

Quality issues regarding learner support for distance learners at the National University of Lesotho

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Introduction and background

The Institute of Extra Mural Studies (IEMS) of the National University of Lesotho (NUL) is mandated to widen access to educational opportunities through distance education. Distance education (DE) is a mode of delivery used as an option to provide education to those learners who have not had an opportunity to enroll for full-time conventional education. This mode of learning delivery separates learners from the teaching institution as well as deprives them of regular contact with their peers (KOUL & Bhatt 1989:12). Academic demands coupled with the isolation and anxiety experienced by distance learners may easily contribute to confusion, loneliness, and stress and sometimes to attrition (Nonyongo & Ngegebule 1998:11). It is therefore, imperative that distance learners be provided with relevant and adequate learner support to enable them to cope with the challenges of isolation and infrequent contact with their learning facilitators and fellow students.

Although there is an attempt to provide learner support services for distance learners at IEMS, there is neither policy nor procedure guiding the practice. Results of a preliminary study on the status of learner support services at IEMS revealed that the services were inadequate (Makhakhane 2007:2). One of the quality criteria for distance education is the provision of relevant learner support services (Welch and Reed 1998:8). Such services are lacking at IEMS although critically needed. On the basis of the above information, there was a concern to address the lack of an integrated and relevant learner support system at IEMS.

The main research question that the researcher chose to address is the following:

What would improve the quality of distance learner support at IEMS?

Sub-questions were designed in order to investigate this question. The following are the two that relate to this paper:

1. What is considered as best practices with regard to provision of quality learner support services for distance learners?
2. What is the current status and nature of learner support services offered at IEMS?

The researcher set out to determine a relevant and effective learner support system that would improve the current practice at IEMS. This paper is based on the following selected research objectives:

1. To gain, by means of literature review, perspectives of distance learner support focusing on; nature, need, importance and best practices: and

To investigate the nature and possible shortcomings of current learner support at IEMS by means of an interactive qualitative model.

Effective elements of a learner support

The National Association of Distance Education Organization of South Africa (NADEOSA) has played a very significant role in advocating for good practices in accordance with promotion of quality distance education (Welch and Reed 2005:60). Consequently, NADEOSA, in an attempt to respond to global expectations of subscribing to good practices has developed comprehensive distance education criteria. The criteria specify instrumental elements, which can facilitate provision of quality distance education. The list includes: policy and planning, learners, programme development, course design, course material, assessment, learner support, human resource strategy, management and administration, collaboration, quality assurance, marketing and results (Welch & Reed 2005: 9). Since the theme of this study is learner support, elements such as academic and administrative support will be discussed.

(a) Academic support

Academic support refers to the kind of assistance provided to support learners with intellectual and cognitive knowledge necessary in the various courses they study. According to Welch and Reed (2005:32) academic support in the distance education context focuses primarily on creating a conducive learning environment that promotes and enhances learning. Academic support includes face-to-face tutor support, mentoring, peer support, workshops, telephone discussions, group discussions and technological support. Simpson (2002:7) also maintains that academic support embraces: definition of overall course structure, explanation of concepts, provision of feedback, and improvement of relevant skills as well as consistent monitoring of learners.

(b) Administrative support

Administrative or non-academic support mainly focuses on organizational issues and affective support for distance learners. Welch and Reed (2005:32) state that administrative support pertains to ensuring that distance learners have adequate facilities and resources for learning. Brown (2006:160) also concurs that administrative support facilitates accessibility to information. Since distance learners are separated from institutions, there has to be a mechanism in place to help learners receive information regarding academic events. According to Sonnekus, Louw and

Wilson (2006:46) administrative support can include the following essential services; student registration, fees payment, sending short message system (sms), sending e-mails, sending materials by post, learning centers and call centers. However, administrative support for distance learners in some distance learning institutions also involves, advising ,administering and assessing academic activities (Simpson 2002:7)

Research design and research methodology

The study is a case study that is being conducted in a qualitative approach. It is adopting a process-planning model often used in action research (Zuber-Skerritt 2002:145). (See fig.1). The model consists of three major components; vision context, and practice. The design consists of two circles resembling a figure eight. The cycles are not in the usual spiral pattern as in most action research models.

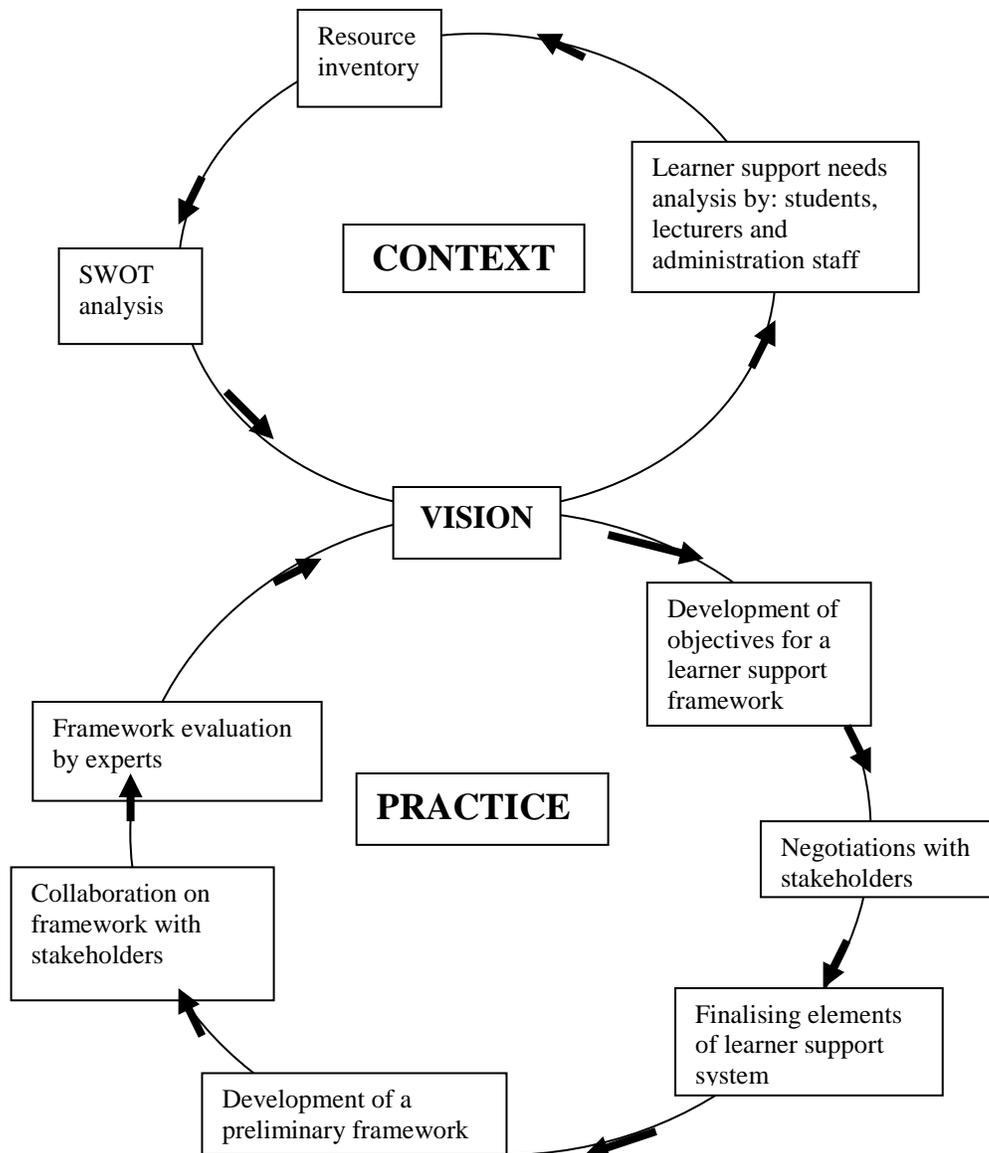


Figure 1. Adapted process planning model from Zuber–Skerritt (2002:145)

The application of the model commences with the vision which is the translation of the aim of the research study. It progresses to form the top circle (First phase) which focuses on context analysis pertaining to learner support services at IEMS. Learner support needs as well as the current status of learner support services were assessed by administrative staff and academic staff interviews and students' focus group interviews (*A students' qualitative survey is planned to triangulate data from the interviews.*). A resource inventory will be conducted and information derived from all these exercises will be used in a SWOT analysis of learner support at IEMS. The results of the SWOT analysis will inform the revision of the vision. This revised vision will lead to the bottom circle (Second phase). The bottom circle indicates a process plan for developing an improved learner support system. The process of developing a framework for learner support at IEMS will be in collaboration with the stakeholders and it will be conducted by means of an

interactive qualitative model. The evaluation of the developed framework will be done by selected experts from the Distance Education Association of Southern Africa (DEASA).

The sample for the research will comprise: All adult education students at IEMS, 4 members of IEMS administrative staff, facilitators, tutors and one expert from each of the ten DEASA member countries.

This paper reports only on the context analysis. Focus groups discussions were conducted with learners enrolled in the Adult Education Programme. Learners who attended tutorials at the main campus in Maseru, as well as learners who attended tutorials at two regional campuses: Mahobong and Mhaheshoek participated in the focus groups discussions. Each focus group comprised ten participants. [Four members of IEMS management were also interviewed.](#)

Discussion of findings

Interviews and focus group discussion schedules were based on the directives for an effective learner support system that were derived from an extensive literature review done in preparation for the research study.

According to the focus group discussions, information provided to students during orientation was not sufficient to enable them to make informed decisions. In addition participants also mentioned that they were not provided with pre-enrolment counseling. Pre-enrolment counseling is very significant because it provides individual with information pertaining to their abilities and interests and this can facilitate appropriate choice of courses. Participants from regional centers were concerned about not being informed on time regarding availability of mobile library service. They complained about not being able to utilize the service, since there was no schedule provided to regional campuses stipulating the dates of availability. Participants at the main campus expressed satisfaction with the books and journals available in the library but raised a concern about the library opening and closing hours. Participants were also of the view that the hours should be extended to accommodate them.

Participants described the style adopted for writing self-instructional materials as satisfactory participants. Similarly, participants also indicated the prescribed self-instructional materials used simple language and also included a pre-test and a post-test. Holmberg (2003:83) emphasizes that distance learning materials should not resemble text books used by conventional learning. According to Holmberg distance learning materials should be designed in a conversational style. Therefore, considering the participants description of IEMS prescribed self-instructional, one may conclude that IEMS seems to be following some of the recommended good distance education practices when developing distance learning materials. However, participants were not happy that the self-instructional materials used by learners were developed sixteen years ago. This raises some concerns that current issues may not be covered in these materials.

Participants also stated that they were not satisfied about lack of technological support at IEMS's learning centers. They concluded that they were discriminated against because other NUL learners studying on the conventional mode had access to technological support. Lack of technological support was described as one of the institution's weaknesses. Moreover, this is a disadvantage for learners considering that nowadays availability of relevant and adequate technology support is mandatory to enable learners to access information.

Members of IEMS management who participated in the interview discussions mentioned that there was no policy or guidelines in place regarding the nature of learner support relevant for IEMS distance learner. Two participants were concerned since some of the part-time staff engaged at IEMS as tutors and facilitators did not have any training in either adult education or distance. Hence, learners complained about these tutors and facilitators lack of appropriate skills of interacting appropriately with adults and distance learners. Moreover, this is a legitimate concern, because distance learners are a very unique group which has to be handled by individuals who are conversant with the nature as well as the needs of this very diverse group. Participants also mentioned that the self-instructional materials prescribed for learner IEMS were developed sixteen years. However, participants reported that relevant stakeholders were involved when the self-instructional materials were developed. Additionally, participants raised a concern about the lack of guidance and counseling services. Similarly, participants were also concerned about lack of relevant technological support.

Conclusion

Findings of this section of the study have revealed issues on orientation, pre-enrolment, library facilities, learning facilitation, nature of learning materials, lack of counseling services, lack of modern ICTs and most importantly absence of a guiding policy on learner support for distance learners at IEMS. This information will be crucial in determining the vision for the second phase of the study. In phase two discussions will be held with stakeholders to determine a framework for a relevant and effective learner support system for IEMS. Subsequently, a relevant and integrated learner support system will be developed for IEMS.

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