

POSITIONING STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES IN THE NATIONAL OPEN UNIVERSITY OF NIGERIA (NOUN) TO ENHANCE CUTTING EDGE OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING (TETFUND, NIGERIA Sponsored Research)

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Matthew Enenche Ogwuche PhD

Department of Political Science, National Open University of Nigeria.

mogwuche@noun.edu.ng

Jibrin Ubale Yahaya PhD

Department of Political Science, National Open University of Nigeria.

jjahaya@noun.edu.ng

Abdullahi Adamu PhD

Department of Political Science, National Open University of Nigeria.

aadamu@noun.edu.ng

Anthonia Okonye

Department of Peace Studies and Conflict Resolution, National Open University of Nigeria.

aokonye@noun.edu.ng

Dennis Abutu

Department of Mass Communication, National Open University of Nigeria.

dabutu@noun.edu.ng

Abstract

This research paper examined the current state of student support services provided by the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) across its 128 study centres in Nigeria. The study focused on only nine (9) study centres as a representative sample base located within the FCT, Lagos, Kogi, Edo and Delta States with three in each cluster of the three types of study centres in the system-regular, special and community study centres. Staff and Students were engaged in the survey in each study centre through Focused Group Discussions (FGD), structured, unstructured interviews and questionnaires. Other stakeholders like the regulator- the National Universities Commission (NUC) and other relevant units in NOUN involved in providing student support services were also engaged in the process. The methodology utilized the mixed method research design that involved survey and descriptive techniques and was both quantitative and qualitative. The findings were subjected to statistical analysis involving such tools as ANOVA descriptive tool for variance, t-test, chi-square, bar and pie charts. The findings revealed that there were weak links in the support services delivery value chain that has made these services not too effective. It was revealed that oversight from the regulator- the NUC has not been

too strong in the area of enforcement and compliance that had further diminished overall operational effectiveness. The study recommended that the University along with relevant stakeholders like the regulator should urgently remedy the identified weak links such as inadequate counselling services, inefficient admission and registration processes, poor internet connectivity affecting online facilitation and exam administration among others in order to improve institutional effectiveness and delivery of its ODL mandate that could lead to uptake by other ODL institutions.

Keywords: Student Support Services, Open and Distance Learning, Cutting Edge.

1. Introduction

The idea of an Open University system in Nigeria was first mooted in the 1977 National Policy on Education which stated that “maximum efforts will be made to enable those who can benefit from higher education to be given access to it. Such access may be through universities or correspondence courses or Open Universities or part-time or work study programmes” (NOUN, 2014). This broad spectrum which refers to Open and Distance Education (ODE) as a platform that provides education for all has Open and Distance Learning (ODL) as a delivery mode which forms the bedrock of the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) with its establishment through the NOUN Act 1983, in its first incarnation, before it was resuscitated in 2002, which makes it the more formal date of its take off. Today, NOUN has over 500,000 students in its enrolment, with over 103, 383 as active (NOUN, 2018. p.25). This huge number brings into focus the centrality of Learning in the system, and the support structure required driving the process.

Learner support is a mechanism to help the learner to learn. In conventional system, classroom transactions, peer team interactions and library facility are components of learning. In ODL system, multimedia, print, audio, video, radio, TV, teleconferencing and video conferencing-instructional package, face-to-face counselling, continuous assessment and hands-on-experience constitute learner support (Sougatta, 2019). Learner support services are the most vital component of any open and distance learning (ODL) system. It includes a wide range of academic and other related activities such as ICT facilities and equipment, mode of service delivery, monitoring and other interactive services (Sougatta, 2019). In NOUN, Learner support services involved the deployment of information and communication technology strategies, provision of frequent and regular interaction between students and the University, and the provision of learning content in a manner that will not make the distance between the students and the University a problem. The range of services are expected to cover –development of self-learning materials, career guidance and counselling, tutorials and facilitation, examination skills and management, peer support group, general information dissemination, feedback mechanism, and administrative problem solving (NOUN,2014). This range of services is supposed to be provided at the 103 Study Centres and the Headquarters, Abuja.

2. Statement of the Problem

The National Universities Commission (NUC), the University Regulator in Nigeria stipulated in its “Guidelines for Open and Distance Learning in Nigerian Universities” that NOUN is currently the only Uni-mode University mandated for ODL in Nigeria in the delivery of university education. But that there are six (6) other universities which are dual mode providing both ODL and conventional face-to-face mode, but the NUC appears to be dissatisfied stating that: “all stakeholders

agree that the practice of distance learning by these dual mode universities is far below acceptable best practice and that at best, they are in transition from the running of part-time/sandwich programmes to distance learning” (NUC 2019). The NUC policy document earlier highlighted stated the requirements for student support services under the sub-section Academic Learner Support as follows: adequate tutor: student ratio, normally 1: 50, tutors with relevant ODL training (workshops, conferences, seminars etc), diverse channels of communication- surface mail, phone, e-mail etc, marking and feedback.

Others are feedback on assignments and examinations within 3 -10 weeks, information and guidance (IAG)- student counselling, and programme specific mentoring, administration- strong logistics support for academic programmes at ODL centre, special institutional support e.g. advice, software, power supply and robust management information system for effective programme monitoring (nuc.edu.ng/uploads/2015/01). NOUN is therefore expected to resolve this identified gap, but has it? To deliver on this huge government and public expectation the NUC advised NOUN to develop a robust “Academic learner support structure” that would entail tutors to be trained or to have validated ODL qualifications (through orientation, seminars, on-line workshops, conferences on ODL programmes), channels of communication (surface mail, phone, email etc), marking and feedback on assignments and examinations (3-10 weeks), Information, advice and guidance (IAG) including student counselling services, administration, strong logistics support for academic programmes at the Study Centres, special institutional support such as software and power supply, a robust Management Information System (MIS) that enables programme monitoring, input and output evidence of student enrolment and efficiency in deploying student support services (NUC 2019).

NOUN on the other hand, in an attempt to comply with this policy requirement by the NUC created support frameworks in NOUN captured under learner support services in its operational policy document which has an entire Directorate created for that purpose-the Directorate of Learner Support Services (DLSS) (NOUN, 2018, p.26). “The Directorate offers guidance and counselling services to students on a wide range of issues ranging from choice of programs, studying in an ODL system, course and examination registrations etc, since the study centres bridge the interaction between the university and its students, most of the learner support services are undertaken at the study centres, library, information and communication technology (ICT), Moot Courts, Laboratories, are some of the learner support services offered at the study centres. However, the university also has a Visitor Information and Call Centre (VICC) that attends to students’ needs at the headquarters” (NOUN, 2018, p.26).

Another publication (NOUN, 2019, p.436) further stressed that the goals of the DLSS are : “publicise and provide usable information about the National Open University of Nigeria, facilitate student learning, provide tutoring and instructional facilitation for students, provide multimedia resources and facilities to support student learning, run workshops and conduct seminars on ODL learning strategies and related issues, help learners on time management, study habits, and self-understanding for seamless learning, serve as a bridge between the university and learners by providing advocacy services. Others are: provide personal psychological counselling and guidance, vocational guidance and career guidance counselling, other types of support for students with challenges. Help students develop side-line capacities, create a better understanding of the concept, philosophy and practices of ODL, and general support for learners across the university”. To what extent

with the benefit of hindsight has NOUN met the expectations of the Regulator in meeting the requirements of academic support to students?

According to the Indira Gandhi National Open University of India (Sougatta, 2019), student support services focus mainly on the establishment of study centres, pre-admission (provision of prospectus and academic programmes both online and offline), information services (information about academic programmes, admission procedures and schedules), post-admission services (self-learning materials, examination, library, financial support, ICT etc), registration, course material distribution, examination and evaluation for learners, additional support services such as change of course, programmes, elective and core courses, change of address, transcripts, provisional certificates like statement of results, counselling schedules, online facilitation and other teleconferencing schedules (Sougatta, 2019). Student support services generally include student registration, access to library resources, tutorial services, academic advising and feedback on assignments and progress.

At this point for the purpose of emphasis it is necessary to identify what is intended by the term 'Student Support in ODL'. By this is meant the range of services both for individuals and students in groups which complement the course materials or learning resources that are uniform for all learners, which are the major offering of institutions using ODL (OUK 2019). The primary functions of student support are threefold (3);

Cognitive

Supporting and developing learning through the mediation of the standard and uniform elements of course materials and learning resources for individual students.

Affective

Providing an environment which supports students, creates commitment and enhances self-esteem.

Systemic

Establishing administrative processes and information management systems which are effective, transparent and overall student friendly (OUK 2019).

These functions are essential and interdependent. In this regard, student support may primarily be seen to do with the administrative process often from the perspective of efficiency; however, it is much more than that. It is all encompassing covering every facet of ODL delivery. As part of the systemic component, NOUN set up the Visitors Information and Call Centre (VIGC) situated at the Headquarters and expected to be accessible nationwide to enable the University to respond to students through letters, faxes, e-mails, written correspondences, and face to face enquiries. In specific terms, the VIGC is to provide information and or advice on orientation, registration, matriculation, admission, study fees, examination queries, and other matters of concern to students and the University (NOUN 2014). Will an overview of the VIGC show whether these student support expectations have been met? On the cognitive and affective elements, NOUN had instituted Computer Mediated Learning (CML/ICT) processes and procedures through information and communication technologies in both instructional methods and delivery in providing student support (NOUN 2014). Course materials are provided in diverse delivery formats like print and electronic formats to enhance e-learning such as radio/TV broadcast, CD rom, and others. But beyond what is stated what would an investigation show as readily available at the Study Centres? Career counselling and administrative services are envisaged to be efficiently and effectively provided

by diligent staff to students at both the Study Centres and the Headquarters, but do these shows on the ground?

The challenges so far identified with the student support frameworks in NOUN which could also be gaps are diverse. For instance, an adequate tutor: student ratio advised by the NUC is 1:50. But as at 2018 NOUN had a total teaching staff of 314 made up of 200 male and 114 female, while, Library staff are 61, senior non-teaching staff (1,359) and junior non-teaching staff (1,842). Non-teaching staff were 3,201 (NOUN, 2018, p.20), while, active student enrolment was 103,383. as at 2022, there is a marginal increase to over 400 as teaching staff, while, active student enrolment has gone to 128,000. Even with the involvement of adjunct academic staff in the 103 study centres, has the ratio been met? That ratio has not been satisfactorily met, and what implications would it have on tutoring and facilitation? On the requirement for multiple channels of communication- what is available is a network of emails involving staff but students are not factored into it. There are no dedicated phone lines at the study centres linked to the Visitors Information and Call Centre as advised by the Regulator, as the VIGC is a stand-alone. Information and guidance (IAG) regulation proposed by the NUC requires strong student counselling and academic mentoring, but in most study centres there is one counsellor available irrespective of the student population. The major study centres have averagely between 3000- 4000 students with only one counsellor, can that be effective? The robust management information system (MIS) envisaged by the NUC as evidence of strong institutional support among others is complimented in NOUN by the information communication technology (ICT) system. Both have deployed learning technologies in the form of web, e-learning, teleconferencing, video, OER and MOOCs (NOUN, 2019). But how effective are these in Nigeria which has a systemic problem of weak and low broadband connectivity that is problematic for internet, and a dysfunctional nationwide electricity supply? In Nigeria, a great percentage of NOUN students are in rural areas with many in community study centres located in the country side where electricity supply from the national grid and internet connectivity is a major challenge. In a study on UNISA, AkwasiArko-Achemfour (2017, p.659) highlighted that “UNISA has a number of student support services in place to support its students but it appears that most of the students from rural areas find it difficult to access the services adequately”. This identifies the problem of access to support services as a gap, and NOUN which shares similar conditions with UNISA where a good number of students are rural based is facing the same challenge.

Efficient student support structure in ODL is expected to address the high level of student dropout associated with ODL. Why is this concern with student dropout in fulltime higher education also important in ODL? It is because it has much higher levels of dropout than conventional education. For example, in the UK Open University dropout is around 45% on new students’ first module and nearly 80% to graduation (OUK 2019). Given the database of over 500,000 students in NOUN with only less than 200,000 currently active, would student support in ODL be a factor or other extraneous factors could be responsible? This research intends to examine the level of student support prevailing in the system to chart a clear path to enhancing a robust student support structure in NOUN.

Research Questions

How effective is the current level of student support services in NOUN?

What are the constraints militating against the achievement by NOUN of NUC guidelines on student support services in ODL institutions?

How can the role expectations for best practice in the provision of student support services in NOUN for, students, by staff, the government and other stakeholders be met?

What would be needed by NOUN as necessary to add value to its student support structure to enable it achieve cutting edge ODL and affirm its position as the leading ODL institution in West Africa?

Aims of the Paper

Examine the level of student support services currently provided in NOUN with a view to determining whether they are effective or not.

Do an overview of the expectations on student support services stipulated by the NUC and as contained in the mandate of NOUN, and the challenges inherent in NOUN militating against the achievement of NUC guidelines.

Identify best practice in student support services in ODL that can be adopted in NOUN and other ODL institutions worldwide.

Make recommendations that will add value to the student support process in NOUN that would position the University to provide cutting edge ODL.

Research Propositions

Ineffective and inadequate student support service delivery in NOUN is responsible for the significant disparity in the huge number of students enrolled and those currently active.

Best practice in student support in ODL is dependent on adequate ODL training for staff, motivation, provision of adequate equipment and facilities to enable the achievement of institutional ODL mandate in NOUN and other ODL institutions.

Extraneous factors rather than internal could be complimentary rather than conflictual in achieving effective student support service in NOUN.

Actualising the goal of providing cutting edge ODL and enhancing the overall goal of ODL in Nigeria is dependent on NOUN providing value added ODL student support services.

3. Methodology

The methodology used to gather, analyse and interpret data was the mixed method research design that involved survey and descriptive techniques. The process which was both quantitative and qualitative generated majority of the data from primary sources (questionnaires, semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions).

Population of the Study

Regular (3) - Abuja Model Study Centre, Wuse Study Centre, and, Lagos Study Centre. Special (3) - NURTW Garki Study Centre, Nigeria Prisons (Sauka) Study Centre, and Nigeria Police Study Centre (Dei-Dei), all in Abuja, and Community (3) -Ogori Community Study Centre (Kogi State), Emevor Community Study Centre, and Fugar Community Study Centre (all in Delta and Edo State respectively). Staff in the relevant units at the Headquarters likes the Visitors and Information Call Centre (VIGC), Directorate of Management Information System (DMIS), Directorate of Examinations and Assessment (DEA), Directorate of Information Communication Technology (DICT), Directorate of Learning Content Management System (DLCMS) and Directorate of Learner Support Services (DLSS).

Sample and Sampling Techniques

The distribution to respondents was based on the disparity in the population of study from those with the highest numbers to the lowest. Abuja Model Study Centre (200), Wuse SC (170), Lagos SC (150), NURTW Garki SC (170), Prisons SC (100), Police SC (40), Ogori Community SC (30), Emevor Community Study Centre (30), and Fugar Community Study Centre (30) NUC (20), The six (6) relevant Headquarters Units mentioned (30 each). These units are run by mostly non-

teaching staff, 300 out of that is about 10% of the 3201 non-teaching staff as at 2018.

4. Conceptual Clarification

Student Support in ODL- This refers to a range of services for individuals and groups which complement the course materials or learning resources that are uniform to all learners, and which are often perceived as the major offering of institutions using ODL (OUK 2019).

Open and Distance Learning (ODL)- This refers to any form of learning which the provider enables individual learners to exercise choice over what they learn, how they learn, where they learn, how quickly they learn, who to turn to for help, and whether, when and where to have learning assessed (NOUN 2014).

Cutting edge- innovative, revolutionary, leading, state-of-the art, ground-breaking, effective, efficient, frontline. These are synonyms for the phrase “cutting edge” (retrieved from <https://www.thesaurus.com> on 17/05/24). Therefore, in the context of this research the state of delivery of support services to students in ODL would be how innovative, effective, efficient and revolutionary they ought to be.

5. Literature Review

AkwasiArko- Achemfour (2017) in a study on the student support structure available at University of South Africa (UNISA) made a tangible argument that studying through distance can be a nightmare and is worse for rural students due to many factors. Generally, to ensure that all students studying through the open and distance learning (ODL) system have a seamless learning experience and are able to graduate, the system needs to provide student support structure to ensure sustainability. A key player in the provision of student support services in ODL is information and communication technology (ICT) which with the continuous innovations has opened opportunities for delivery of quality tertiary education that is at par with the face-to-face conventional classroom instructional approach (Achemfour, 2017). According to Moore and Tait (2002), in many developed and developing countries currently the increased demand for ODL occasioned by the utility of ICT among others has made ODL to be a competitive mode of education and an essential aspect of mainstream education and even more preferable in some instances. UNISA (2008) pointed out from its experience that learner support is not only critical for ODL but is actually the backbone. It's on this basis that among several of its student support services that it does recognise the centrality of face – to-face tutorials, guidance and counselling, information and communication technology (ICT) and e-tutoring.

However, a widely acknowledged downside to ODL is the high dropout and low graduation rates in distance education. Woodley and Simpson (2014) identified the high attrition rates in distance education as a major challenge that requires more dynamic efforts to mitigate. Student support services are therefore seen as the steps to take not only to mitigate attrition rates but to also ensure the sustainability of ODL as a component of distance education.

According to Achemfour (2017), learner support or student support is generic terms which describes the range of services that are developed by institutions to assist students meet their learning objectives; gain knowledge, new skills and expertise that would equip them for post-graduation and to enable them complete their studies on schedule. The range of student support services currently in use by ODL institutions as identified include: face-to-face tutorials, workshops, guidance and counselling, telephones, information and communication technologies (ICT), and audio-visual technologies, UNISA acknowledged to be an

African and global leader in ODL employs most of these tools in its student support services.

On the basis of global best practice in student support system in ODL, this paper will interrogate the high student attrition rates in NOUN, the quality and availability of learner support services, how accessible they are, the willingness or inability of students to access these services, and what could be done to re-position NOUN and similar tertiary institutions elsewhere to be an efficient and effective purveyor of ODL and distance education.

6. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this paper is contextualised by Moore's (1990) theory of transactional distance and Trumper's (2004) theory of dialogue. This paper is aware of several competing theories that seek to interrogate the theoretical and conceptual underpinnings to student support in ODL. Achemfour (2017) quoting Gorsky, Caspi and Trumpeter (2004) made the valid exposition that in distance education, the learner, the facilitator, the physical and temporal distance or barriers are not so much the problematic, but rather the learning context itself. This is underpinned by the consideration that in the learning process the effort of the individual is mediated by interpersonal dialogue made possible by physical, human and other resources. The assumption of dialogue in learning is that it is a communication process that is reciprocal between the learner and the system in which the individual had to be an active participant for their personal development even if supported or assisted by others or the structure.

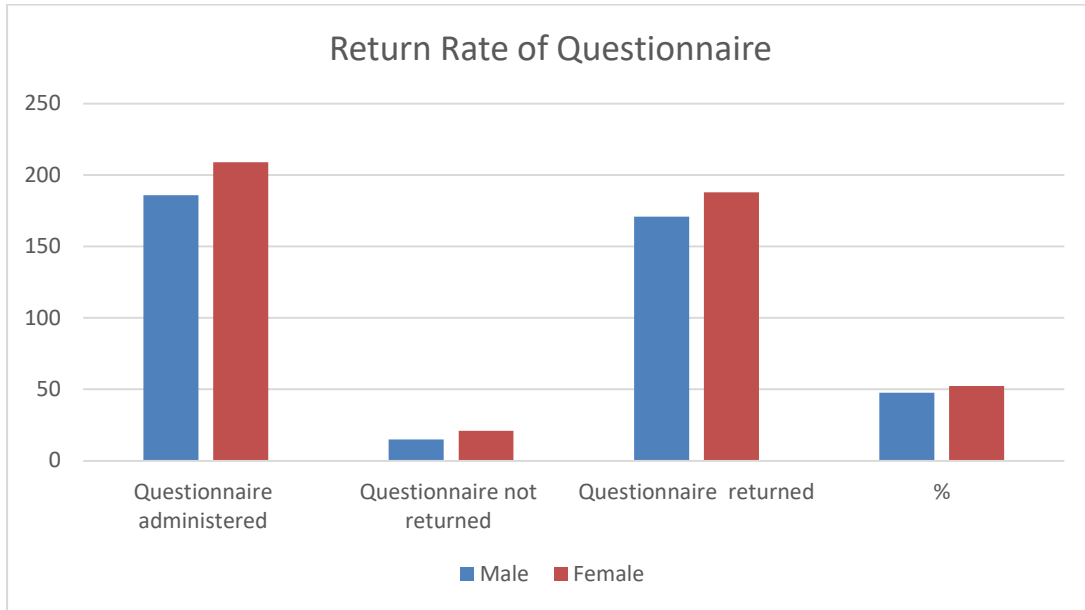
In the context of this research, Moore's theory views the separation between learners and their tutors and the ODL institution as a psycho-social or transactional distance unlike other theorists who see such separation as more of geographical. Tait (2003) stressed that though distance is geographical, what actually creates distance is the relationship between dialogue and structure, but which can be mitigated through the use of ICT and support systems to make learning less cumbersome for learners

NOUN as an ODL institution clearly shows signs that transactional distance have led to challenges faced by many of its learners unable to effectively access its student support services. The paper undertook a deeper examination of the challenges of access and adequacy of the student support services offered by the institution would help to address the gaps in the support services currently on offer, and position the institution to enable it provide cutting edge learner support services, and make it an emerging global ODL leader.

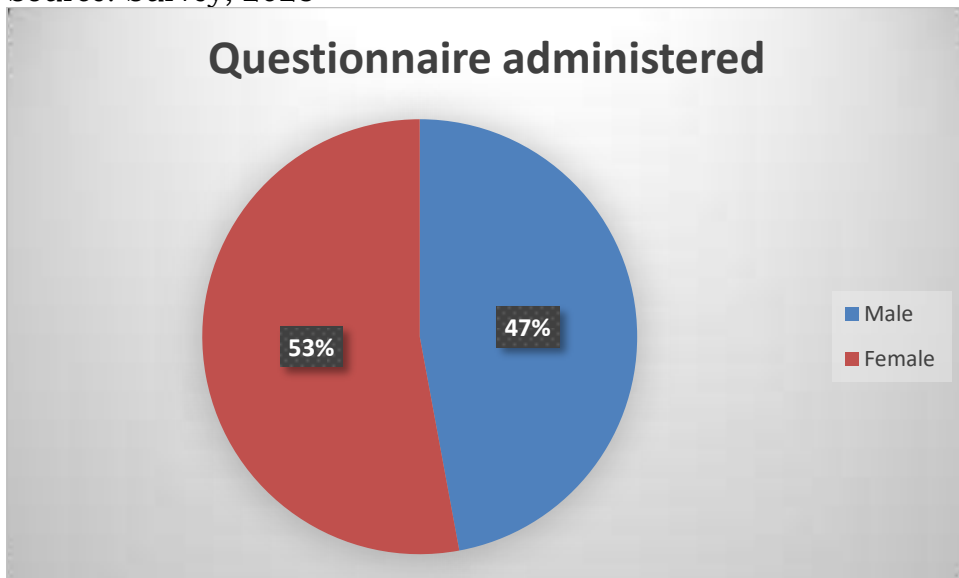
Data Presentation and Analysis

Return Rate of Questionnaire

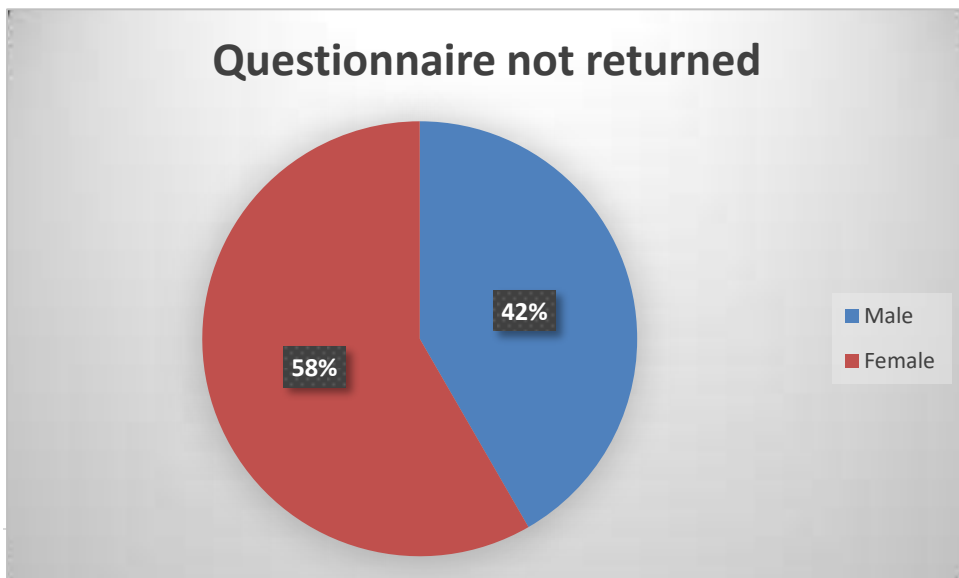
359 questionnaires were returned out of 540 that were distributed.



Source: Survey, 2023



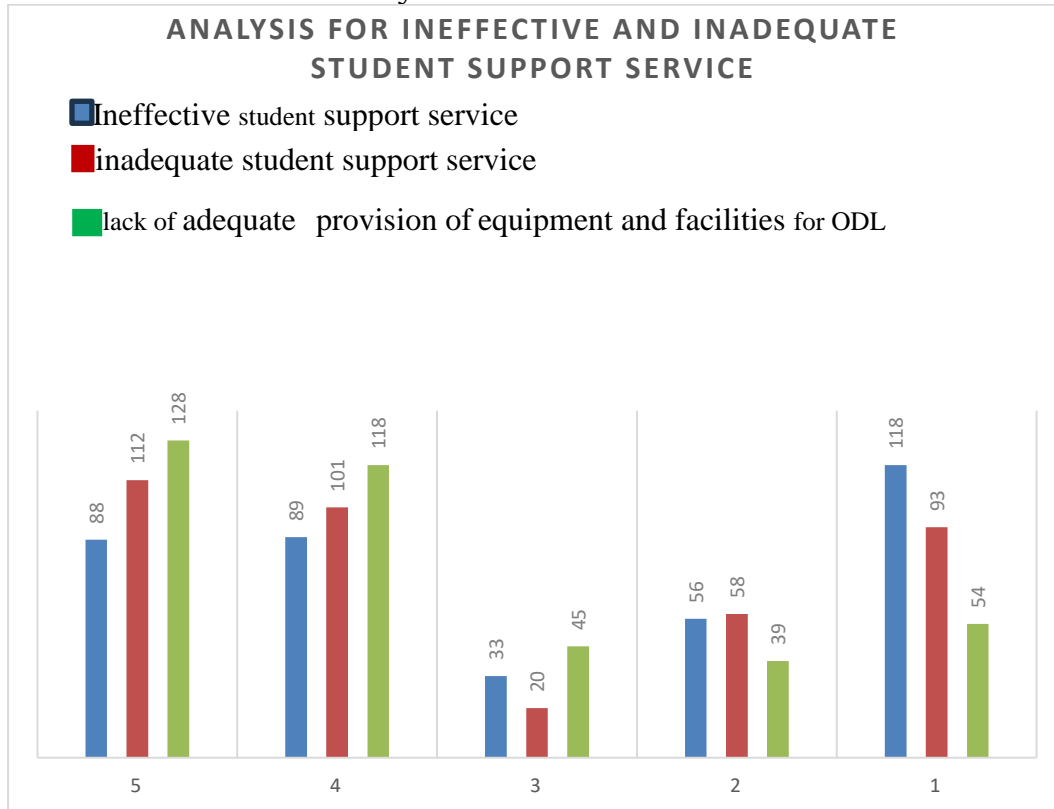
Source: Survey, 2023



Source: Survey, 2023

The chart shows the distribution of respondents according to their sex. 171 of the respondents representing about (42 %) of the total respondents are male while 188 representing about (58%) of the total respondents are female.

Percentage Analysis for Ineffective and inadequate student support service delivery in NOUN is responsible for the significant disparity in the huge number of students enrolled and those currently active.

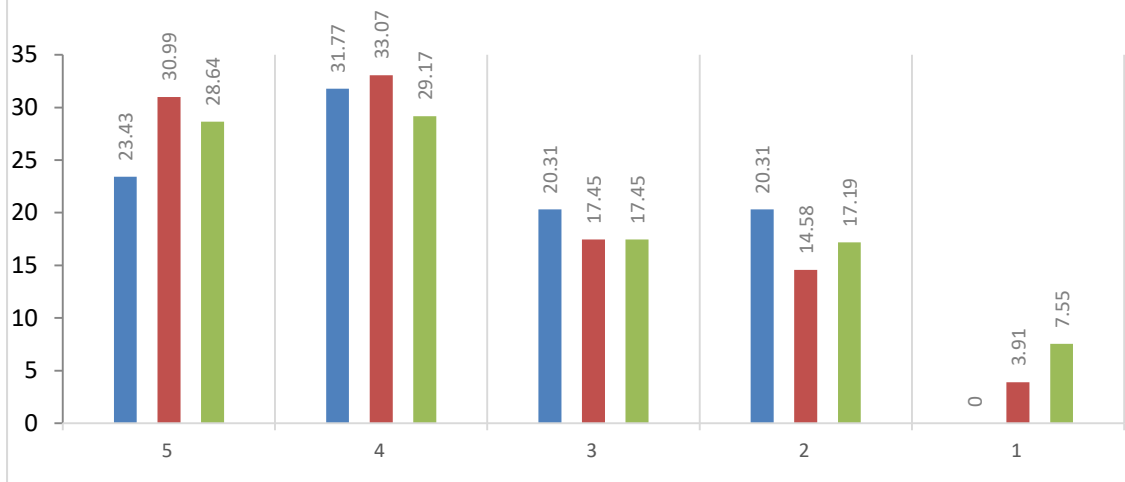


Source: Survey, 2023

Analysis for best practice in student support services in ODL

ANALYSIS FOR BEST PRACTICE IN STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES IN ODL

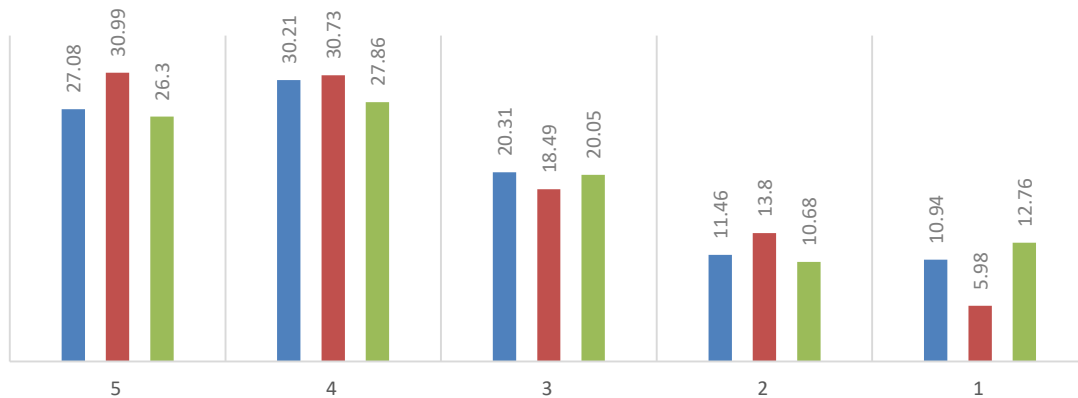
- information and or advice on orientation, registration, matriculation, admission, study fees, examination queries, and other matters of concern to students
- information and communication technologies in both instructional methods and delivery in providing student support
- Career counselling and administrative services are envisaged to be efficiently and effectively provided by diligent staff to students



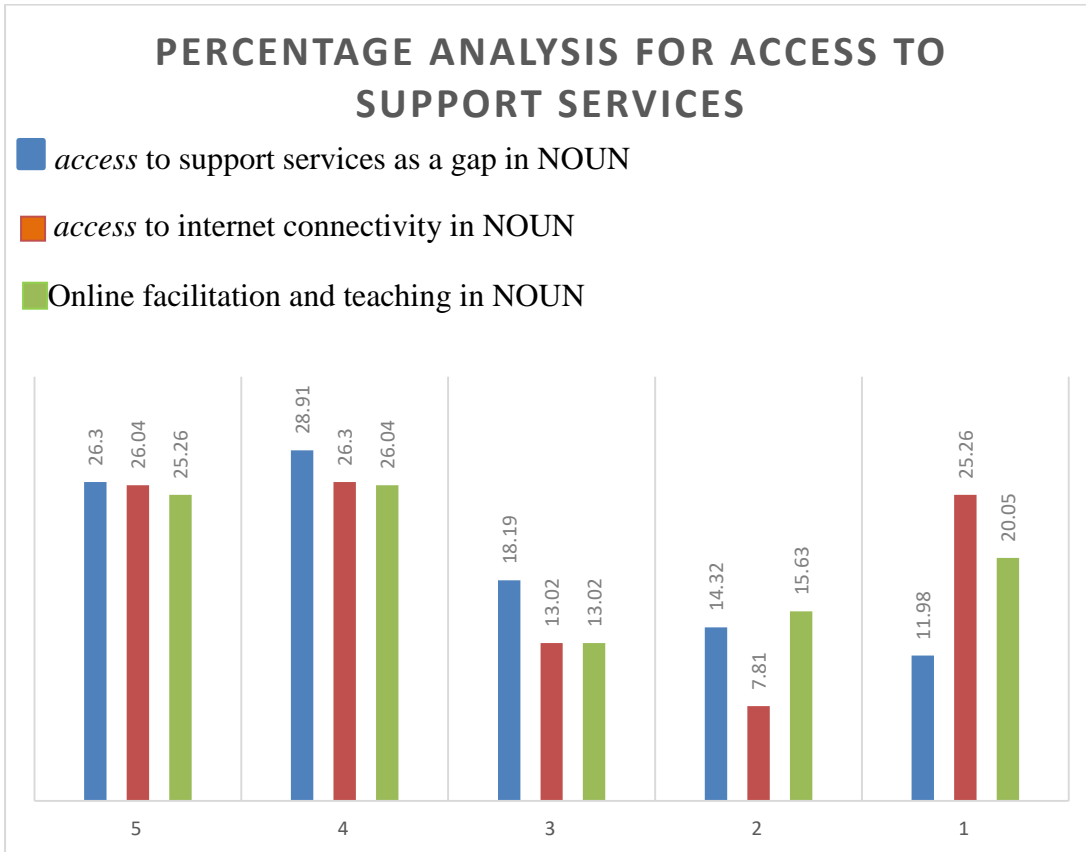
Source: Survey, 2023
Percentage Analysis for information and guidance

PERCENTAGE ANALYSIS FOR INFORMATION AND GUIDANCE

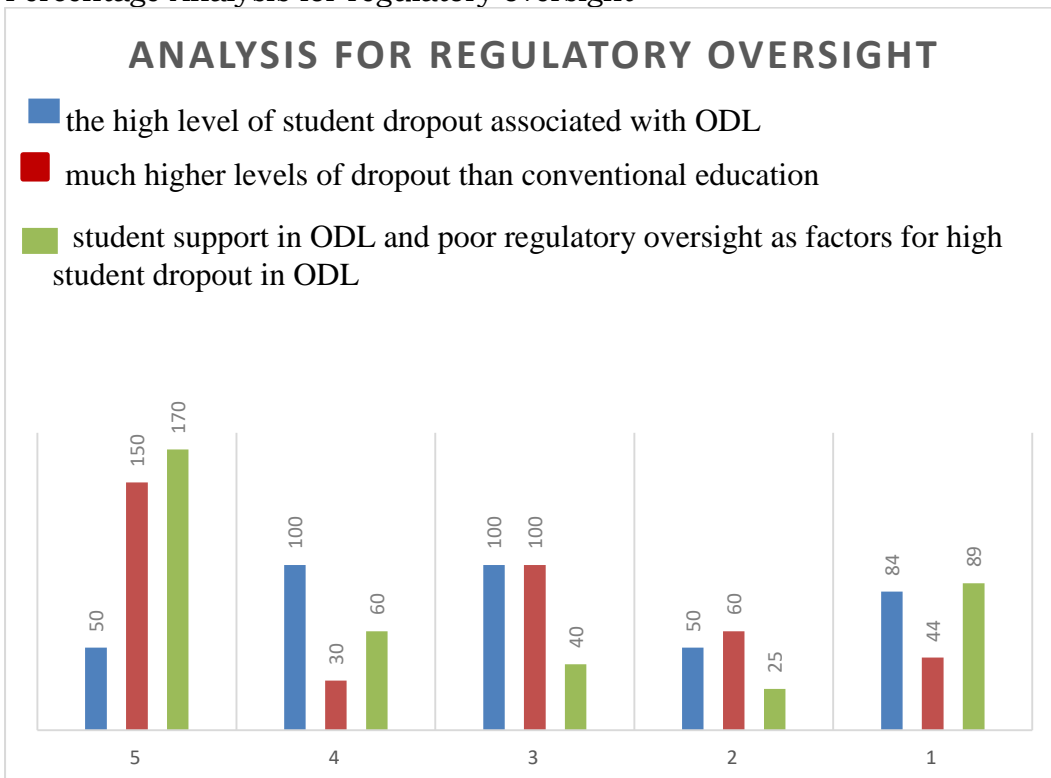
- Information and guidance (IAG) regulation proposed by the NUC requires strong student counselling and academic mentoring
- The robust management information system (MIS) envisaged by the NUC as evidence of strong institutional support
- deployed learning technologies in the form of web, e-learning, teleconferencing, video, OER and MOOCs



Source: Survey, 2023
Percentage Analysis for access to support services



Source: Survey, 2023
 Percentage Analysis for regulatory oversight



Descriptive Statistics on the Variables

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
INIESS	359	1.00	5.00	3.0086	1.25944
BPIODLSS	359	1.00	5.00	3.5243	1.22104
IAG	359	1.00	5.00	3.8157	1.25471
ATSS	359	1.00	5.00	3.0457	1.33612
RO	359	1.00	5.00	3.6543	1.50931
CR	359	1.00	5.00	3.5323	1.35321
Valid N (listwise)	359				

Source: Survey, 2023

Source: SPSS version 20.00

The table 5 shows the result of the descriptive statistics which indicates the mean and standard deviation as well as minimum and maximum value of the variables. The mean value of inadequate and ineffective support service (INIESS) is 3.00, the mean value of best practice in ODL student support service (BPIODLSS) is 3.52, the mean value of information and guidance (IAG) is 3.81, the mean value of access to support services (ATSS) is 3.04, and the mean value of regulatory oversight (RO) is 3.65. The table also recorded standard deviation of the variables as indicated in the table.

7. Discussion of Findings

The research outcome showed that lack of adequate provision of equipment and facilities for ODL, ineffective student support service, inadequate student support service, information and or advice on orientation, registration, matriculation, admission, study fees, examination queries, are matters of concern to students requiring information. There are challenges at the study centres on the administration of student registration, matriculation, admission, study fees, and examination queries. Students are concerned by the inadequate career counselling and administrative services provided at the study centres. They raised concerns over the envisaged efficient and effective information and guidance to be provided by diligent staff to students which is lacking. Information and guidance (IAG) regulations proposed by the NUC requires strong student counselling and academic mentoring but due to poor regulatory oversight is not the case. The robust management information system (MIS) envisaged by the NUC as evidence of strong institutional support and deployment of learning technologies in the form of web, e-learning, teleconferencing, video, OER and MOOCs are highlighted. The paper identified access to support services as a gap in NOUN, and access to internet connectivity. The research outcome demanded for improvement in online facilitation and teaching in NOUN in order to stem the high level of student dropout associated with ODL that are much higher than in conventional education. Similarly, it identified inadequate student support in ODL, and poor regulatory oversight as factors for high student dropout in ODL.

8. Recommendations

The paper recommended improvement in online facilitation and teaching in order to stem the high level of student dropout associated with ODL. The concerns by students over the inadequate career counselling and administrative services provided at the study centres should be addressed. Other concerns over are the envisaged efficient and effective information and guidance to be provided by diligent staff to students which is lacking should also be addressed by urgent overhauling of the mechanism. Information and guidance (IAG) regulation as proposed by the NUC which requires strong student counselling and academic mentoring should be

strengthened through better regulatory oversight. The robust management information system (MIS) envisaged by the NUC as evidence of strong institutional support and deployment of learning technologies in the form of web, e-learning, teleconferencing, video, OER and MOOCs are critical to effective instructional delivery in ODL and must be effected. The paper identified access to support services as a gap in NOUN, and access to internet connectivity for learning and exam purposes which are vital for student retention and motivation in ODL.

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