

Chapter 74

Students Support Services: A Case of Blended Learning in Higher Learning Institutions in Tanzania

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines challenges the higher learning institutions offering blended learning programmes in Tanzania face in enhancing student support services from administrative standpoint. Using interviews, documentary analysis, and observation as data gathering instruments, the chapter reveals that higher learning institutions face numerous student-support related challenges including poor Internet and narrow bandwidth, erratic electricity and lack of alternative power, computer illiteracy, scarcity of study materials including e-resources and the absence of affirmative institutional policies. The chapter contends that for blended learning programmes to remain viable, effective, and sustainable, students support services need to be carefully tailored and regularly evaluated. Further, thorough decisions need to be undertaken regarding the design and development of effective student support which are contextualised according to respective institutional needs.

INTRODUCTION

In blended learning programmes, the provision of student support services is probably one of the most important responsibilities of an institution and; certainly, one that can have the greater impact on student success or failure. According to Bertrand (2010), without proper support for students to gain the required technology literacy, digital technologies will continue to be used to supplement and duplicate current practices rather than to create innovative practices. Nevertheless, regardless of its significance, the mechanisms of improving student support services are often under-viewed or overlooked in most distance education institutions. One reason for this unfortunate situation is that most distance education institutions have an inadequate understanding of how to plan and organize quality student support systems (Tait, 2004).

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-5472-1.ch074

Consequently, due to advances in technology, the current higher learning institutions which do not meet student-specific support demands are likely to suffer significant attrition (Floyd & Casey-Powell, 2004). Student support therefore is not an “add on” but “an all pervasive component of educational processes which ensures that learning and teaching are approached from a learner centred vision of education” (Nunan, 1993, in Möwes, 2005). Thus, Tait (2000) and Brindley (2004) suggest the need for student support systems to continuously evaluate the needs of learners in order to identify challenges in advance. Literature shows that the need for effective management of student support services is central to effective implementation of student support services in higher learning institutions.

In Tanzania the adoption of blended learning technologies in higher learning institutions came as a response to three major developments; the Higher Learning Policy (1999), the Primary Education Development Plan (PEDP) and the Secondary Education Development Plan (SEDP) and; finally the improvement in the Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) (Mtebe and Raphael, 2013). Currently few Universities have opted to adopt blended learning as a delivery mode. The Open University of Tanzania and The University of Dar es Salaam are among the Universities that are currently offering distance learning programmes that blend face to face and online delivery.

The Open University of Tanzania was the first established public distance learning institution in Tanzania. For years after its establishment in 1994, the university has been running pure distance learning programmes using a blend of correspondence and face to face approaches (Mahai, 2005). Recently, it has increasingly become difficult for the Open University of Tanzania to offer academic support services using traditional correspondent means because of the increased numbers of students, as well as an acute shortage of teaching materials to meet demands of the students. The university has, therefore, opted for blended learning programmes in which materials are made available electronically for all students to access.

UDSM started to implement blended learning to supplement on- campus course delivery in 1998 as well as introduce blended distance programmes ten years later. The blended learning distance programmes are: Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PDGE), Postgraduate Diploma in Engineering Management (PGDEM), and Master degree in Engineering Management (MEM)(Dachi, Mtebe and Raphael (2011).

Largely, the future of student support services in Blended Learning education at the University of Dar es Salaam and the Open University of Tanzania is uncertain given the challenges existing in Higher Learning Institutions in Tanzania. The chapter aims to identify the challenges in implementing student support services in blended learning programmes in higher learning institutions in Tanzania from the perspective of managers in responsible in offering such services to blended learning students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature shows that blended learning institutions in Africa and the world at large face similar challenges when attempting to offer student support services. Student support services can be defined as activities which enable learners to study successfully and to construct their own understanding of the content (Thorpe, 2003). Simpson (2002) describes student support as all activities extending beyond the production and delivery of course materials that assist student in their studies. He classifies learner support into two main modes: academic (or tutorial) and non-academic (or counselling) support. Keegan (2003) clusters the services into four categories, which are *information phase* - getting information relating to the course; *registration phase* - guidance on course selection and registration support, *learning*

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