Article

The Availability of Learner Support Services in Selected Open, Distance and e-Learning Institutions

Tabitha A. Rangara-Omol
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3182-9650
Catholic University of Eastern Africa, Kenya
53314069@mylife.unisa.ac.za

Velisiwe G. Gasa
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3402-4268
University of South Africa
gasavg@unisa.ac.za

Abstract

Learner support is regarded as a survival tool necessary for any student who chooses to learn in an Open, Distance and e-Learning (ODeL) institution. It is a necessary service and component of a student's academic experience. Distance learning providers are, therefore, expected to sensitise students on the demands and challenges of distance learning formats so that they can acquire coping mechanisms as challenges arise. However, it has been noticed that, although many institutions provide several forms of learner support, they are sometimes inaccessible or minimally useful to the students. The purpose of this article is to investigate the extent of support services' availability for students in ODeL institutions. It draws from a study that was carried out to evaluate learner support services rendered by ODeL institutions to first entrant undergraduate students. To collect data, a questionnaire was constructed to test variables (9 learner support indices) within the construct. It was uploaded into SurveyMonkey and sent to 272 undergraduate students in two selected universities. The results indicated that out of nine indices only four were positive. The following were negatively rated: counselling and mentorship, regional centres and library use, interaction and communication, skills training as well as student associations and representation. This indicates that students from both universities were dissatisfied with the availability of the mentioned support. There is thus a need for support services to be available not only to solve arising problems but as an assistive companion accompanying the students throughout their academic journey.

Keywords: distance education; distance learning; information and communication technology

UNISA university of south africa PRESS

International Journal of Educational Development in Africa
https://upjournals.co.za/index.php/IJEDA
Volume 5 | 1 | 2019-2020 | #10000 | 22 pages

https://doi.org/10.25159/2312-3540/10000
ISSN 2312-3540 (Print)

Introduction

The nature of distance learning involves student-centred learning, independent learning and constructivist pedagogies, which all require the student to grow towards self-reliance. Contrary to the belief that distance learners are independent (Moore 2003), many students entering into distance education may not have had prior experience in distance learning environments or independent learning skills and so may not immediately qualify as independent learners. In addition, they may not have braced themselves for the challenges that come with such environments. In many instances, students have not even reflected on how "distance" could impact their learning (Kelly and Stevens 2009). These issues rationalise the need for learner support services. There is a need for distance education providers to understand the needs of their students in order to develop appropriate learner support components that support the student's needs and the learning transaction. A learner support mechanism endeavours to address all the student's requirements that may affect his/her learning, including career and course choice guidance, preparatory needs, study skills, access to and use of technology, psychosocial needs, collaborative and group discussions, guidance on tutorials, learning materials, assessments and writing of assignments. Learner support services consist of elements provided by the host university that are capable of responding to the student's needs in all the aforementioned activities (Dzakiria 2008). It also includes guidance and counselling on both academic and non-academic issues (Tait 2000).

Most universities in Africa moving from single to dual mode have not fully grasped that distance learning is a different pedagogy (Power and Gould-Morven 2011), which requires organisational restructuring and separate course development. In distance learning, the student characteristics, needs and contexts are so diverse that it is no longer appropriate to assume that these students are all able to learn and benefit equally from the courses offered from their situated diverse locations. Universities are continuously adopting new technologies, leaving the student bewildered as to their focus, learning or technology training. Information and communication technology (ICT) providers are mostly focused on the "use" rather than the "user" (Njenga and Fourie 2010). Moreover, distance learning has numerous challenges that are not immediately visible to new students. Distance education programmes have the capacity to scale up to huge proportions. A typical programme has the ability to hold thousands of students within one virtual classroom. This makes them demand-driven, often overlooking many factors that affect both the faculty and the students. Students in such environments possess characteristics and needs that may differ from those of their colleagues in a typical face-to-face classroom. This is a consideration that has been overlooked by many universities. Most often, face-to-face programmes are simply adapted to fit into distance learning programmes. Therefore, students who are entering into such an experience for the first time may need to be prepared either through counselling, self-evaluation or an online support system, or need to understand what they are signing up for. Therefore, it is imperative to ask these questions:

To what extent are support services available for students in ODeL institutions?

To what extent are the students in ODeL institutions receiving learner support services?

A Discourse on Learner Support

Learner support comprises a range of human and non-human resources that guide and facilitate the educational transaction, especially for the student. It consists of elements provided by the host university that are capable of responding to the learner's needs either as an individual or as part of a group of learners throughout the academic journey (Dzakiria 2008; Thorpe 2002). A learner support mechanism endeavours to address all the learner's requirements that may affect his/her learning, including career and course choice guidance, preparatory needs, study skills, access procedures to seminars, psychosocial needs, collaborative and group discussions, guidance on tutorials, learning materials, assessments and writing of assignments. It also includes guidance and counselling on non-academic issues that may affect the student's academic walk (Keegan 1995; Tait 2000). A breakdown in one of these needs often affects all the others (Lentell 2012).

It is important to emphasise that a student who is enrolled for distance education does not only need learning materials but also infrastructure support, interactions support and consumer information (AACSB International 2007). These three requirements sum up the overarching concept of learner support from one perspective. Garrison and Baynton (1987) further explain that learner support comprises all the resources within the learner's access that contribute to a smooth engagement in the learning process. Kelly and Stevens (2009) and Thorpe (2002) affirm that learner support is an important requirement not only for distance learners but also for pure online students using the latest learning technologies. Therefore, learner support should intentionally be included in the planning of any distance education programme.

According to Thorpe (2002), learner support is not only a subsystem of distance education, but also a part of all the integrated processes within distance education. It should be a major offering of any educational institution. It should also be integrated within activities that involve tutoring through face-to-face or electronic techniques, emails and other correspondences, telephone and computer mediated learning, counselling, mentoring and administrative services on campus and at regional centres (Roberts 2005; Stevens and Kelly 2009; Tait 2000). Furthermore, Ryan (2004) and Tait (2000, 2002) state that when planning for learner support services, the most important consideration should be the needs of the learner, driven both externally and internally. Such a consideration recognises the learner's experiences and challenges that may arise in his/her daily life in and out of school. This leads to constructs and frameworks that may support the learner to cope and overcome issues that may affect his/her learning. Within such a framework, the learner's needs compel the education provider to provide support for the achievement of successful learning.

Theoretical Foundations of Learner Support

Learner support is a relatively new phenomenon in education and as such its boundaries are still under formulation. There are no definitive theories that explain the practice of learner support. However, there are theories associated with the practice of learner support in distance learning that are referred to as theoretical foundations or theoretical assumptions. One of these theories is the Theory of Transactional Distance that was developed by Michael G. Moore in the 1970s. It is one of the few theories in distance education that can be used to frame experiments in tutoring or other learner support activities to assess what change there is in the outcomes of student learning (Tait 2017). A number of researchers have confirmed its usefulness as a framework against which to analyse distance education practice. One of them echoed that theories such as these "are invaluable in guiding the complex practice of a rational process such as teaching and learning at a distance" (Garrison 2000, 3). In addition, Jung (2001, 527) expressed that it "provides a useful conceptual framework for defining and understanding distance education in general."

Moore (1993) and Benson and Samarawickrema (2009) acknowledge that there exists transactional distance in any educational event, but that in distance education and e-learning, the separation of the teacher and the learner significantly affects their transaction. According to Moore (1993), a transaction is defined by the amount of interaction students receive within four forms of interaction: student-teacher interaction, student-student interaction, student-material or content interaction and student-institution interaction. In the past, distance education was mainly defined by geographical distance, but as technologies as well as the characteristics and needs of students change, there is a demand for a much closer interaction with the education provider in order to break down barriers to success in distance learning. Furthermore, Moore (1997) emphasised the need for the establishment of quality interaction and dialogue to evade barriers to success in distance learning. The more and better the dialogue, the less the transactional distance. Similarly, an improvement in the amount and structure of dialogue increases the likelihood of learner autonomy (Shearer 2010). That is why some support frameworks include all mechanisms that facilitate dialogue, structure and learner autonomy. For example, support frameworks that have a positive impact on dialogue enable communication between the learner and the learning material, as well as the teacher and institution.

Moore's theory was particularly relevant, as it offered a lens through which researchers could evaluate learner support services rendered by ODeL institutions to first entrant undergraduate students. Through his discussion of the nature of quality dialogue and interaction, the diverse forms this takes, and how it affects the learner's experience, Moore's ideas provided a theoretical frame of reference through which researchers could quantify the impact of the nine learner support indices and how to diminish the transactional distance in order to break down barriers to success in distance learning.

Method

This study utilised a quantitative survey design. It aimed at gathering data using quantitative methods to assess students' experiences of learner support services. The target population was undergraduate students enrolled in distance education courses or programmes in the identified universities. Purposive sampling was used to identify the participating universities and the participating students.

Nine common indicators of learner support services, also referred to as indices, were used as the test variables. The indices were identified and condensed from studies done at the University of Ulster (Alias and Rahman 2005), the National Distance Education Centre of Ireland (Lorenzi, MacKeogh, and Fox 2004), the University Teknologi of Malaysia (O'Donnell, Sloan, and Mulholland 2006), the University of Southern Mississippi (Ward, Peters, and Shelley 2010), and the University of South Africa (Oosthuizen, Loedolff, and Hamman 2010; Zawacki-Richter 2005). The indices were: 1) Registration procedures, 2) Orientation programme and skills training, 3) Technology and learning materials, 4) Counselling and mentorship, 5) Interactions and communication, 6) Feedback, 7) Regional centres and library use, 8) Student associations and representation, and 9) Course progression and satisfaction. These indices informed the main constructs of the questionnaire that was uploaded onto SurveyMonkey with a link provided and sent to each participant. The questionnaire was divided into three parts. The first part contained the consent form; the second contained 75 Likert scale questions that were divided under the nine indices, and the last part comprised questions concerning the respondent's general characteristics. In total, there were 88 items to be answered. The questions contained in the questionnaire were content validated against the nine indices exposed during the literature review.

The study made use of SurveyMonkey knowing that online surveys rarely receive high response rates (Fricker and Schonlau 2002). The response rates for online surveys are sometimes worse than those for any conventional surveys. It was hoped that the response rate in this study would reach a threshold of at least 50%. However, as indicated on Tables 1 and 2 below, the study attained a response rate of 43% (n=103) and 44% (n=135) for Western University and Northern University respectively. Both Western University (WU) and Northern University (NU) are pseudonyms.

Tables 1 and 2 illustrate the breakdown of activities and the response rate.

Table 1: Response rate at Western University (WU)

Total number of questionnaires sent out via email	**122**
Bounced emails	**19**
Questionnaires for response	**103**

Questionnaires received back	**44**
Response rate **%**	**42.72**
Completed questionnaires	**36**
Total	***n*=36**

Table 2: Response rate at Northern University (NU)

Total number of questionnaires sent out via email	**150**
Bounced emails	**15**
Questionnaires for response	**135**
Questionnaires received back	**60**
Response rate **%**	**44.44**
Completed questionnaires	**54**
Total	***n*=54**

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collected through the online questionnaire were analysed. For descriptive statistics, Microsoft Excel was used to generate totals, means, modes, percentages and distribution tables. These were then transformed, using the same software, into charts and graphs. For the inferential statistics, Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) (version 23) was employed to conduct factor extraction and reduction. The indices were rotated based on the Kaiser-Mayer-Olkin (KMO) indicators and the proportion of variance based on the results of Principal Component Analysis (PCA), as explained in Table 3 below.

At NU, the administration of questionnaires was conducted within a period of one month. The email addresses for the students were accessed from the university's administration. In week one, the questionnaire was sent out by providing a link in each email. Weekly reminders were sent out every Friday for the subsequent three weeks. On the last day of week four, the link was closed and the questionnaires that had been returned were stored in the SurveyMonkey cloud account. The process of administering the questionnaires was repeated at WU, replicating NU within the following month. In the fourth month, all data were downloaded from the cloud account for editing and the data analysis phase.

As mentioned above, the data were analysed using online survey software and exported to Microsoft Excel and SPSS 23. Factor analysis (FA) was used to reduce data from the 75 test items into components that had strong associations in order to measure the construct more efficiently. There are statistical measures generated by SPSS that can

help to determine the appropriateness of the interrelationships. The rotated components results table also yielded the level of significance in the differences based on t-tests between universities by each index. The level of availability and usage of each index for each individual university was measured by absolute percentages.

Results

The coefficients from factor analysis were used to derive weighted indices for the nine mentioned dimensions. As seen from the Bartlet's test, KMO coefficients and the amount of variation explained by the first two principal components, the items within each indicator variable were sufficient to construct the indices (Table 3).

Table 3: Principal component analysis

Indicator	**KMO**	**Proportion of variance explained by first 2 PCA**
Registration support	0.660	64.1
Orientation support	0.838	52.3
Technology support	0.587	41.8
Counselling and mentorship	0.763	52.6
Interaction and communication	0.639	51.0
Regional centres and library use	0.838	68.1
Student feedback support	0.735	66.6
Student representation and associations	0.641	52.2
Course progression and satisfaction	0.694	66.9

The table above indicates that all *p* values for Bartlett's test of spherecity were significant ($p<0.00$) from the KMO column.

Table 4: Rotated components by PCA

		Mean	**Std. Error Mean**	**T**	**Sig**
Registration Process	WU	11.0516	.35125	2.708	.008
	NU	12.0206	.17536		
Orientation support	WU	17.5127	.72923	1.973	.052
	NU	19.0010	.38616		
Technology support	WU	11.2895	.35803	2.557	.012
	NU	12.3859	.25661		
Counselling and mentorship	WU	15.8185	.46675	2.130	.036
	NU	14.5488	.37241		

Interaction and communication	WU	13.2326	.40442	.994	.323
	NU	13.6649	.23416		
Regional centres and library use	WU	11.3057	.70411	2.477	.015
	NU	13.3382	.47845		
Student feedback support	WU	11.4179	.44540	.643	.522
	NU	11.8050	.39124		
Student representation and associations	WU	8.1907	.31206	.891	.376
	NU	7.8276	.25843		
Course progression and satisfaction	WU	20.2382	.64564	1.725	.088
	NU	21.6040	.48402		

The main characteristics that distinguished the two universities were registration process, technology and learning materials, counselling and mentorship, and regional centres, where the t-test showed significant differences between them. The *p* values were 0.008, 0.012, 0.036 and 0.015, respectively, at 0.05 significance level. In all of them, NU had a relatively higher mean score than WU, except for the index of counselling and mentorship. In the registration process, technology and learning materials, counselling/mentorship, and regional centres support processes, the percentage scores indicated differences between individual indices as well as differences between universities.

Results are herein presented based on individual indices.

Rating Scale Key:

Strongly Agree = 5; Agree = 4; Neither = 3; Disagree = 2; Strongly Disagree =1.

Registration Procedures

Figure 1 illustrates that in the registration index, 82% (*n*=36) of respondents at WU were pleased with the university's support during registration compared to 92% (*n*=54) of those at NU, giving a difference of 10% (*n*=90) between universities.

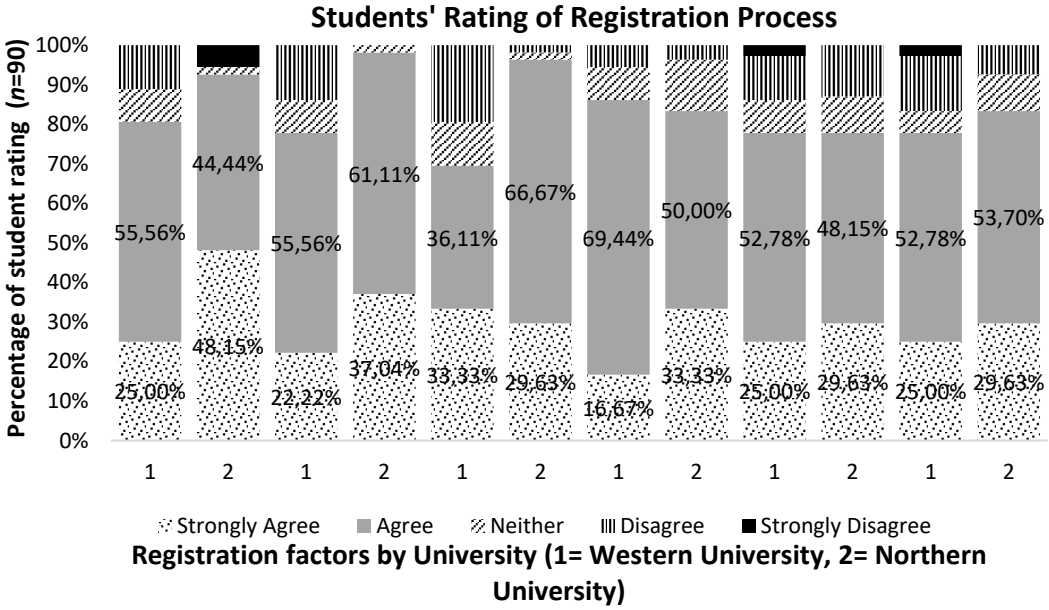

Figure 1: Students' rating of the registration process

Orientation and Skills Training

Figure 2 indicates that the highest rating on 5 for both WU and NU was on the eleventh indicator in orientation on how and where to access help, which scored 31% (*n*=36) and 26% (*n*=54), respectively. The highest rating for both universities was in orientation on examinations and assignments, which scored 72% (*n*=36) and 68% (*n*=54) on 4 for WU and NU, respectively. Other than this, there seemed to be a wide variation in the ratings on the orientation indicators. The lowest rating indicating dissatisfaction was orientation to study groups. Here, 45% (*n*=36) of respondents in WU awarded a rating of 2 and below, while 13% (*n*=54) of those at NU recorded the same rating, giving a difference of 22%. The highest disparity between the universities was in orientation to time management skills, where a rating of 4 was awarded by 40% (*n*=36) of WU respondents and 9% (*n*=54) of respondents from NU, giving a difference of 27% (*n*=90).

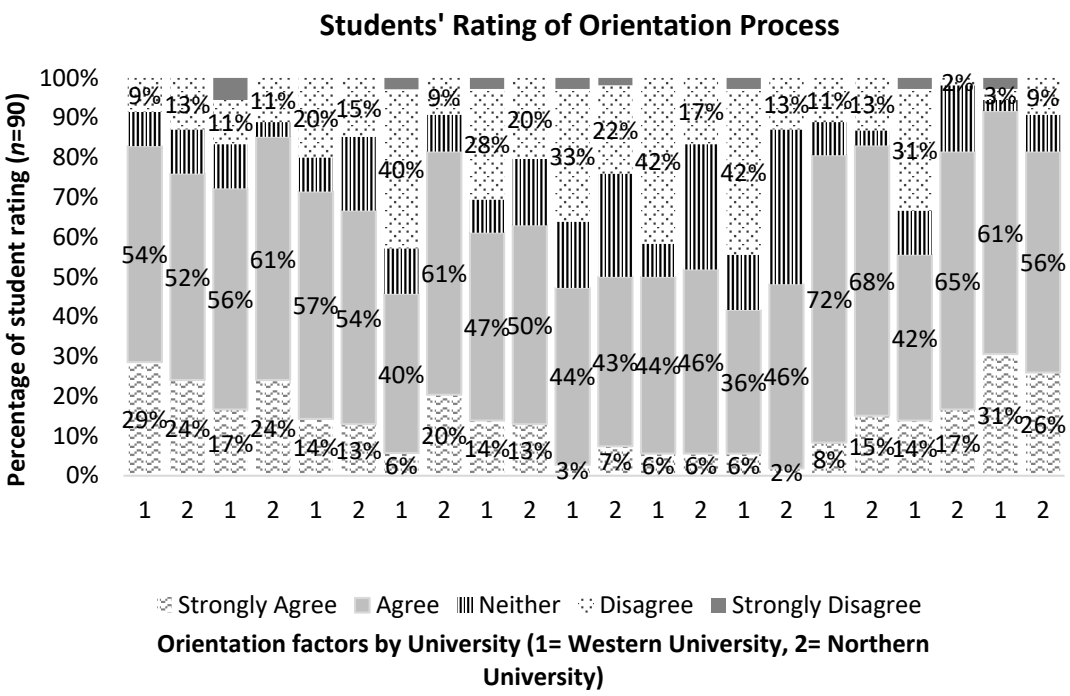

Figure 2: Students' rating of orientation process

Technology and Learning Materials

In the use of internet and access through a personal modem (see Figure 3), the majority of students were in tandem. Over 80% (*n*=90) of the respondents from both universities rated this item 4 and above. Delivery of learning materials through ICT formats received the widest disparity of ratings, with a rating of 1 from 25% (*n*=36) of respondents from WU and 73% (*n*=54) from those in NU. Figure 2 also shows that the issue of possessing ICT skills required for the programme or course received an equivalent rating of 5 from 37% (*n*=90) of respondents from both universities. The previous question which assessed whether the students had received knowledge and skills for ICT use from the university showed that the provision of ICT skills was rated as satisfactory by 58% (*n*=36) of repondents from WU and 85% (*n*=54) of those at NU. This indicates a disparity in the way the two universities equipped the students to use ICT for distance learning programmes. The use of computers at regional campuses was rated 1 by 47% (*n*=36) and 67% (*n*=54) of WU and NU students, respectively. This is an indication that the majority of the students rarely used the computers at the regional centres. Assistance from the ICT personnel did not score very highly in WU, with less than 50% (*n*=36) of students seeming happy; in contrast, over 80% (*n*=54) of respondents from NU gave a rating of 4 and above for the same question. This also indicates a disparity in technology support provided by the two universities.

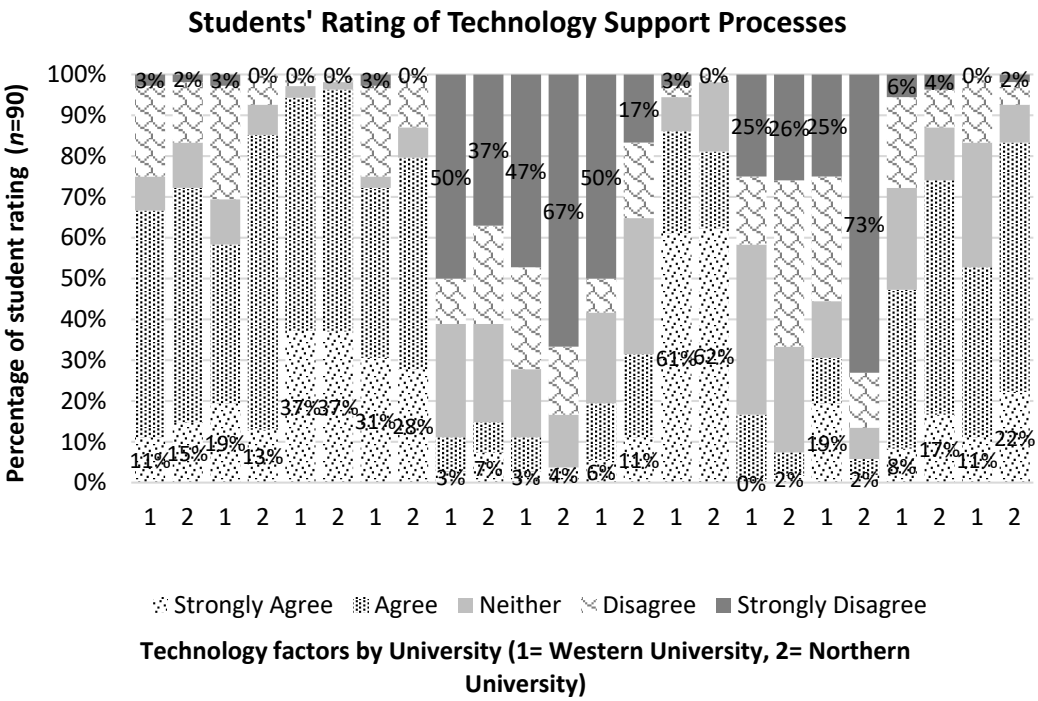

Figure 3: Students' rating of technology support processes

Counselling and Mentorship Support Processes

Figure 4 indicates that only 36% (*n*=36) and 24% (*n*=54) of students rated the first question 5 for WU and NU, respectively. Here, the respondents were required to rate their knowledge on the difference between a lecturer, counsellor and mentor. The results indicate that problems may arise in the students' decision-making skills as to whom to approach when in need of any particular support. WU respondents had the highest rating of 61% (*n*=36) in 4 for acknowledging that they receive counsel from their lecturers and that they regard mentors as important to their studies (6th question). NU, on the other hand, had the highest rating of 59% (*n*=54) in 4 for knowledge in differentiating the services of a lecturer, counsellor and mentor as far as counselling and mentorship is concerned. Figure 4 also indicates that on the index of the counsellor's availability when needed by the student, a rating of 1 was given by 25% (*n*=36) and 28% (*n*=54) of the respondents in WU and NU, respectively. Additionally, 33% (*n*=36) of WU respondents rated 1 on the question enquiring whether the students would consider asking for help from the counsellor for non-academic issues; 50% (*n*=54) of respondents at NU also gave a rating of 1 for this question. These may be indicators that students were dissatisfied with the availability and accessibility of counselling and mentorship support.

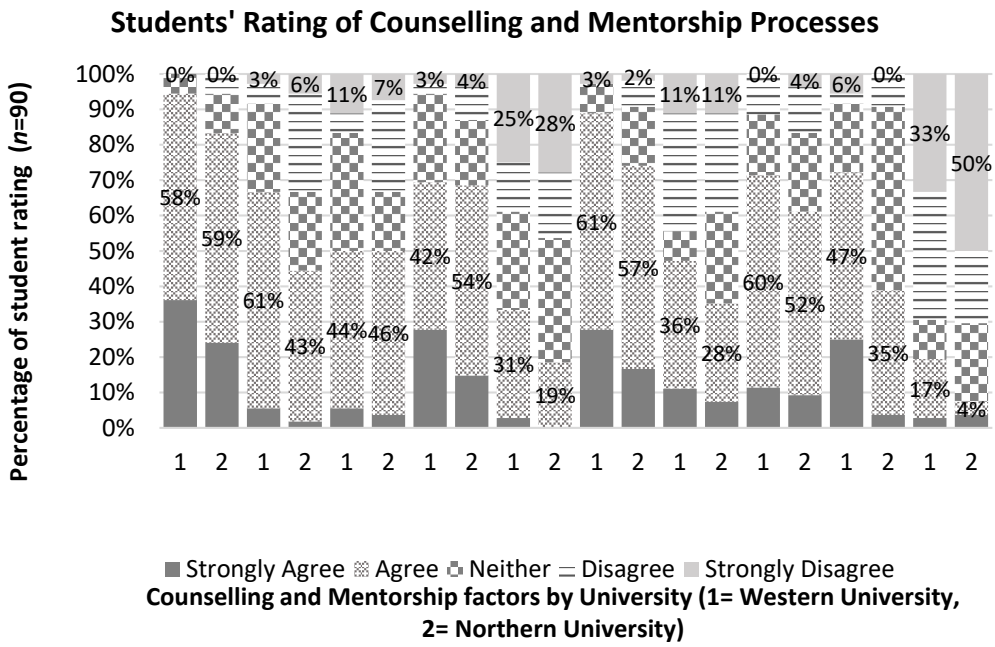

Figure 4: Students' rating of counselling and mentorship processes

Interaction and Communication Support

Figure 5 displays high ratings on most of the questions. The majority of the students seem to have experienced support from this index. There was a combined rating of over 70% (*n*=90) that indicated satisfaction concerning all the questions, except for the one that asked the respondents to rate the university's administration's ability to communicate information coherently and effectively. On this, 45% (*n*=36) of the respondents from WU gave a rating of 4 and above and 59% (*n*=54) of those from NU gave the same rating. Although both scores indicate that students were somewhat pleased with the support service, there was a disparity of 14% (*n*=90) between the universities.

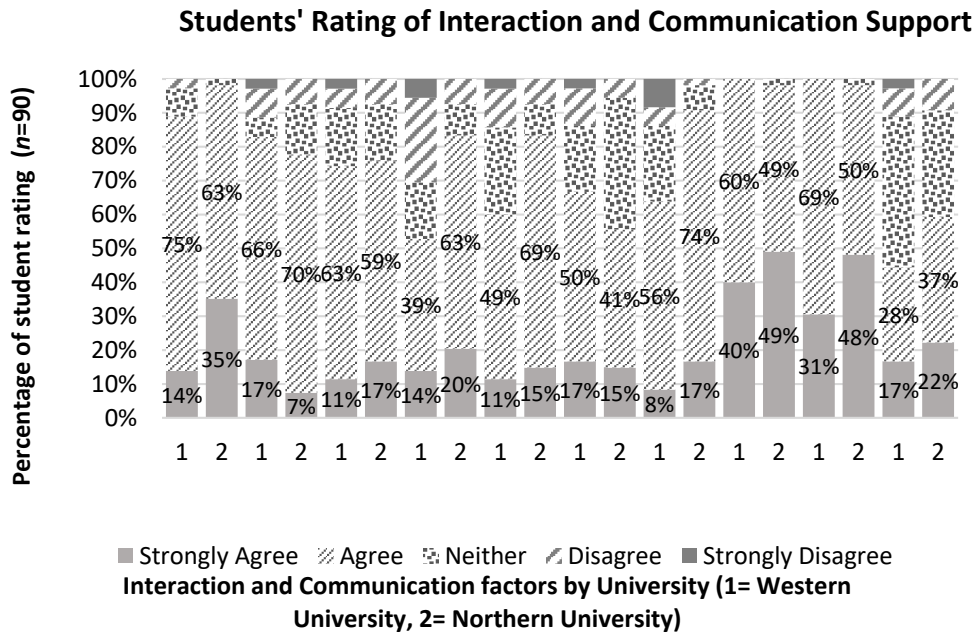

Figure 5: Students' rating of interaction and communication support

Timely and Constructive Feedback

Figure 6 displays a similar trend in the number of students who rated the item 5 and 1. Up to 10% (*n*=90) of students from the divide did not express very strong feelings either positively or negatively concerning this index. This may indicate that on average, this support system was widely available. However, it is noteworthy that the question concerning timely feedback from all staff was rated 1 by 22% (*n*=36) and 6% (*n*=54) of students from WU and NU, respectively. Moreover, 6% (*n*=36) and 24% (*n*=54) of students from WU and NU, respectively, gave a rating of 5. There seems to be an inverse relationship whereby students at WU strongly disagreed on the issue of timely feedback (22% [*n*=36]), while those at NU strongly agreed on the same (24% [*n*=54]). However, it is not possible to establish the significance of this from the chart. Figure 6 also shows a distributed response, with no index scoring less than 3% (*n*=90) from the divide.

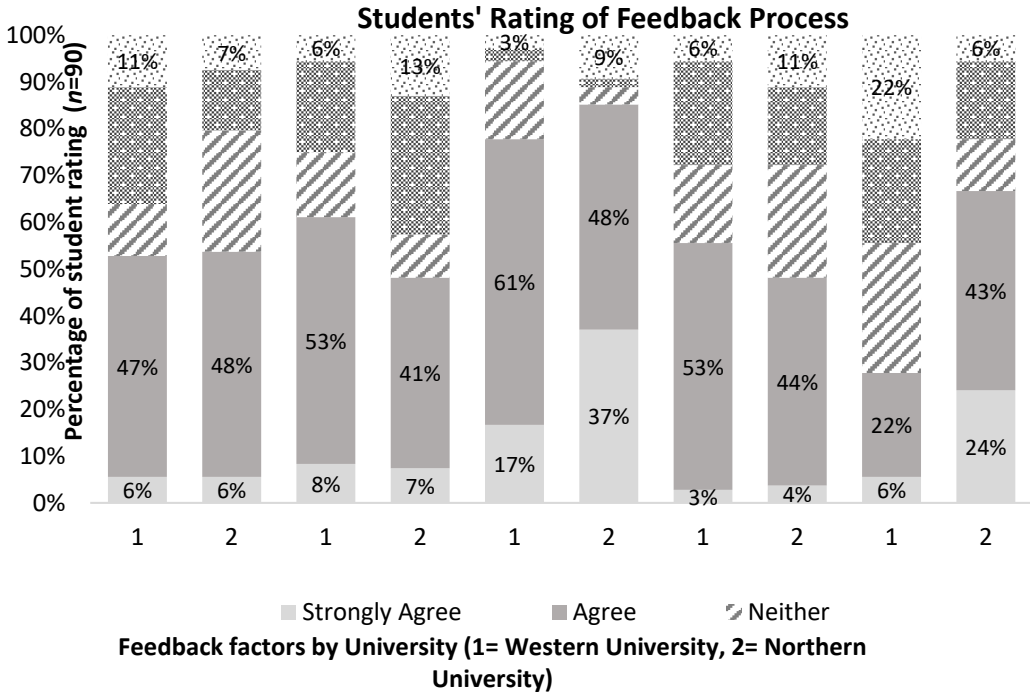

Figure 6: Students' rating of the feedback process

Regional Centres and Library Support

Figure 7 illustrates the students' ratings for regional centres and library use. These ratings illustrated general displeasure among students of both universities, with over 25% (*n*=90) scoring 1 for most of the questions, particularly for the question which enquired whether the students visit and utilise the library at the centre. Here, 53% (*n*=36) of respondents at WU and 48% (*n*=54) at NU indicated that they did not use this facility. The highest rating of 5 was only given by 6% of respondents from WU (*n*=36) for the 3rd and 6th questions, while the highest score of 5 was awarded by 13% (*n*=54) of the students of NU for the second question. This shows that the majority of the students, approximately 90% (*n*=90), did not strongly agree that adequate support is provided at the regional centres. The generally high number of students who gave a rating of 1 is an indication that this support system was not working very well. The use of the library, both online and at the regional centre, scored highly in 1, indicating that the students were not efficiently using the library. When the students were asked to rate their use of the university's online library, 67% (*n*=36) and 22% (*n*=54) of the students rated 1 for WU and NU, respectively. This shows that the library, whether physical or digital, was not providing sufficient support.

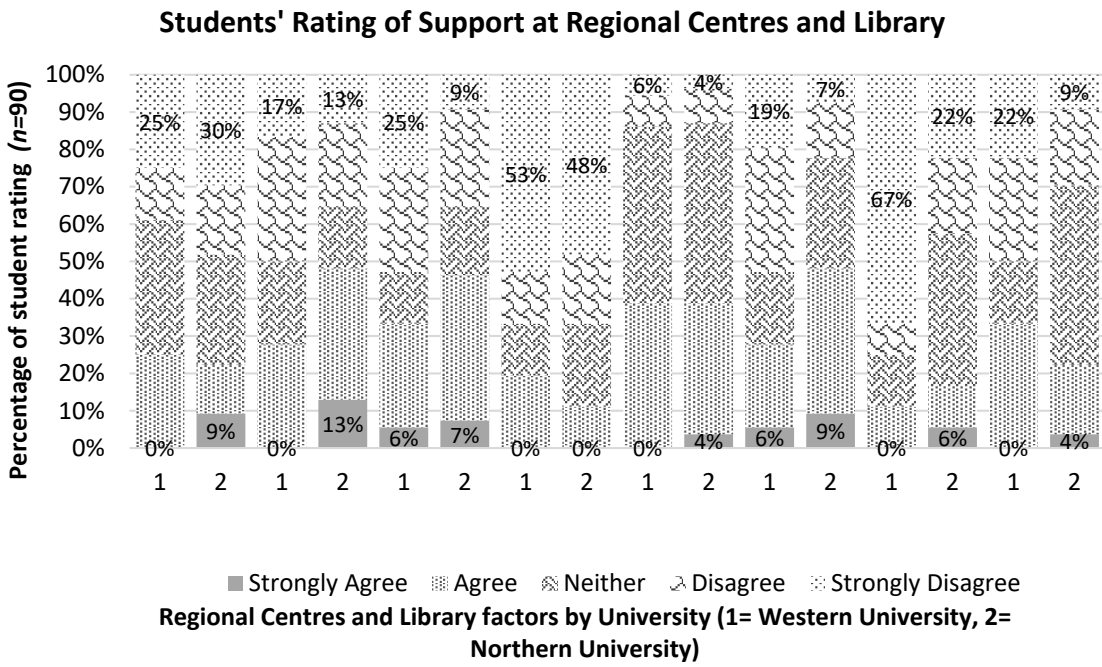

Figure 7: Students' rating of support at regional centres and library

Student Associations and Representation Support

Figure 8 indicates that this index lacked a distinct pattern based on the scores by respondents from both WU and NU. Over 50% (*n*=90) of the respondents gave a rating of 3 when asked whether the associations or councils were representative in both universities. Equally, over 50% (*n*=90) chose a rating of 3 on whether there were sufficient opportunities for associations and representation. The highest rating was in the second question, which asked the students to rate whether this index was important for their learning. Most students seemed to agree; 71% (*n*=36) and 63% (*n*=54) of respondents from WU and NU expressed satisfaction, respectively. Additionally, over 60% (*n*=90) from both sides of the divide were in agreement with the statement that the university supports students to belong to associations.

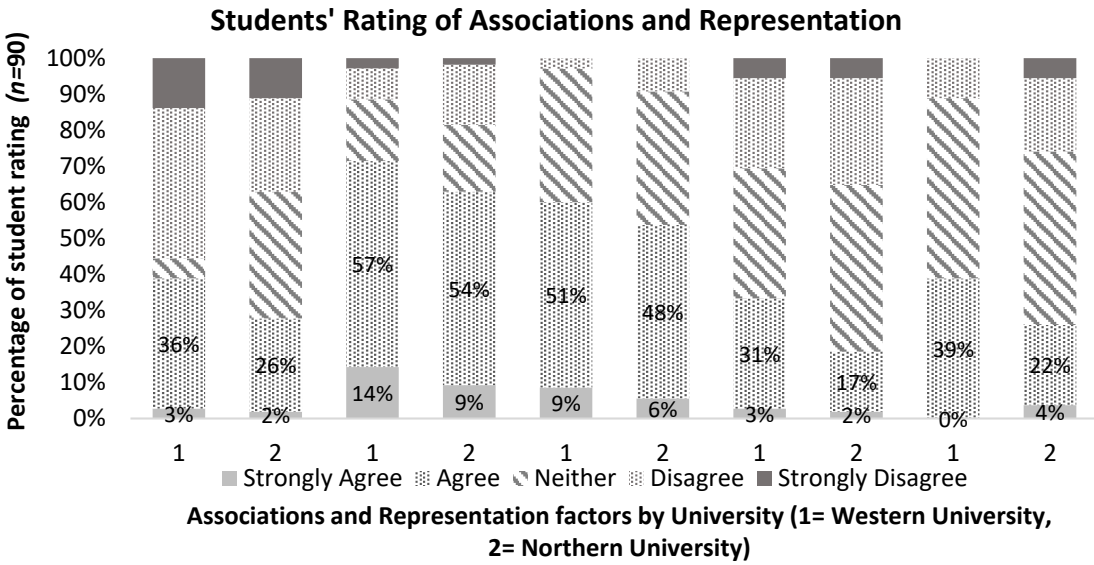

Figure 8: Students' rating of associations and representation

Course Progression and Satisfaction Support

Figure 9 illustrates that the highest rating of 4 and above was given by 89% (*n*=54) of respondents from NU who seemed to be satisfied with the way the university was running their particular programme or course. This was in the question where the students were asked to rate the availability of information on assessments. Comparatively, at WU only 67% (*n*=36) of the respondents expressed satisfaction with the same question. Although respondents from both universities seemed happy in terms of this question, there was a disparity of 22% (*n*=90). In general, the respondents were happy with the support for course progression. This is also evident because less than 10% (*n*=90) of respondents from both universities gave a rating of 1.

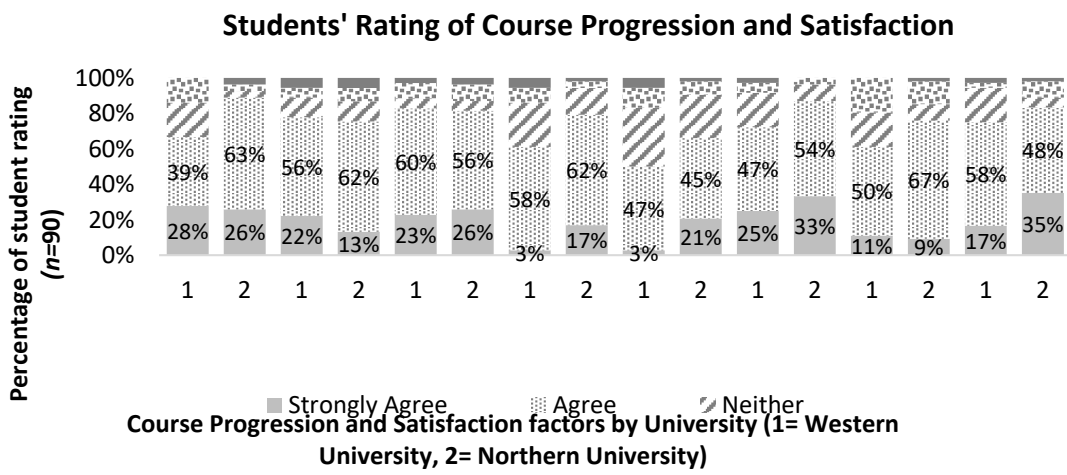

Figure 9: Students' rating of course progression and satisfaction

Discussion

Regarding registration support, the means indicate that the respondents from both WU and NU seemed generally pleased with the support provided during registration processes. Respondents from both universities (*n*=90) had a mean score of 4. Additionally, this was also the score from most respondents in both universities. In this support index, students from both universities seemed pleased with the services, although there were differences in absolute percentages. The statement on "understanding the registration process" had the highest indication that students encountered some problems in this index. Here, up to 20% (*n*=36) of students in WU gave a rating of 1, while in NU less than 5% (*n*=54) of the students gave the same rating. In terms of receiving guidance during the registration process, students from both universities indicated equivalence, with about 80% (*n*=90) giving a combined score of 4 and above. The availability and accessibility of course information is paramount to application and registration processes. A prospective student should be able to access course requirements, the institution's entry requirements and any other relevant information.

Regarding the orientation process, there was no significant difference between the universities, even though the modalities of providing support differed. Most of the students from both universities indicated that orientation support was available. In WU, the students were expected to travel to the university for orientation and skills training, while in NU, the students were expected to take it online. In WU, orientation was not stated as mandatory, and the students could proceed to the learning phase without it. At NU, on the other hand, orientation was mandatory and gradable. The students had to attain an acceptable pass grade before proceeding to the learning phase. Skills training was lacking for both universities, with students showing no definitive answer as to whether or not they received this training. There is a possibility that some of the skills,

although not specified, were silent and the students were able to gain them without even being aware. For instance, the online orientation at NU was self-paced with deadlines. This meant that for successful completion, the students had to learn self-discipline, time management and self-organisational skills.

Regarding technology and learning materials support, the t-test showed that there was a significant difference between the universities in the provision of this support. In this index, students at WU gave low ratings for the support received from ICT personnel, while those at NU seemed generally happy with the ICT staff. Delivery of learning materials through ICT formats received the widest disparity of ratings, as 25% (*n*=36) of WU respondents and 73% (*n*=54) from NU chose 1 as a rating. The issue of possessing ICT skills required for the programme or course received equivalent ratings, with 37% (*n*=90) from both universities giving it a rating of 5. The previous question, which assessed whether the students had received knowledge and skills for ICT use from the university, was rated as satisfactory by 58% (*n*=36) of respondents from WU and 85% (*n*=54) from NU. This indicates a disparity in the way the two universities equipped the students to use technology. The use of computers at regional campuses was rated 1 by 47% (*n*=36) and 67% (*n*=54) of respondents from WU and NU, respectively. This is an indication that the majority of the students rarely used the computers at the regional centres.

At both WU and NU, the majority of the students acknowledged that counselling and mentorship were important to their studies. But there was a general indication that they were dissatisfied with the availability of this support, as only 36% (*n*=36) and 24% (*n*=54) gave a rating of 5 in this question for WU and NU, respectively. When the respondents were required to rate their knowledge on the differences between a lecturer, counsellor and mentor, NU had the highest rating of 59% (*n*=54) for the knowledge of differentiating the services of a lecturer, counsellor and mentor as far as counselling and mentorship are concerned. WU respondents had the highest rating of 61% (*n*=36) in 4 for acknowledging that they receive counsel from their lecturers and that they regarded mentors as important to their studies. Figure 4 also indicates that 33% (*n*=36) of WU respondents rated 1 on the question enquiring whether the students would consider asking for help from the counsellor on non-academic issues, whereas 50% (*n*=54) of respondents at NU also rated 1.

In both universities, there seemed to be problems regarding timely and constructive examination feedback. The question concerning timely feedback from all staff was rated 1 by 22% (*n*=36) and 6% (*n*=54) of respondents from WU and NU, respectively; a rating of 5 was given by 6% (*n*=36) and 24% (*n*=54) for the same. The respondents from both universities did not show a clear pattern for the questions, except where they indicated general satisfaction. Here, the students were asked to rate whether feedback from the faculty on assignments was constructive. For this, there was a mean score of 4 for both WU and NU (*n*=90). Generally, the most occurring score was 4 for almost all the questions in both universities.

Regarding the regional centres and library use, the ratings indicated a high amount of displeasure consistent within the divide, as a rating of 1 was given by more than 25% (*n*=90) for most of the questions. This is especially observed in the question that enquired whether the students visit and utilise the library at the centre. Here, 53% (*n*=36) of the respondents at WU and 48% (*n*=54) at NU indicated that they did not use this facility. The majority of the students, approximately 90% (*n*=90), did not strongly agree that the support provided at regional centres is adequate. The generally high number of students who chose 1 as a rating is an indication that this support system was not working very well. The use of the library, both online and at the regional centre, also scored highly in 1, indicating that the students were not efficiently using the library. When the students were asked to rate the use of the university's online library, 67% (*n*=36) and 22% (*n*=54) of the students rated 1 for WU and NU, respectively. This shows that the library, whether physical or digital, was not providing sufficient support.

Students from both universities seemed dissatisfied with student associations and representation. The t-test did not indicate a significant difference because students from both universities seemed unaware of how to join the associations. This index lacked a distinct pattern based on the scores by respondents from both WU and NU. Over 50% (*n*=90) of the respondents rated 3 for whether the associations were representative in both universities. Equally, over 50% (*n*=90) chose 3 as a rating for whether there were sufficient opportunities for associations and representation. The highest rating was in the question that asked the students to rate whether this index was important for their learning. Most students seemed to agree; 71% (*n*=36) and 63% (*n*=54) of the respondents from WU and NU expressed agreement, respectively.

The respondents seemed generally happy with the course progression and satisfaction support provided by the two universities. Most of the respondents from both WU and NU rated 4 for all the indices except for the fourth and fifth questions where respondents from WU showed no clear pattern, indicated by a mean of 3. In these questions, the students were asked to rate whether support for this index was available and accessible, respectively.

Conclusion

This article investigated the provision of learner support services through nine indices in two universities. In both universities, students seemed more satisfied with the support they received in terms of registration, timely and constructive feedback, technology and learning material support as well as course progression than they did with other forms of support. Counselling and mentorship as well as student associations and representation received the least positive ratings from the students. Interaction and communication as well as skills training were among those rated negatively. Although regional campuses were available, their use for distance learning students seemed to be diminishing as they rarely indicated the utilisation of these facilities.

It is important to note that learner support services should be an ever-present component of learning throughout the student's academic journey. Oftentimes, the education provider focuses on learning materials, timetables, deadlines and the completion of studies without due consideration for the students' needs. This may not cause overt problems in face-to-face formats, but for distance education students, a lack of support in the face of competing needs may be a source of stress. This article recommends that distance education models should specify and progressively provide support services. Students enrolled in distance education need to learn generic skills that support learning outcomes.

References

Alias, N. A., and N. S. N. A. Rahman. 2005. "The Supportive Distance Learning Environment: A Study on the Learning Support Needs of Malaysian Online Learners." *European Journal of Open, Distance and e-Learning* 8 (2). Accessed October 13, 2021. https://old.eurodl.org/?p=archives&year=2005&halfyear=2&abstract=185.

AACSB International (The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business). 2007. "Quality Issues in Distance Learning." Accessed October 13, 2021. https://numerons.files.wordpress.com/2012/04/16quality-issues-in-distance-learning.pdf.

Benson, R., and G. Samarawickrema. 2009. "Addressing the Context of e-Learning: Using Transactional Distance Theory to Inform Design." *Distance Education* 30 (1): 5–21. https://doi.org/10.1080/01587910902845972.

Dzakiria, H. 2008. "Students' Accounts of the Need for Continuous Support in a Distance Learning Programme." *Open Learning: The Journal of Open, Distance and e-Learning* 23 (2): 103–11. https://doi.org/10.1080/02680510802051913.

Fricker, R. D., and M. Schonlau. 2002. "Advantages and Disadvantages of Internet Research Surveys: Evidence from the Literature." *Field Methods* 14 (4): 347–67. https://doi.org/10.1177/152582202237725.

Garrison, R. 2000. "Theoretical Challenges for Distance Education in the 21st Century: A Shift from Structural to Transactional Issues." *The International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning* 1 (1): 1–17. https://doi.org/10.19173/irrodl.v1i1.2.

Garrison, D. R., and M. Baynton. 1987. "Concepts: Beyond Independence in Distance Education: The Concept of Control." *American Journal of Distance Education* 1 (3): 3–15. https://doi.org/10.1080/08923648709526593.

Jung, I. 2001. "Building a Theoretical Framework of Web-Based Instruction in the Context of Distance Education." *British Journal of Educational Technology* 32 (5): 525–34. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8535.00222.

Keegan, D. 1995. "Teaching and Learning by Satellite in a European Virtual Classroom." In *Open and Distance Learning Today*, edited by F. Lockwood, 108–18. London: Routledge.

Kelly, P., and C. Stevens. 2009. “Narrowing the Distance: Using E-Learner Support to Enhance the Student Experience.” *European Journal of Open, Distance and E-Learning* 2: 1–6.

Lentell, H. 2012. “Distance Learning in British Universities: Is It Possible?” *Open Learning: The Journal of Open, Distance and e-Learning* 27 (1): 23–36. https://doi.org/10.1080/02680513.2012.640782.

Lorenzi, F., K. MacKeogh, and S. Fox. 2004. “Preparing Students for Learning in an Online World: An Evaluation of the Student Passport to eLearning (SPEL) Model.” *European Journal of Open Distance Learning* 7 (1). Accessed October 13, 2021. https://old.eurodl.org/?p=archives&sp=full&article=108.

Moore, M. 1997. “Theory of Transactional Distance.” In *Theoretical Principles of Distance Education*, edited by D. Keegan, 22–38. New York, NY: Routledge.

Moore, M. G. 2003. *Handbook of Distance Education*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Njenga, J. K., and L. C. H. Fourie. 2010. “The Myths about E-Learning in Higher Education.” *British Journal of Educational Technology* 41 (2): 199–212. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8535.2008.00910.x.

O’Donnell, C. M., D. J. Sloan, and C. W. Mulholland. 2006. “Evaluation of an Online Student Induction and Support Package for Online Learners.” *European Journal of Open and Distance Learning* 9 (1). Accessed January 16, 2013. https://old.eurodl.org/?p=archives&year=2006&halfyear=1&article=220.

Oosthuizen, A. G., P. V. Z. Loedolff, and F. Hamman. 2010. “Students’ Perceptions of the Quality of Learner Support in ODL.” *Progressio* 32 (1): 185–205.

Power, M., and A. Gould-Morven. 2011. “Head of Gold, Feet of Clay: The Online Learning Paradox.” *The International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning* 12 (2): 13–39. https://doi.org/10.19173/irrodl.v12i2.916.

Roberts, D. 2005. “Learner Support in South African Distance Education: A Case for Action.” Paper presented at the Common Wealth for Learning Conference. Accessed October 13, 2021. http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.618.4794&rep=rep1&type=pdf.

Ryan, Y. 2004. “Pushing the Boundaries with Online Learner Support.” In *Learner Support in Open, Distance and Online Learning Environments*, edited by J. E. Brindley, C. Walti and O. Zawacki-Richter, 125–34. Oldenburg: BIS.

Shearer, R. L. 2010. “Transactional Distance and Dialogue in Online Learning.” Paper presented at the 26th Annual Conference on Distance Teaching and Learning, University of Wisconsin, Madison, WI.

Tait, A. 2000. “Planning Student Support for Open and Distance Learning.” *Open Learning: The Journal of Open, Distance and e-Learning* 15 (3): 287–99. https://doi.org/10.1080/713688410.

Tait, A. 2002. “Re-Thinking Learner Support in Distance Education in the Open University UK: A Case Study.” In *Rethinking Learner Support in Distance Education: Change and Continuity in an International Context*, edited by A. Tait and R. Mills, 185–95. London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203006191.

Tait, A. 2017. “European Figures in Distance and e-Learning.” *Journal of Learning for Development* 4 (1): 5–11.

Thorpe, M. 2002. “Rethinking Learner Support: The Challenge of Collaborative Online Learning.” *Open Learning: The Journal of Open, Distance and e-Learning* 17 (2): 105–19. https://doi.org/10.1080/02680510220146887a.

Ward, M. E., G. Peters, and K. Shelley. 2010. “Student and Faculty Perceptions of the Quality of Online Learning Experiences.” *The International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning* 11 (3): 57–77. https://doi.org/10.19173/irrodl.v11i3.867.

Zawacki-Richter, O. 2005. “Online Faculty Support and Education Innovation—A Case Study.” *European Journal of Open Distance Learning* 8 (1). Accessed October 13, 2021. https://old.eurodl.org/?p=archives&year=2005&halfyear=1&article=163.