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Assessing Student Support Services in Open and Distance Learning: The Case of Botswana Open University

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Abstract

Open and distance learning has become a learning approach of choice in many institutions of higher learning, especially during and after the outbreak of COVID 19 in 2020. This is true for both conventional institutions and those that were originally established to service students through the open and distance learning mode (ODL). Botswana Open University (BOU) is such an institution. To ensure that all students studying through the ODL system have enduring learning experiences and success, there is a need for the institution to have a practical and effective student support system. In an ODL environment, student support services entail academic, psycho-social, technical, and administrative support. Such support ensures that students are self-directed in their quest to meet their learning needs. This study assessed the effectiveness of student support services in BOU, the only fully ODL institution in Botswana. The researchers adopted Simpson's Model of Student Support Services for success in ODL as their theoretical benchmark. The model states that for students to succeed in an ODL environment, they should receive cognitive, emotional, and organisational support. An exploratory, qualitative design involving interviews and document analysis allowed for data collection that were thematically analysed. The findings identified administrative, academic, technical, and psychosocial support challenges. Based on these findings, recommendations were made to improve student support services at BOU.

Keywords: student support services, open and distance learning, e-learning support, academic support, psychosocial support, administrative support

Introduction

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are becoming increasingly competitive to remain successful in the market. They should provide quality education (Shikulo & Lekhetho, 2020). This can be achieved by providing effective support services to their customers (the students). Arko-Achemfuor (2017) argues that to ensure that students studying through the open and distance learning (ODL) system have an enduring learning experience and success, there must be a robust student support system as one of the components of institutional services.

Just like students in conventional institutions, ODL students need support as they embark upon life experiences, especially when faced with challenges such as attending university (Qakisa-Makoe, 2005). More so because the number of students dropping out of distance learning programmes is significantly higher than those in conventional study programmes (Dadigamuwa & Senanayake, 2012; Shikulo & Lekhetho, 2020). Woodley and Simpson (2014:459) referred to the high dropout and low graduation rates in distance education as "an elephant in the room in distance education". In their study on increasing student retention and enhancing academic performance, integration, and satisfaction, Sanchez-Elvira Paniagua and Simpson (2018) point out that in the United Kingdom distance education institutions tended to have lower graduation rates when compared to those offering full-time studies. Aluko (2021) explains that adequate student support is key to stemming student dropout in distance education. In this regard, student support services in ODeL are also essential to facilitate and enhance self-directed learning (SDL) among learners since they provide guidance, feedback, resources, and opportunities for interaction and collaboration (Shabani & Maboe, 2021). Botswana Open University (BOU) has several services that support its students. However, the number of queries raised by students regarding support services at the university has increased recently (Nkolo, 2021). This prompted these researchers to evaluate the effectiveness of student support services in the university's five regional campuses.

Context

Botswana Open University is one of four public universities in Botswana. It was established in 2015 by an Act of Parliament to provide quality education through open and distance learning. It has five regional campuses in Gaborone, Francistown,

Kang, Maun, and Palapye. The university supports a broad spectrum of programmes ranging from basic education to tertiary level for certificate, diploma, undergraduate, postgraduate, and master's qualifications in five schools: business and management Studies, education, science and technology, social sciences, and open schooling. In terms of student support, there is a division of student support and welfare services under the Deputy Vice-Chancellor – Student Services.

The Student Services Division, as one of the core support organs of BOU, is mandated to provide full student support services to all enrolled students, staff, and alumni. It initiates and develops student support programmes and strategies to deliver quality and cost-effective student services either in-person or through technology-mediated measures with support from both academic and corporate services divisions (BOUb, 2011). The support services reach students in various ways as individuals and online groups or face-to-face through BOU's five strategically located regional campuses and learning centres spread across the country.

According to BOU (2011), the services offered by SSD include (a) administrative support, where students are assisted with applications, registration, assessment administration, and graduation; (b) tuition support through the Moodle platform in the form of online tutorial sessions, discussion forum, chats, online formative and summative assessments; (c) face-to-face or in-person tutorial support; (d) online self-learning materials support and off-line tuition support for open schooling students without access to digital platforms through self-learning materials, telephone, and pen and paper end of course examination; (e) guidance and counselling support including psychosocial support and welfare services which are provided both online and in person (BOU, 2011).

Other forms of support include communication, and student engagement through staff at regional campuses, the Student Representative Council, and Student School Representatives. Student Course Captains also use various communication modes such as telephone, emails, letters, information brochures, flyers, in-person meetings, different ICT media platforms such as social media, and virtual meetings (BOUb, 2020). Finally, library support is provided through training on using the library effectively in-person and online, including accessing e-learning resources at Head Office and all the regional campuses. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and its attendant protocols, the institution expedited the implementation of the Strategy for Technology Enhanced Teaching, Learning, Assessment, and Student Support (STELTASS) in 2020. The

strategy transformed the university from blended learning to facilitating learning in a fully digital learning environment (BOUb, 2020). However, this shift seems to have posed additional challenges regarding student support.

For purposes of this study, the researchers investigated the challenges of offering student support services to students in the School of Education with a particular focus on those pursuing the Bachelor of Education programmes—namely, the Bachelor of Education-Primary, the Bachelor of Education–Integrated Early Childhood Education, and the Bachelor of Education–Special and Inclusive Education. Currently, these programmes are offered over two years to candidates with a diploma in education qualification.

Theoretical framework

This study was guided by the Simpson model of Student Support Services for Success in Open and Distance Learning. The model states that for students to succeed in a distance learning environment they must possess the following qualities and skills: intellectual ability, good learning skills, and motivation to learning. In addition, the students should be able to deal with stress; be self-confident; have a sense of humour; manage time; and balance demands of family, job, and study. Furthermore, Simpson (2016) categorises these qualities and skills into three main areas: cognitive (academic), emotional, and organisational (non-academic) support. According to Simpson (2016), organisational support is meant to consolidate students' strengths and correct and improve their weaknesses. Simpson (cited by Hadebe, 2023) posits that "emotional support, in a supportive way to the two, deals with being motivated to learn, attaining self-confidence and managing stress" (Hadebe, 2023, p.56).

Statement of the problem

At BOU, an audit query was raised indicating that there were one hundred and seventeen (117) students (assigned to thirty-three tutors) who extended their studies beyond the registration period (Audit-BOU, 2021). In addition, the university continues to receive increased incidence reports during the administration of formative and summative assessments indicating failure to complete assessments due to limited internet connectivity. Furthermore, continuing students across the university's

regional campuses lament that the BOU registration system is not user friendly. This was confirmed by an audit query in 2020 indicating that there were unaccounted funds in the university's bank account, partly due to some students who paid tuition fees but failed to submit their registration (BOU, 2020).

The Gaborone Regional Campus, Guidance and Counselling Customer Satisfaction/feedback survey report of July 2021 also highlighted that students are dissatisfied. They cited several reasons, including delayed response to queries, missing marks, having to come to the regional campus many times without getting help, and leaving telephones unanswered by BOU staff. Other reasons provided by students were lack of customer care, poor communication, delayed service provision, delayed assignments feedback, and absence of officers in the offices resulting in being moved from one office to the next (Nkolo, 2021), to name only but a few. Such dissatisfaction would definitely influence student retention as well as the public image of the institution concerning its mandate. Given the numerous reasons for dissatisfaction as cited in the reports and by students, the researchers evaluated the effectiveness of student support services at BOU to recommend strategies for their improvement.

Purpose of the study

This study aimed to assess the effectiveness of student support services at BOU.

Objectives of the study

The objectives of this study were to:
- investigate challenges preventing students from effectively accessing the support services offered by BOU
- highlight the benefits experienced by students in accessing the support services at BOU
- recommend strategies that can be employed to improve the effectiveness of student support services at BOU.

Research question

The main research question is: How effective are student support services at BOU?

This question is further broken down into the following sub-questions.

- What challenges prevent students from effectively accessing student support services at BOU?
- What are the benefits of students accessing student support services at BOU?
- What strategies can be employed to improve the effectiveness of student support services at BOU?

Literature review

According to Kumtepe et al. (2018 p.115), support services in the context of education are defined as services provided for forming learning communities and continuing the communities created. Therefore, student support services aim to bring about student satisfaction associated with persistence, academic performance, retention, and career advancement. Robinson, as cited by Nsamba (2017), indicated that student support services in ODL include academic, administrative, psychosocial, and technical support services. These services are now discussed in some detail.

Academic Support

The aim of academic support is to bring about student academic excellence. Sembiring (2020) explains that academic excellence can be achieved through graduate satisfaction, student engagement, student achievement, and loyalty to the institution. Sembiring (2020) further outlines graduate satisfaction as a condition where the students score a good Grade Point Average (GPA), complete the programme on time, have program relevance, and get social recognition. He further defines student engagement as the willingness of the student to participate in a study group activity, complete assignments on time, be active in tutorial sessions, and be ready for each semester's examinations. On the other hand, achievement is defined as the function of academic excellence to enable students to attain the required assignment score, good tutorial mark, high semester examinations results, and fulfil the academic writing requirement.

Finally, loyalty is defined as the function of academic excellence to do regular registration each semester, commitment to complete studies, eagerness to engage in further study at the same university and be willing to recommend the university to others (Sembiring, 2020). Academic support in ODL can be in the form of tutorials

that allow contact with one's tutor in person or virtually and for contact with other students. Regular tutorials can serve as a guide throughout the course. They can also serve as a pacing mechanism and lead to the formation of study or peer learning groups (BOU, 2011).

Administrative Support

As an integral part of administrative support service in ODL, university personnel contribute most to a student's social integration into a university setting. They are responsible for creating a campus atmosphere that gives students a sense of security and success. Kisimbii et al. (2018) explain that there are activities that university personnel provide to students to enable students to persist. These include orientation of new students, provision of the academic calendar, study timetable, teaching and learning the unit-by-unit guide, and course modules at the beginning of the semester. These services facilitate students' preparedness for effective coursework in the semester. They also instil discipline and orderliness in the conduct of students toward successful learning and teaching.

Psychosocial Support

According to the Regional Psychosocial Support Initiatives (REPSSI, 2022), psychosocial support (PSS) can be defined as a continuum of love, care, and protection that enhances a person's cognitive, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing and strengthens their social and cultural connectedness. In ODL, a student may find it necessary to go to a learning centre to have access to a counsellor. Through counselling, a counsellor helps students to learn to understand themselves and their environment. In this way, they can choose the behaviour that will help them develop, grow, progress, ascend, mature, and step up educationally, vocationally, socially, and personally (Egbo, 2013). This self-assessment is a prerequisite for the students to become resilient even when they face challenges of isolation, time, and day-to-day demands resulting from them being ODL students.

Technical Support

In the opinion of Lamidi (2021), there has been a lot of emphasis on technology as a driver of ODL. However, ICT support systems have been criticised and frequently considered to be inadequate in preparing students for success (Makoe & Nsamba 2019:137; Sanchez-Elvira Paniagua and Simpson 2018:4). Kear et al. (2016:102) opine that the mere presence of technology is not enough, and institutions must assist students in their academic work, otherwise the quality of technology would be compromised. Researchers have argued that availability of quality ICT increases the rate of academic success by students (Lamidi, 2021). However, the availability of technology alone is not a panacea to success. The students must have the skills to manipulate and utilise the technology to pursue their learning. This calls for provision of training and support by the institution.

The benefits of student support services in ODL

According to Turan et al., people studying at a distance require flexibility; that is, they need to be able to study when and where they have the time to study (Turan et al. 2022) Thus, most of the support at a distance provides this flexibility. For example, a student can use the learning package, whether in print or CDs or a combination, at the time and place that suits them. Although they have a fixed time, radio broadcasts can also be picked up over a large area and listened to wherever the students are. Knowles (cited in BOU, 2011) explains that assignments, even with a due date, can be prepared according to a timetable drawn up by the student to suit their situation. For example, it enables students, especially adults, to simultaneously maintain work and family commitments while studying. Also, because learning in this mode is based on a wide range of activities, which incorporates the students' personal experiences, it enables adult students to apply what they are learning to their own situations at work and home.

Support such as interactive learning materials, tutor-marked assignments (with detailed comments since the tutor has little time to give face-to-face feedback), tutorial letters, and contact with a tutor by telephone provide real guidance and encouragement to a student so that they can enjoy their learning, keep up their motivation, and monitor their own progress (BOU, 2011). This is important because,

unlike face-to-face interaction, students in the ODL context cannot directly (and instantly) ask questions or request explanations from a tutor. Therefore, the main form of feedback is the written word (Simpson, 2016).

Furthermore, support services provide contact at a distance for students with their tutors, the institution, and fellow students. Learning is at its best when there is a dialogue between at least two people. Contact with the tutor can occur at a distance through assignments, telephone conversations, or letters. In the same way, contact can take place between students through online conversations or letters. Furthermore, contact between students can occur through the telephone, with a tutor and a group of students through a tele-conferencing facility, or online discussion forums or chats. This guided learning promotes a personal relationship between the tutor and the student, thus creating greater student motivation and improved learning outcomes (BOU, 2011). This is especially important because social interaction and collaboration has been proved to be instrumental to learning by adults and ODL students (Knowles, 1998; Harasim, 2012; Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000; Picciano 2021). In sum, as reported by these authors, the study is premised on investing the gaps within the academic, administrative, and psychosocial student support services at BOU to enable students to succeed and move on to other pursuits.

It should be noted, however, that no amount of support can make a difference if a student is not self-directed in his or her orientation to learning. In this case the student should take responsibility for his or her own learning. This is particularly important in an ODeL environment. With such an orientation, student support services would enhance the effectiveness of learning by providing additional guidance, feedback, and resources. Learners who are self-directed would remain wide awake to opportunities to interact and collaborate with fellow students. They seek help and advice when confronted with learning challenges.

In summary, student support services in an ODeL institution encompasses academic, psychosocial, administrative, and technical support. If these services are well articulated, the students can complete their programme on time and within budget. As indicated earlier, BOU seems to have the structures and resources to support student learning. However, the question remains whether these structures and resources are efficiently and effectively utilised. That is one of the reasons why this study was conducted.

Methodology

This study adopted an exploratory qualitative research approach collecting data through telephone interviews and analysing relevant policy documents from the BOU. The approach allowed the researchers to draw rich data from participants, which were corroborated with the information from the BOU policies, guidelines, and audit reports (Morgan, 2022, Creswell, 2014).

Population and Site Selection

The study took place at an ODL institution of higher learning which, amongst others, offers teacher education programmes. The institution has five (5) regional campuses—namely, Gaborone, Francistown, Palapye, Maun, and Kang, with a total of four hundred and thirty one (431) first year and second year students registered for the Bachelor of Education (BEd) programmes. Of these, one hundred and eleven (111) were students in the BEd Integrated Early Childhood Development (BEd-IECD), two hundred and thirteen (213) were in the BEd-Special and Inclusive Education (B Ed- SIE), and one hundred and seven (107) in the BEd-Primary (BEd-PRI) programmes. In addition, there are five (5) tutor coordinators, one (1) student counsellor, three (3) heads of Department, four (4) lecturers, and thirty-one (31) tutors in the Bachelor of Education programmes.

Participants Selection and Data collection strategies

Purposive sampling was used to select participants for the study. For this study, four (4) tutor coordinators, ten (10) tutors, ten (10) students from the five regional campuses, and the student counsellor were purposively sampled. In addition, three (3) heads of department (HODs) were also interviewed. Therefore, a total of twenty-seven participants were interviewed. These were coded using numbers and letters as follows: tutor coordinators TC1 to TC4; tutors coded as T1 to T10; students S1 to S10; and heads of department HOD1 to HOD3.

Semi-structured individual interviews with the HODs, student counsellor, tutor coordinators, students, and tutors were conducted. An interview protocol ensured the researchers collected similar data from all participants. The in-depth interviews aimed to assess the challenges that prevent ODL students from accessing student support services effectively within the institution. The interviews were conducted

telephonically as a way of adhering to COVID-19 protocols. In addition, the following documents were consulted:

- Unallocated Funds on Students' Accounts
- Student Support Services. Study Guide for LS012
- Report on Audit at Gaborone Regional Campus
- The BOU e-tutor Model

Through analysing the interviews and the mentioned BOU documents, the researchers established and explained why students had difficulty accessing and utilising student support services at the university. The documents were selected because of their authenticity, credibility, representativeness, and meaning since they relate to the phenomenon under investigation (Morgan, 2022:71).

Data analysis

The researchers used content analysis techniques to analyse data. Content analysis refers to the gathering and analysis of textual content (Struwig & Stead, 2007). The researchers followed three basic procedures when analysing data from interviews. These were transcribing data, reading, and rereading transcripts. The researchers then segmented and coded the data by counting words and coding categories (enumeration) and identifying relationships and potential themes in data (Johnson and Christensen, 2008:556). Finally, the selected documents were analysed and triangulated with interview findings. To establish the trustworthiness and understanding of the research findings, the researchers adopted Guba's (cited by Alexander, 2019) criteria for the validity of qualitative research strategies: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Gay et al., 2011:393).

Researchers' role

The researchers were the main data collection and analysis instrument in this qualitative study. A reflexive approach was followed in that data were transcribed, read, reread, segmented, coded, counted words, coded categories (enumeration), and identified relationships and potential themes in the data (Morgan 2022:73, Johnson, and Christensen, 2008:556). This allowed them to discover the realities of student support services in ODL (Johnson & Christensen, 2008:393). The fact that the researchers are lecturers in the same institution enabled them to access participants (students, heads of department, tutor coordinators, tutors, and the counsellor) and

documents within the institution.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Botswana Open University Research Ethics Committee (UREC). The interview guide was accompanied by a consent form highlighting the purpose of the study, emphasizing its importance and significance including a description of the procedure to be followed, and the length of time it will take the participants to complete the study (Johnson & Christenson 2014: 134). The consent form also stated a commitment to share the study results when completed. At the beginning of each interview, participants were informed that their participation should be voluntary and that they were free to withdraw at any time from the research (Majaule, 2016). Furthermore, the researchers highlighted how the study would benefit the participants, the Student Support Services Division, and the institution. Participants were informed that all responses would be treated with the utmost confidentiality. The researchers also explained to the participants sampled that they would be interviewed telephonically. To ensure anonymity, letters and numbers were used to represent participants and the regional campuses.

Significance of the research

The empirical investigation of the challenges of student support services in ODL remains an area of considerable interest, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study should help provide relevant insight into the major challenges of student support services in an ODL institution with the view of recommending strategies to improve student support services that enable ODL students to persist. Furthermore, such knowledge will help the Student Support Services Division design more effective strategies to improve student retention in an ODL institution.

Results

The results are presented starting with biographic information and verbatim transcription of participant interviews.

Findings and Analysis

The comments of the participants during the interviews were structured according to the following research questions: (a) their views regarding challenges they experience in accessing support services in their regional campuses; (b) their views on how they have benefited from support services offered in their regional campuses; and (c) the participants' views on what should be done to improve the effectiveness of student support services at BOU.

Demographic information

Regarding demographic information, tutors had an average of four years' experience at an ODL institution, while HODs had an average of two years' experience in their positions. The tutor coordinators have seven years of experience working in an ODL institution. The interviewed students' average age was 38 years. All students interviewed were self-sponsored, with 60% living in remote villages.

Participants' views of challenges preventing them from effectively accessing support services from their regional campuses

The following themes were identified as the major challenges preventing students from effectively accessing student support services in the regional campuses: lack of electronic devices; limited internet connectivity; poor communication; delayed feedback; lack of IT skills; and lack of proper induction.

Lack of electronic devices

Lack of electronic devices like laptops and tablets (gadgets) was mentioned as one of the major challenges by six (6) out of ten (10) tutors, seven (7) out of ten (10) students, and the counsellor. When asked how she has benefited from the support services in her regional campus, student S1 stated, "*I did not benefit because I am struggling since I do not have gadgets [laptops], because we research and doing assignments is a challenge*". The student counsellor supported this, who lamented that "la*ck of resources, financial resources, and electronic gadgets are a big challenge as most students seemingly rely on work resources*

like computers and internet connectivity". Tutor T6 also agreed that the lack of gadgets (electronic devices) is a challenge by stating, "*Students have no rightful gadgets which makes it difficult to do their work*".

BOU has computer laboratories at headquarters and in all their regional campuses. However, these are not accessible to most students due to distance and time, since many live and work away from the campuses. In addition, most students are self-sponsored and have other financial obligations which may be a limitation to buying gadgets (Musingafi et al., 2015).

Limited internet connectivity

Limited internet activity was also cited as a challenge, with 8 mentions in the students' responses and 18 mentions in tutor responses. Tutor T3 stated, "*Students lack internet in their various places. Sometimes when I post a forum discussion, some students fail to participate because of internet.*" All tutor coordinators and the student counsellor confirmed that limited internet connectivity is a challenge that hampers students from persisting in their studies. Tutor coordinator (TC1) said, "*Some students live in remote areas where there is no network coverage or there is often network blackout. As such we normally receive high incidence reports from students during tests and exams saying that they were not able to complete an assessment due to internet connectivity.*" Tutor T6 also concurred by saying that "*Lack of support services – particularly for those in rural remote areas where they have to travel long distances to access such services, for example internet connectivity.*" This agrees with Nsamba and Makoe (2017) who evaluated the quality of students' support services in open distance learning and indicated that students did not show much enthusiasm for online tutoring as it was only accessible to students with internet connectivity. Therefore, this implies that the students without access to internet facilities cannot productively participate in synchronous online discussion, tutorials, and quizzes.

Poor communication

Poor communication was mentioned by students and by the tutors. "Unanswered calls" was a major concern mentioned 11 times by students and twice by tutors. Student S4 said, "*Lack of effective communication-[Francistown] region rarely answers their telephone, and this is a big challenge for students as some of our enquiries need to be answered*

quickly and directly, not through email. Please improve that as we end up calling other regions."
This was supported by student S8 who said, "*There is poor communication between students and their tutors and coordinators*", with student S10 lamenting that "*I have a problem with the registration-when I email, I do not get a response and when I call the response is not friendly. Tutors and coordinators hardly answer the calls from the students when they really need to.*"
Tutor T3 confirmed this by saying, "*Poor customer service delivery from the service providers bathong, BOU has poor communication.*" A similar situation was reported by Nsamba and Makoe, (2017) who in their study reported similar findings in spite of students and tutors having exchanged their phone numbers.

Feedback on assignments

Delayed feedback was also reported as a challenge, with student S3 reporting that "*This semester we did not get feedback for assignments, therefore we do not know which area to improve on.*" In the examination queries, one student appealed against the assessment by stating that "*I want my paper to be remarked and comments made so that I may know where I need to improve.*" Similar findings were made by Nsamba and Makoe (2017) which revealed that some ODL students complain about the quality of the assignments, citing examples of "late feedback", "poor quality of marking", and "insufficient feedback". The Gaborone Regional Campus, Guidance and Counselling Customer Satisfaction/ feedback survey report of July 2021 also highlighted poor communication (including responses to assignments marked by tutors), unanswered phone calls, absence of some BOU staff members in the offices, and delayed assignment feedback as some of the reasons causing students' dissatisfaction (Nkolo, 2021) .The problems relating to poor communication, the quality of assignments, and their marking pointed to the possible lack of commitment of tutors who are part-time employees of the University with full-time work elsewhere. Despite quality assurance structures, their enforcement is often weak due to the high number of tutors assigned to a programme or tutor coordinator.

Lack of IT skills

Lack of IT skills was mentioned by students, tutors, tutor coordinators, HODs, and the student counsellor as a significant challenge to accessing support services effectively.

Tutor T7 stated, "*Students have poor understanding of using the system-being unable to upload assignments.*" Tutor T8 agreed that "*Students lack technical know-how on how to access the available support services*". One tutor coordinator (TC 2) confirmed this by pointing out that "*Students do not know how to access the **learning portal** and **My online services.***" The student counsellor also agreed that lack of IT skills is a major challenge to students accessing support services effectively by stating, "*Computer illiteracy limits students from fully utilising the services.*" This finding tallies with the study by Musingafi et al. (2015) at Zimbabwe Open University, which indicated that seventy percent (70%) of the respondents had no computers and fifty-five percent (55%) were computer illiterate. The implication is that most of these students could not access information on the Internet.

Lack of proper guidance during induction

Lack of proper guidance during induction was mentioned by students, tutors, and the HODs as a challenge that hampers students from effectively accessing support services. As a result, students spend a lot of time seeking assistance to access services that would normally be outlined and pointed out during induction or the student guides. Furthermore, a large proportion of ODL students miss induction sessions, citing a variety of reasons. Despite student guides being posted on website and student portal, students still struggle to access support services. Tutor T8 stated, "*There is inadequate support in the form of guidance and who to consult in case students experience challenges.*" This was confirmed by Tutor T4 by stating that, "*Not knowing whom to contact for specific services at the regional office is a challenge*." HOD 3 further supported this by saying, "*Some are not aware of the services*." Similar findings were recorded by Musingafi et al. (2015) at ZOU where eighty percent (80%) of the respondents stated that there was a lack of appropriate advice during their studies.

Participants' views on benefits of student support services in the regional campuses

The following themes emerged as the benefits of student support services: technical support, administrative support, tuition support, and psychosocial support..

Technical support

Technical support with great emphasis on unlimited access to online platforms was mentioned by students, tutors, and tutor coordinators. Student S6 stated that "*Since the course is mostly done online, I had the opportunity to learn more about the use of internet and also exploring many things around the globe through the use of internet.*" Tutor T6 supported this by stating, "*Those who had access to such services have indeed benefited in several ways such as gaining knowledge on the use of modern technology. Those students that are nearby are always coming to the camps to access internet and seek help on how to access the services. Use of computer technology has also helped them cut costs on travelling and this has also been time saving.*" "*They benefit from online services which save them the trouble of travelling from various destination to access a service, for example, the payment of fees, registration, tutorials, and examinations.*" "*Those who had access to such services have indeed benefited in a number of ways such as gaining knowledge on the use of modern technology.*" "*Students benefit from technical support in terms of accessing the portal and been assisted with other software issues.*" "*I have been able to access lesson slides, been able to access results on the portal.*" These were supported by tutor coordinators with one of them (TC4) stating that "*Students are guided on how to go about the portal including submission of assignments.*" It should be noted that BOU has a Centre for Technology Enhanced Learning and Teaching (CTELT) and Information and Technology (IT) support staff who are always on standby to assist students with any issue related to the use of the portal. This should imply that most students can access information on the internet and on the BOU portal.

Administrative support

Administrative support ranging from clear communication by BOU staff in the regional campuses, proper guidance, provision of study material, and assistance during registration was mentioned by students, tutors, tutor coordinators, and HODs as benefits that students receive from their regional campuses. Student S9 excitedly proclaimed, "*I have benefited a lot since I was assisted willingly in all aspects demanded.*" The tutors also concurred that students do receive administrative support, with T7 saying that "*An issue with a repeating/returning student was handled professionally due to the transparent 3-way communication between the student, BOU regional office and me as a tutor.*" Tutor coordinators confirmed that indeed administrative support is provided

to students with TC3 saying, "*Students are assisted with understanding the processes and regulations. Interpretation of regulations and guidance. Connecting students with tutors and easing their anxieties.*" HOD3 also agrees that administrative support is provided to students by narrating that "*…by regularly engaging students on how they should tackle academic issues through sending SMS and emails. They receive SMS and emails informing them about how assignment and exams are written. Tutor coordinators provide students with vital information through SMS and emails. Students are guided on how to go about the portal including submission of assignments. Supportive regional staff. Creation of study groups. WhatsApp groups. Induction/orientation.*" Effective administrative support by BOU staff implies that students can meet deadlines for registration and submission of assignments.

Academic support

Academic support in the form of tuition also emerged as one of the benefits that students are receiving from their regional campuses, with Tutor T7 stating, "*Student support services teach students how to manage their time better since the student bears the responsibility of engaging with the course materials instead of simply showing up to class on an assigned day and time. As a result, students not only gain knowledge from the coursework, but they also sharpen their time management skills.*" TC1 agrees that students receive tuition support "*By regularly engaging students on how they should tackle academic issues through sending SMS and emailing semester issues*". HODs also confirmed that students are given tuition support, with HOD3 stating that "*They receive virtual tutorials and guidance on research, as well as assignment and examination submission.*" Online tutorials greatly benefit most students, especially those who work and stay some distance away from the regional campuses, since they can attend the tutorials in their homes. This reduces the cost they initially incurred to travel to the regional campuses to attend tutorials physically. However, such support if not backed by the student's ability to take responsibility for their own learning is futile. As reported elsewhere in this paper, support to students should aim at creating environments for self-directed learning by motivating them not only to learn, but also learn in a relevant and meaningful manner (du Toit-Brits, 2019).

Psychosocial support

The student counsellor emphasised psychosocial support as one of the benefits that students receive from the institution. She stated that, "*Counselling offers them the necessary skills to help them manage their time and balance their life demands to effectively attend to their school needs. They are given psycho-emotional and academic support to help them deal with the everyday challenges they face.*" Counselling has come in handy at BOU as it assists students in dealing with post-COVID traumas. This happened especially in the BEd programmes since they were faced with the trauma of seeing their colleagues and loved ones die due to COVID-19 (Winthrop et al., 2020 & Mmegi-online, 2020).

Participants' views of Strategies to improve the effectiveness of student support services at the regional campuses

The following themes emerged as suggested strategies for improving the effectiveness of student support services: technical support, administrative support, academic support, and psychosocial support.

Improve Technical support

Students, tutors, tutor coordinators, and HODs suggested that the students should be provided with technical support through gadgets, internet connectivity, and computer literacy. Student S1 lamented, "*We need to be given laptop especially looking at the fact that we pay enough money.*" Another one (student S2) said, "*Students to be provided with WIFI routers to be able to use internet wherever they are. For example, routers monthly subscriptions can be included in school fees as well as the cost of routers.*" Another student (S9) also said, "*Negotiating subsidized rates for students to access internet connectivity.*" Tutors also agreed that students should be provided with technical support, with one tutor (T4) stating, "*Incorporating computer education in the curriculum. It is often wrongfully assumed that all students are computer literate. While many may be familiar with basic computer functions, it has become clear over the years that they lack adequate knowledge of using the computer as a tool in education.*" As suggested by students and tutors, one way of enhancing technical support is for the university to negotiate with service providers for students to buy gadgets and access to the internet at subsidised rates.

Improve Administrative support.

Students, tutors, and HODs suggested a need to improve administrative support regarding the provision of qualified personnel, effective communication, and prompt feedback. Student S10 recommended that administrative staff in the regional campuses should be increased by saying, "*To increase staff at the Registration office*". Another student (S9) suggested that administrative staff with good interpersonal skills should be employed by stating, "*I think student friendly personnel have to be put in place for the satisfaction of services since most of the first-time students are not familiar with the processes of online programmes.*" Some students suggested effective communication as a way of improving administrative support, with one student (S4) stating that, "*Effective communication between the school management, tutors and students e.g., students should be updated of any changes, new concepts and activities at the beginning of the semester so that they prepare on time because some of them are working students and they need to also update their employers.*" Tutors agreed that there is need to improve the administrative support in the regional campuses, with tutor T8 stating that, "*The support services should not only be responsive to the needs of the distance students but should also be accessible, for example, library.*" She further stated that "*Tutor morale should be taken into consideration in terms of remuneration, workload and working conditions because there will be a compromise if our needs are not taken care of.*" HOD3 was of the view that there is need for "*Vigilance in following up students' non-attendance for tutorials and assessment*". Based on these findings, the authors recommend that a more robust system be implemented to ensure timely payment of tutors to improve their morale. In addition, there should be mechanisms set up to enable tutors to feel that they "belong" to the university community despite being part-time employees of the institution.

Improve Academic Support

To improve academic support, sub-themes that emerged include effective communication, prompt feedback, blended learning, and more interactive tutorial sessions. When suggesting strategies to improve academic support, student S8 recommended, "*Easy accessibility of information and provision of assessment feedback on time*". Tutors also suggested prompt feedback as one strategy for improving academic support, with T7 saying, "*Provide consistent feedback. Use the feedback loop concept and*

allow for self-assessment regularly." Tutor T6 opined, "*Due to unavailability / unreliable internet connectivity in some areas something needs to be done to help such students. Introduce some form of individualized instructional strategies for students especially for those who are not coping much.*" Tutor T10 suggested that tutorial sessions should be increased by stating, "*Increase the number of tutorial and forum sessions which are student centred. Provide more interactive processes for them to engage more with their tutors and support staff that can help them to improve in their learning processes.*" Tutor coordinators suggested that there is a need to go back to blended learning by TC2 stating that "*Intensive follow-up research lessons should be provided to students to intensify their knowledge on research as face-to-face tutorials were well attended as compared to online tutorials.*"

Conclusion and recommendations

This study sought to investigate the challenges of effectively offering support services to students in the School of Education at Botswana Open University. The findings indicate that the difficulties identified relate to administrative, technical, academic, and psychosocial support. In the administrative support area the outstanding theme was poor communication, which manifests in staff not responding timeously to phone calls, delays in providing feedback, and limited internet connectivity. The technical challenges cited by participants included the inability of some students and tutors to access and fully utilise the learning platforms and the e-library. It can also be concluded that there is still a need to conduct more tutorials, more IT support in terms of electronic gadgets, and WI-FI routers in partnership with IT service providers. Based on these findings, an introductory course to e-learning with emphasis to self-direction is recommended in the School of Education at BOU. It should be noted that the effective provision of student support services in ODeL enhances self-direction leading to improved student satisfaction and success.

The authors believe that student support services at BOU are well-organised and effective despite the challenges outlined in the paper. This is evidenced by the fact that BOU has computer laboratories, physical and e-libraries, qualified IT and e-learning support specialists, qualified tutor coordinators, tutors, and lecturers at all its regional campuses. It, therefore, means that the university has adequate infrastructure, personnel, and guiding documents. However, this calls for further research to establish the root causes of students' inability to access certain support services effectively.

Further research should incorporate a larger sample of students to further analyse the impact of efficient provision of student support services on performance and academic success. There is also a need to establish the level of readiness to self-directed learning by students at BOU given that the university has a lot of resources and services that seem not to be optimally utilised by students.

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