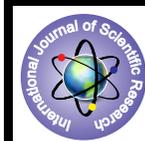# THE USEFULNESS OF STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES IN DISTANCE HIGHER EDUCATION WITH PARTICULAR FOCUS ON THE ZIMBABWE OPEN UNIVERSITY

**PHOEBE KASHORA** | Faculty of Social Sciences and Gender Development Studies, Women's University in Africa, Mt Pleasant, Harare, Zimbabwe

**ERIC SAMUEL MAPASURE SARABOYI MAKURA**

**ELIZABETH CHIKWIRI**

**ABSTRACT**
*Provision of Distance Higher Education (DHE), pioneered in 1858 by the University of London as its External Programme, twenty two years after its establishment, is the only way Developing Countries can effectively enable majority of their people acquire University Education, which they had been deliberately denied during the period of colonial domination .This study sought to determine the usefulness of Learner Support Services (LSS) in DHE, but focusing only on the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU). Data was collected from ZOU students through the use of questionnaires and structured interviews. The study found compelling evidence of the popularity and heavy demand for LSSs among students. The study strongly advises institutions of Higher Learning providing DHE to use a wide variety of LSSs so that students would not only enjoy learning, but equally meaningfully benefit from such mode of education.*

## Introduction

Distance Education was pioneered by Isaac Pitman in England in 1844 to provide Courses on Shorthand (Threstha 1997). This mode of education was adopted in 1858 by the University of London, twenty two years after its establishment, to provide Higher Education throughout the world through its External Programmes (Bell and Tight 1993). This novel mode of Higher Education led Charles Dickens, the greatest British novelist of the Victorian period, to describe the University of London External Programmes as the "People's University", for it provided access to Higher Education to students from less affluent backgrounds, which by then was a preserve of the Aristocracy and the Bourgeoisie. The University of South Africa (UNISA), copied the same mode of Higher Education when it was established in Pretoria in 1946.This mode of Higher Education was coined and popularised by the Labour Government of Harold Wilson as "The Open University" or "The University of the Air ", when it introduced it throughout Britain in 1969 . Since then, the expression 'Open' has tended to be used to refer to such mode of education (Tait and Mills (Eds.) 1996).

According to Dillon, Gunawardena and Parker (1992), for learners to meaningfully benefit from such mode of education, they need adequate and effective Learner Support Services (LSS). This study sought to determine the usefulness of LSSs in DHE, but focusing only on the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU), established in 1999, to provide higher education to the indigenes, which they had been "deliberately denied during the period of colonial domination and exploitation" (Makura 1981: 377). LSSs the study sought to determine, included hard and soft copy learning materials, library and learning resources and tutor support services, to mention only a few.

## Concepts

### The Concept Distance Education

"Distance education", Holmberg (1987) has explained, "includes the various forms of study at all levels which are not under the continuous immediate same premises, but which, nevertheless, benefit from the planning, guidance and tuition of a tutorial organisation." In a similar vein, Daniel (1996) has opined that, "distance education is the offering of educational programmes designed to facilitate a learning strategy which does not depend on day-to-day contact teaching, but makes best use of the potential of students to study on their own." Thus, distance education needs to be seen as the institutional provision of support for learners that involves no face -to -face contact on the part of the learner.

### The Concept Higher Education

According to Förg, Flenner, Gruber (eds.) (2009:4), "higher education is formal education that is provided by an institution of higher education and whose successful completion is marked by conferring a university degree." Thus, higher education refers to the tertiary education sector and mainly to courses of study that prepare students for scientific and research-oriented careers, as well as careers that call for a high level of professional qualifications.

### The Concept Distance Higher Education

Phipps, Ronald, Merisotis and Jamie (1999) consider higher distance education as a mode of providing education to students who are not physically present in a traditional setting such as a classroom. Thus, distance higher education is university education provided through correspondence.

### The Concept Learner Support Services

Garrison and Baynton (1987:7) explain that, "learner support is the resources that learners can access in order to carry out the learning processes." In a similar vein, Simpson (2000) considers learner support services in distant education as all activities beyond the production and the delivery of course materials that assist in the progress of students in their studies. Thus, learner support services need to be seen as services which offer advice, guidance and study support and aim to identify and remove barriers to learning.

### Objectives

The objectives of the study were to:

Determine the adequacy of SSS offered by ZOU in providing DHE.

Evaluate the effectiveness of SSS provided by ZOU.

Suggest possible ways by which SSS offered by ZOU could be improved so that student would be better engaged and benefit from richer DHE provided by ZOU.

### Theoretical Anchorage

The study is mainly anchored on two theories, namely, Max Weber's Functionalist Theory and Karl Marx's Class Conflict Theory. Weber (1947) states that society like the human body survives because of its various systems efficiently performing their various functions. The Theory enabled researchers to apply functionalist lenses in determining the adequacy and effectiveness of SSS

provided by ZOU. On the other hand, Marx (1867) argues that society consists of structured classes with different power, that are always in conflict and antagonistic in nature, of which depend on the mode of production at a given period. The researcher used Marx's Theory of Class Conflict to determine whether or not students equally benefitted from the support services (SS) provided by ZOU given the fact that they came from different social classes.

## Literature Review

Simpson (2000) categorises SSS in DHE into types namely, non-academic and academic. He cites examples of non-academic SSS as counselling, orientation programme, course registration, news bulletin, and student associations. For academic SSS, he cites examples of the development of learning skills knowledge and literacy. This classification is shared by virtually all authorities on SSS in DHE. These include Tait and Mills (1996) and Evans and Nation (Eds.) (1993), to mention a few.

Tait and Mills (Eds.) (1996) observe that since distance education students are placed in a unique situation in which neither teachers nor fellow students are physically present to clarify, discuss or provide feedback, adequate and effective SSS are vitally important if DHE is to be effective. Echoing the same view Hodgson (1986:56) stresses that, "support systems contribute to the process of a course as do the learning materials." Rae (1989) holds the same view.

Garrison (1989) observes that of all the SSS provided in DHE, the most important is the tutor. He argues that it is only through the guidance and direction of the tutor that distance education can achieve its goals and develop control of the educational process. Thus, the tutor is clearly indispensable in the provision of DHE. This strongly suggests that it would be the height of folly to ever think that the heralded Information and Communications Technology (ICT) would ever replace the tutor in the provision of DHE.

## Methodology

The study used the Mixed Method Research Methodological approach in keeping with the recommendations of Best and Khan (1993) that it is the most appropriate paradigm for studying a social phenomenon. The paradigm enabled the researcher to use aspects of both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies whenever it was considered either of the two was most appropriate.

With regards to design the study adopted the Case Study Research Design in line with the recommendations of Best and Khan (1993) that it is the best way of organising data for understanding social reality.

## Sample

A sample of ZOU undergraduate students was randomly selected consisting of 4 students from each of 5 select Provinces out of Zimbabwe's 10 provinces. The research participants were selected irrespective of the degree programme they were pursuing.

## Data Collection

Data was collected through the use of questionnaires and structural interviews.

## Findings and Discussions

The findings of this study are based on responses of ZOU undergraduate research participants deduced from the questionnaires and structured interview schedule on the usefulness of support services ZOU provides to its DHE learners. Such services are now increasingly expected from institutions that offer DHE for they enable students not only to enjoy learning more, but equally more meaningfully benefit from DHE (Ravisankar and Murthy 2000).

**Table 1 below, clearly shows responses of research participants regarding Student Support Services provided at 5 selected ZOU Provincial Centres:**

| | Not Very Helpful | Not Helpful | Not Sure | Helpful | Very Helpful |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Information Services | | 24 | 6 | 60 | 10 |
| Registration | | | 2 | 68 | 15 |
| Academic Planner | | 15 | 3 | 70 | 27 |
| Academic Guide Book | | | 4 | 66 | 30 |
| Printed Learning Materials | | | 2 | 63 | 35 |
| Supplementary Learning Materials (Multimedia) | | 19 | 10 | 55 | 16 |
| Video Conferencing | 80 | 15 | 5 | | |
| Tutor's Services: | | | | | |
| i) Course Tutor | | 5 | 2 | 60 | 33 |
| ii) Personal Tutor | 90 | 7 | 3 | | |
| Counselling Services | 12 | 60 | 7 | 16 | 5 |
| Library Services | | 36 | 4 | 54 | 6 |
| Examinations and Evaluation Services | | 21 | 8 | 58 | 15 |
| Student's Bulletin | 66 | 28 | 6 | | |
| Student's Associations | 75 | 15 | 10 | | |
| Financial Support | 90 | 6 | 4 | | |

Asked about whether or not they considered the information services provided by ZOU helpful as high as 60% of the respondents thought that they were very helpful, while 10% saw them as helpful and 24% felt that they were not helpful. It is crystal clear from the findings of the study that a large majority of students considered information services provided by ZOU to be helpful. However, the fact that almost one quarter of the respondents viewed such services as not helpful indicates that ZOU needs to make more effort and try to improve its information services.

With regards to registration as high as 68% of respondents considered the services as helpful, while 15% saw it as very helpful. 15% viewed it as not helpful and 2% were not sure. As can be deduced from the findings, a large majority of students consider registration services provided by ZOU helpful. Again, since almost one fifth of the respondents viewed such services as not helpful, suggests that ZOU needs to try and improve its registration services.

Responses of research participants to the question on the usefulness of the academic planner are quite revealing. As high as 70% of the respondents consider it helpful, while 27% regarded it as very helpful, and 3% were not sure. It is crystal clear from the findings that almost all the students consider the academic planner helpful. This strongly suggests that virtually all students regard it as indispensable.

With regards to Printed Learning Materials, as high as 63% of the research participants considered them helpful while 27% regarded them as very helpful. The findings are a compelling testament of how DHE students consider Printed Learning Materials indispensable. This strongly suggests that ZOU needs to concentrate on improving the quality of such materials as almost all students regard them as indispensable.

Asked about what they thought of Supplementary Materials (Multimedia) 55% of the respondents considered them helpful, while 16% saw them as very helpful, 19% regarded them as not helpful and 10% were not sure. The findings clearly show that the majority of students considered Multimedia provided by ZOU helpful. However, the fact that what one fifth of the respondents viewed such services as not helpful indicates that ZOU needs to try and improve the Multimedia Services it provides to its DHE students.

Responses of the research participants to the question on Video Conferencing Services sheds light of illumination. As high as 80% of the research participants considered such services not very helpful, while 15% regarded them not helpful and 5% were not sure. Statistics on the use of video conferencing indicate poor provision of such services by ZOU, an inability to keep up with 21st century changes in DHE. Institutions of higher education, particularly those providing DHE are increasingly adopting the Modular Object Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment (MOODLE) system developed by Martin Dengiamas (Paier 2007).

This software package, with a lot of services, is not cost saving, but equally enables DHE students to better enjoy and engage more meaningfully from studies.

Equally revealing, are responses of the research participates with regards to the Tutor's Services, namely Course Tutor and Personal Tutor. As high as 60% of the respondents considered the Course Tutor as helpful, while 33% of them viewed him/ her as very helpful, 5% slam him/her as not helpful, and 2% were not sure. Thus, the findings strongly suggest most ZOU students consider the Course Tutor as indispensable. However, with regards to the Personal Tutor, as high as 90% of the students considered them not very helpful, and 3% were not sure. The findings reveal evidence of the non-existence of Personal Tutors in the DHE programs offered at ZOU. It is therefore germane to argue that the Tutor's Services provided by ZOU in its DHE are rather narrowly focused as they are confined to those of a Course Tutor. This contrasts the British Open University which has both a Course Tutor and a Personal Tutor (Tait and Mills 2002). Tutor's Services need to be comprehensive, forthey are crucial in DHE (Dillon, Gunawardena, and Parker 1992).

With regards to Counselling Services 16% of the research respondents participants considered them helpful while 5% thought they were very helpful, 60% regarded them not helpful , and 7%  were not sure. It is clear from the findings that only about one third of students considered Counselling Services provided by ZOU as helpful. This badly reflects on the institutions. "Counselling Services are sporadically offered at the beginning of semester and when need arises" one of the respondents commented. The findings therefore strongly suggest that ZOU needs to make determined efforts to improve its Counselling Services.

Asked about the Library Services 58% of respondents consider them helpful while 15% saw them as very helpful, 21% regarded them not helpful and 8% were not sure. Findings indicate that the majority of students consider the Library Service provided by ZOU as helpful. However, the fact that one third of the students regard such services as not helpful suggests that ZOU needs to improve the Library Services.

With regardsto Examinations and Evaluation Services 58% of the research participants thought they were helpful while 15% of them considered them as very helpful 21% viewed them as not helpful and 8% were not sure. The majority of students considered Examinations and Evaluation Services provided by ZOU as helpful. However, the fact that about one tenth of the students regarded such services as not helpful may mean ZOU may have to review its Examinations and Evaluation Services.

Responses of research participants to the question about a Student Bulletin are quite revealing. 66% of respondents considered the Student Bulletin as not very help, while 28% saw it as not sure. The research points towards the strong implication of the lack/ non-existence of a Student Bulletin at ZOU. There, ZOU needs to determined efforts to establish a Student Bulletin.

Equally revealing are the responses of the research participants to the question about Student Association. As high as 75% of the respondents considered the Students' Association as not very helpful, while 15% regarded it as not helpful, and 10% were not sure. A glance at the evidently startling statistics about the participant's responses regarding student associations can be used to deduce a simple hypothesis. ZOU does not have a Student Association. Ample effort needs to be directed at the establishment of a Student Association for ZOU.

On the issue of Financial Support, as high as 90% of the research participants regarded such Service as not very helpful, while 6% thought it was not helpful, and 4% were not sure. Strong evidence points towards lack of Financial Support Services for students at ZOU. Concerted efforts have to therefore be made, by ZOU, to try to provide some form of financial assistance to its student populace.

**Conclusion**

Figure 1 below, clearly illustrates a Summary of Student views on Support Services at five ZOU Provincial Centres:
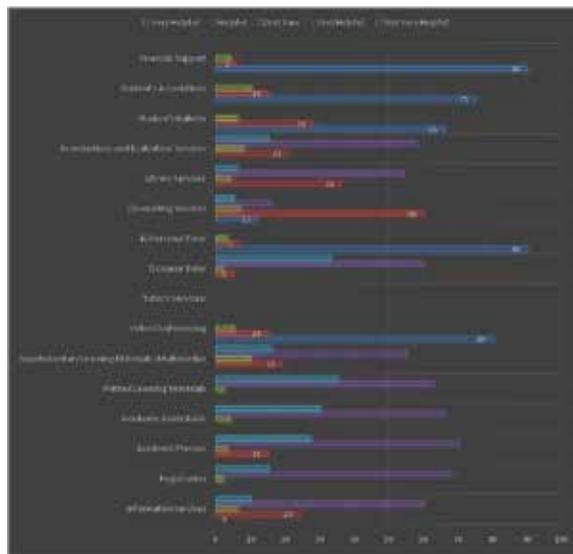


**Figure 1: Summary of Student Views on Support Services**

From the above summary of Student Views on Support Services provided by ZOU, certain salient points may be made. Generally, the findings suggest that Student Services provided by ZOU are seen by students as just helpful, for only 57% of the students found them helpful. On the other hand, a large majority of students consider the services not very helpful, for , as high as 68.8%considerd them negatively. This does not reflect well on the quality of Student Services provided by ZOU.This study encourages ZOU to make determined effort and try to improve the support services it provides to students so that they would more enjoy learning and ore meaningfully benefit from their studies.

**REFERENCE**

Bell, R., and Tight, M. (1993): Open Universities: A British Tradition? Society for Research into Higher Education, Buckingham, Open University Press. | Best, J. W. and Khan, J. V. (1993): Research in Education, Boston, Allyn and Bacon Press. | Daniel, J.S. (1996). Mega-Universities and Knowledge Media: Technology Strategies for Higher Education, London, Kogan Page. | Dillon, C. L., Gunawardena, C. N. and Parker, R. (1992): 'Learner Support: The critical link in Distance Education', Distance Education, 13(1), 29-45. | Evan, T. and Nation, D. (Eds.) (1993): Reforming and Open and Distance Education: Critical Reflections from Pacific, London, Kogan Page. | Förg, E., Flenner, M. and Gruber, R. (Eds) (2009) Austrian Development Agency The Operational Unit of the Austrian Development Cooperation Vienna, Austria. | Garrison, D. R. and Baynton, M. (1987): 'Beyond Independence in Distance Education: The Concept of Control', American Journal of Distance Education, 1(3), 3-15. | Garrison, D. R. (1989): Understanding Distance Education: A Framework for the Future, London Routledge Press. | Hodgson, V. (1986): 'The Inter-relationship between Support and Learning Materials', Programmed Learning and Educational Technology, 23(1), 56-61. | Holmberg, B. (1987): Growth and Structure of Distance Education, London, Routledge. | Makura, E.S.M.S. (1981): Southern Rhodesia: The Making and Implementation of The Two-Pyramid Policy: A Study in Discrimination and Exploitation, Unpublished D. Phil. Thesis, Dalhousie University, Nova Scotia, Canada. | Marx, K. (1887): Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume I, London, Free Press. | Phipps, Ronald; Merisotis, Jamie (1999) A Review of Contemporary Research on the Effectiveness of Distance Learning in Higher Education, Institute for Higher Education Policy, Washington, DC. | Rae, M. (1989): 'Successful Distance Learners: Some New Zealand Correspondence School Strategieis', In Tait (Eds.) (1996): Op. Cit. | Ravisankar, K. and Murthy, C. R. K. (2000): 'Student Participation Circle: An approach to Learner Participation and Quality Improvement', Indian Journal of Open Learning, 9(1), 73-85. | Simpson, O. (2000). Supporting Students in Open and Distance Learning, London, Kogan Page. | Tait, A. and Mills, R. (Eds.) (1996): Supporting the learner in Open Distance Learning, London, Pitman Press. | Threstha, G. (1997): Distance Education in Developing Countries: Definition. United Nations Development Programme. London: Longman Press. | Weber, M. (1947): The Theory Of Social And Economic Organization • London, Free Press. |