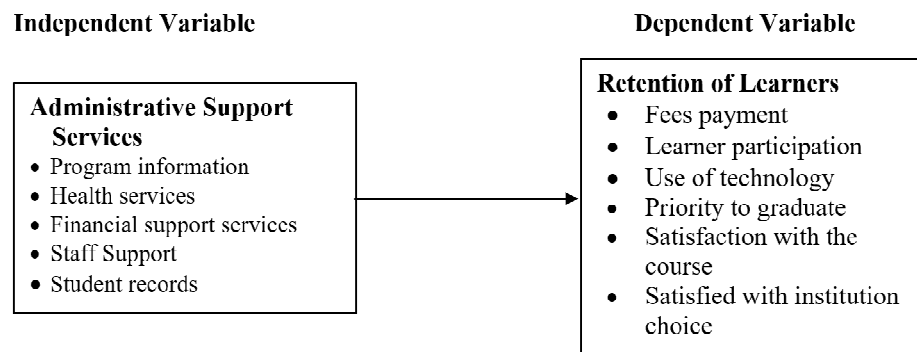


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

3. Research Methodology

Pragmatism paradigm and cross-sectional survey design guided the study. The study targeted 1990 learners enrolled in the Bachelor of Education Programmes by distance education in University of Nairobi, Kenyatta University and Mount Kenya University in the year 2021. The study sample size was 322 ODL students pursuing Bachelor of Education related degree programmes in the three selected universities. The sample size was calculated using the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) formula while the sampled students were selected from the target population using stratified random sampling. Data was collected using questionnaires. Validity of the questionnaires was ascertained by the research supervisors who examined the relevance of all items in the tool with respect to readability, clarity and comprehensiveness. The reliability of the questionnaire on the other hand was determined using internal consistency reliability test based a pilot study conducted among 20 randomly selected students. The alpha coefficient for learner administrative support services was 0.853 which was above the threshold of 0.7. Regression analysis was used to test the research hypothesis at 95% confidence interval.

4. Results and Discussions

The hypothesis of the study stated that learner administrative support services have no significant influence on retention of learners in ODL programmes at the selected Universities in Kenya. This hypothesis was tested by carrying out a multiple regression analysis of student records, health services, financial support, program information, and support from staff against the retention of learners in ODL programmes. Table 1 shows model summary.

Table 1: Influence of Administrative Support Services on Retention of Learners

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	0.731 ^a	0.534	0.526	0.52813

a. Predictors: (Constant), Student Records, Health Services, Financial Support, Program Information, Support from Staff

Table 4.20 indicates an R-value of 0.731 which implied that the model provides a good fit for the data. The R-Square value of 0.534 achieved in this model implied that student records, health services, financial support, program information, and support from staff cumulatively explained 53.4% of variance in learner retention in ODL programmes. This further implies that 46.6% of the variation in learner retention in ODL programmes is explained by other factors that were not under consideration in this model.

The adjusted R Square of 0.526 achieved in this study implied 52.6% of the variance in learner retention in ODL programme is explained by the significant predictors in the regression model. Therefore, 47.4% of the variation in learner retention in ODL programmes is explained by other factors that were not considered in the model as well as non-significant predictors (among the administrative support services) in the model. Focusing on the standard error of estimate of 0.52813 achieved in this model, it implies that the model was accurate in its prediction since the error was less than the unit of measurement (1 for the Linkert scale). Model significance is shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Model Significance for Administrative Support Services and Retention of Learners

Model		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	88.356	5	17.671	63.354	0.000 ^b
	Residual	76.983	276	0.279		
	Total	165.339	281			

a. Dependent Variable: Retention of Learners

b. Predictors: (Constant), Student Records, Health Services, Financial Support, Program Information, Support from Staff

The significance of the model was shown by $F(5,276)=63.354$ and $p<0.05$. This therefore implied that the regression model whose predictor variables are student records, health services, financial support, program information, and support from staff and predicted variable is the retention of learners in ODL programmes; was statistically significant at 5% significance level. This further implies that the regression model contains at least one predictor variable which is significant at 5% significance level. The study further sought to establish which among student records, health services, financial support, program information, and support from staff were significant predictors of the retention of learners in ODL programmes and to what extent. The model significance results is as shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Model Coefficients for Administrative Support Services and Retention of Learners

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	1.424	0.169		8.448	0.000
	Program Information	0.161	0.058	0.212	2.760	0.006
	Health Services	0.129	0.035	0.219	3.720	0.000
	Financial Support	0.130	0.055	0.162	2.381	0.018
	Support from Staff	0.019	0.062	0.025	0.314	0.754
	Student Records	0.229	0.057	0.242	3.996	0.000

a. Dependent Variable: Retention of Learners

The study revealed that program information ($t=2.760$, $P<0.05$), health services ($t=3.720$, $p<0.05$), financial support ($t=2.381$, $p<0.05$) and student records support services ($t=3.996$, $p<0.05$) were statistically significant predictors of retention of learners in ODL programmes based on their t-statistic and p-values. Support from staff did not test significant at 5% significance level and thus its influence was not assumed ($t=0.314$, $p>0.05$). Based on the unstandardized beta coefficients, the study established that one unit increase in program information support by the administration, the learner retention in ODL Programmes would increase by 0.161 units ($\beta=0.161$) with other factors held constant.

One unit increase in support related to health services would lead to 0.129 units ($\beta=0.129$) increase in the learner retention in ODL Programmes while other factors are held constant. Similarly, learner retention in ODL Programmes would increase by 0.130 units ($\beta=0.130$) if administration offers support to learners in regard to financial services, while holding other factors constant. While other factors are held constant, one unit increase in support in regard to student records, the level of learner retention in ODL Programmes would increase by 0.229 units ($\beta=0.229$). Among the significant predictors of the learner retention in ODL Programmes, support in regard to student records had the highest influence on learner retention in ODL Programmes, followed by support on program information, then financial support services and finally support in regard to health issues.

The study hypothesis stating that; H_01 : Learner administrative support services have no significant influence on retention of learners in ODL programmes at the selected Universities in Kenya, was rejected at 5% significance level. Therefore, the study confirmed that learner administrative support services have significant influence on retention of learners in ODL programmes at the selected Universities in Kenya and especially in regard to administrative support on course information, health services, financial support and support on student records. These findings concur with those by Mutambo *et al.* (2018) who noted that administrative support was very crucial and determined attrition rates of students in open and distance learning. The author further noted that administration was keen to support their students in all means possible in order to reduce deferment cases and also student drop out before completion of their courses.

5. Conclusion

The study concluded that learner administrative support services have significant influence on retention of learners in ODL programmes at the selected Universities in Kenya. It was noted that learner administrative support services with respect to course information, health services, financial support and support on student records have significant influence on retention of learners in open and distance learning (ODL) programmes. On the other hand, it was noted that learner administrative support services with respect to support from staff does have significant influence on retention of learners in open and distance learning (ODL) programmes.

6. Recommendations

The study recommends universities to intensify training and monitoring the service delivery of their staff in ODL programmes. This aspect could influence the public image and reputation of an institution, efforts should be made to ensure professionalism on how they handle communication matters with the open distance learners. In addition, the study revealed that health services, student records and financial support are critical factors that are administrative that can influence the retention of ODL programmers. Therefore the study recommends universities should make efforts and improve on any shortfalls. The study further recommends intensification of quality assurance activities basically to address administrative responsibilities of the university and staff to the students.

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