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Perceptions of the nature of university learner support practices: Staff and students' voices

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Abstract: The incorporation of staff and students' views is so central in the transformation of learner support management and delivery in distance education. This study explored the staff and students' perceptions of the nature of learner support in distance education at Uganda Martyrs University in Uganda. The study used a qualitative research approach involving focus groups and in-depth interviews with selected university students and staff. The study results showed that the nature of learner support services focused on; academic advising, library and technology, counselling and career, communication and administrative services. The results provide valuable information on how to strategize learner support planning in distance education by synthesising and incorporating the voices of the students and staff. University administrators need to address the staff and students' concerns about learner support to nurture a sustainable quality support culture.

Subjects: Adult Education and Lifelong Learning; Educational Research; Higher Education; Open & Distance Education and eLearning; Teachers & Teacher Education; Continuing Professional Development

Keywords: stakeholders; perceptions; learner support; distance education; quality

1. Introduction

Understanding stakeholders' perspectives of learner support especially the staff and students is significant for informing improved service delivery (Tao, 2008). The nature of learner support in distance education is reviewed globally with specific lessons for Uganda. Many institutions in the

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Considering staff and students' views is so central to inform a steady improvement of learner support provision in distance education. This study explored the staff and students' perceptions of the nature of learner support in distance education at Uganda Martyrs University in Uganda. The study results showed that the nature of learner support services mainly dealt with; academic advising, library and technology, counselling and career, communication and administrative services. The results provide valuable information on how to strategize learner support planning in distance education by synthesising and incorporating the voices of the students and staff. University administrators need to address the staff and students' concerns about learner support to create a sustainable quality learner support culture.

developed countries analyse learner support relating to issues of institutional support; course development, design, and delivery; and review of instructional materials; teaching and learning, course structure, student support, faculty support and assessment (Stella & Gnanam, 2004). The provision of those services varies between institutions depending on availability of support infrastructure like Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) and staff skills. In developing countries, learner support services focus on security, medical services, library, and hostel, transport and ICT services (Akpoiroro & Okon, 2015). In this case even socio-political environment influences the nature of learner support especially on issues of political security and transport which reflects the work and living environment in several developing countries especially in sub-Saharan Africa. Alves and Uhomoihi (2010) argue that due to increased use of computers and web applications such as blogs in distance education, security should be extended to such students' facilities to counter virus attacks.

In his survey of learner support in distance education, Dirr (1999) consider admissions and registration of students key pre-enrolment support services. Universities should ensure organised and transparent admissions and registration of the students (Brindley, 2014; Shimoni et al., 2013). The implication is that admissions should be timely communicated to the students through known channels. The central role of the registry department of ensuring timely and courteous support to all students during admissions and registration should be strengthened (Stewart & Wright, 2005). In Uganda, Muyinda (2012) claims that pre-enrolment learner support is only limited to advertising the courses. The students' registration is mainly done at university campuses and tend to be tedious with long queues that take a lot of students' time during face-to-face period. It could be prudent for the registry departments to make their presence effectively felt (Stewart & Wright, 2005) in Ugandan universities by planning for on-line registration and deploying sufficient staff during physical students' registration.

Orientating new students in distance education is one of the initial learner support services to enhance quality (Shimoni et al., 2013). The initial experience of students with distance education is frightening, frustrating and intimidating if they are not supported to develop self-confidence (LaPadula, 2003). Therefore, students need orientation to understand the new learning mode. In their study at the University of Manchester in the United Kingdom, Forrester et al. (2005) looked at orientation as the process of helping distance learners settle and embark on their studies. They further noted that effective orientation programme helps the university attract, ease transition and help students to concentrate and succeed in their studies. In Uganda, Mayende and Obura (2013) highlight that given the adult nature of distance learners, who also live far from the universities with family and career commitments, they need orientation support in lifelong learning skills.

Research underscores the role of ICT infrastructure through integration of various media, including ICT to support course delivery and student learning (Hampel & de Los Arcos, 2013). Nevertheless, effective use of technologies needs monitoring to stimulate pedagogic and psychological support to erase a feeling of isolation especially when learner support is on-line (Bertin & Narcy-Combes, 2007; Lee, 2003). Even in the use of simple technologies like radio, visual and print materials in distance education like the case in most African countries, learner support is needed for efficiency (Potter & Naidoo, 2006). The implication is that regardless of the nature of technology support, learners need guidance to effectively use any technology.

Provision of course materials is crucial in any learner support system of distance education. This involves use of printed materials, audio and audio-visual materials, computer conferencing, and fax to distribute assignments (Marsap & Narin, 2009). Though there are efforts to enhance a reading culture in Uganda (Mlay et al., 2015), such efforts are limited by poor reading culture (Bunoti, 2010). In order to ensure steady improvement in the quality of modules in distance learning, educational institutions have to build a database of their modules that should be continuously reviewed to improve service delivery and learning (Slater et al., 2015; Toetenel & Rienties, 2016).

Face-to-face workshops and group discussions are key learner support services in distance education (Shimoni et al., 2013). This is because they provide academic and tutorial support, learning strategies and writing skills. Like in Nepal (Pangeni, 2016), Uganda's education culture is dominated by face-to-face tutoring. This could be rooted from the practices of African traditional education that emphasise physical meeting of the teacher and the learner. Distance education in Uganda features learning activities supported by face-to-face sessions and some online learning activities which can be described as "blended learning" (Shemahonge & Mtebe, 2018). At the University of South Africa, Olivier (2016) found that students that attended face-to-face contact sessions performed better in written assignment compared to those who only participated in on-line discussion forums. Similarly, in two quantitative and one qualitative studies by Price et al. (2007) at the Open University, UK, students that received face-to-face tuition reported better experiences than those that received on-line tuition. Conversely, in their comparative study of students' views on on-line and face-to-face support in Turkey, Sad et al. (2014) found that students who received on-line support were more positive on key issues like programmes providing lifelong learning and having better opportunities to access and share learning resources than those who received face-to-face support. In Uganda, with many institutions experiencing limited internet connectivity, they should continue investing in on-line learner support as they provide face-to-face sessions to reduce on learner isolation and strengthen academic confidence of the adult learners.

Library support is the most critical of all the learner support services (Tait & Mills, 2004). This is because the library is the source of resources for learner research to complete the course assignments. The library provides electronic materials like e-journals, e-books and newspapers that can be accessed anywhere as long as one has access to internet connection to promote quality learning (Lee, 2003). From the library, the needs of distance learners go beyond journals and books and include how to support them to conduct individual-driven library research including the disabled students (Mears & Clough, 2015). This is congruent with studies conducted at universities in the UK (Needham et al. 2013; Stone, 2012) and Australia (Cox & Jantti, 2014) which found a strong correlation between library resources use and students' academic performance. With reference to Africa, Mayende and Obura (2013) and Oladokun (2002, 2014) posit that for distance education students to effectively use library services, provision of training and adequate support is a must by the university librarians.

Provision of counselling and guidance services is a key learner support in distance education (Moore & Kearsley, 2005; Shimoni et al., 2013). This is because distance learners have academic, personal and career challenges that need services of a trained counsellor (LaPadula, 2003). However, inadequate counselling and guidance to distance learners has been reported in studies conducted in both high income and low income countries (Gujjar et al., 2010; Kishore, 2014). To avert the situation, there is need for organised computer aided guidance and counselling in order to avoid frustration and aid the students to take charge of their learning (Frieden, 1999; Tait, 1999).

Creating a sense of institutional belonging for distance learners through support services like student leadership representation, providing medium for networking with colleagues and lecturers, easy access to course materials, and mobility of the disabled is another key learner support (Shimoni et al., 2013). Ludwig-Hardman and Dunlap (2003) urge universities to guard students against isolation from their university, instructors and fellow peers. An interesting example is the weekend programme organised by the Eastern Oregon State Colleges (LaPadula, 2003), where distance learners visit the campus on weekends and share experiences with peers and their lecturers. Conversely, Lefever and Currant (2010) argue that technology can be used to create university community belonging while saving the time a student would use to move to the university. They consider social networking sites, SMS and Instant Messaging (IM) being able to support social interactions leading to a sense of belonging.

Trindade et al. (2000) believe that reliable communication is the single most support that the institution can use to inform the students of any new development in their learning. Timely communication to distance learners can counteract a feeling of isolation from the instructor and peers (Bates, 2005; Puri, 2006). For effectiveness, there is need for communication mapping and management in learner support

so that there is clarity on the chain and levels of communication between the institution and the students (Tait & Mills, 2004). Douce (2018) suggests the use internet facilities such as developing distance education web portal, posting information on the website and use of emails to safeguard against communication lapses. Effective communication can be via forms like email, asynchronous discussion boards, synchronous chat rooms and skype in distance education (Murray et al., 2015). In Uganda, several educational institutions rely more on utilising media like mobile telephony, social media, postal services, face-to-face and limited use of the internet to link with their students (Mayende et al., 2014).

There is need for administrative support like having an established distance education support department equipped with facilities and staff to support the students (Dirr, 1999; LaPadula, 2003; Rumajogee et al., 2003). The administrative department should be able to support learners both on-line and off-line by having basics like a helpdesk and hotlines. An innovative example is the “follow the sun” help desk approach that enables universities in different continents to provide shared learner support 24/7 (Sykes, 2002). The other approach is that of Kvavik and Handberg (2000) who urge institutions to develop their websites and provide sufficient support on-line so that students no longer need to seek the help desk support.

Students should be supported during fees payments by showing paying options, checking fees balances and indicating possible sources of financial support (Floyd, 2018). In online-based distance education, sufficient information is up-loaded on the distance education portal to be accessed by the students. Though fees collection is a responsibility of the finance office, the registrar should be involved since fees payment is an integral part of the registration process (Ludwig-Hardman & Dunlap, 2003). Although it is common knowledge that the fees paid by distance learners is lower than that paid by fulltime students (Okopi, 2010), many students still find it problematic to pay.

Regarding the nature of students’ research supervision, there is a disconnection between the supervisor and the supervisee in distance education due to distance and spatial differences (Andrew, 2012; Nasiri & Mafakheri, 2014). In Zimbabwe, Mapolisa (2012) found that distance learners were supported by supervisors who had limited research skills, got little direction and had few supervision meetings that led to low-quality research. Supervision is worse where the supervisor and supervisee live in different countries with an imbalance in availability of IT support (Andrew, 2012). Even within the same country, there can be variations in IT access by the students depending on whether one lives in town or rural area as the case in Uganda. This has been termed as “dancing at a distance” (Evans & Green, 1995). It can be observed that as IT use permeates distance education, supervision practices have to change from face-to-face to suit the development trends in learner support.

2. Research question

The current study explores the question: How do the staff and students perceive the nature of learner support for in-service teachers by the training university?

3. Methodology

The study used a qualitative research approach involving Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and in-depth interviews to collect data from the students and staff involved in distance education courses in the faculty of education respectively. The population comprised of all 320 first-year Bachelors (BED) and Diploma (DEP) students and 14 staff members engaged in distance education in the Faculty of Education at Uganda Martyrs University. Using students’ course representatives, 36 volunteers to participate in group discussions were selected. The identification of the 14 faculty staff was purposive (based on their involvement in distance education) to obtain responses from the right respondents. The six staff sampled for interviews were voluntarily selected.

The study had four FGDs of eight students in each group (Morgan, 2013). Two groups were from BED and two from DEP students. English was used as a medium of our discussion to unite all the participants that speak different tribal-based languages. Individual participants consented prior to the start of the focus group discussions. The FGD method allowed probing by the researcher (Morgan, 2013).

FGDs involved designing focus group guide. Concise, clear and reasonable questions were developed (Krueger & Casey, 2015). The FGD guide was piloted on a group of six students outside the main study that informed further revision. Similarly, the interview guide for the staff was piloted and refined using simple and clear language. Permission and consent of participants was obtained before conducting actual data collection and each participant had to complete a consent form (see Appendix A).

4. Data analysis

The study used thematic analytic model based on data reduction, data display, and data verification and drawing conclusions in data analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The field notes and audio recordings were transcribed. The reviewed transcripts were then imported in Nvivo 11 data organisation computer software for data organisation, coding by creating nodes and parent nodes based on the study sub-themes and themes respectively (Edlund & McDougall, 2016). The six university staff were coded Uni staff 1, Uni staff 2, Uni staff 3, Uni staff 4, Uni staff 5, and Uni staff 6. The numbers were given randomly and do not indicate staff position or seniority in the faculty. The four focus groups of students were identified by numbers and each of the group participants was allocated a different number from those of other group members. These include; FGD 1, FGD 2, FGD 3, and FGD 4. In each FGD, participants were identified by numbers from 1 to 8. For example, Student 1, FGD 1; up to 8 since they were eight participants in each FGD. The organised data were exported to word processor, ready for interpretation (Miles et al., 2014). The results were displayed in form of text.

5. Results and discussions

5.1. Academic advisory support

Concerning academic advisory support, the majority of the staff (83.3%) and the students (86.1%) commended the distribution and use of modules by the faculty and students respectively as a pivotal learner support in the study context:

We provide modules which are a form of learning materials to guide our distance learning students. Our mode of delivery is mainly by correspondence. The modules contain units of the syllabi the students are taking and we also include other reference materials in the module and CDs for our students (Uni staff 4).

Though the modules were considered basic course materials, students are expected to find other research materials to enrich their reading and use in their studies. The use of print materials and CDs is an indication that distance education is still in the second phase of development in the study context (Evans & Nation, 2007; Nipper, 1989). However, effective use of both faculty course materials and students' references is limited due to the poor reading culture in Uganda's education system (Bunoti, 2010). To nurture the reading culture, there is need for a deliberate government efforts to institutionalise reading especially in the primary and secondary education systems to influence reading at tertiary level. Initiatives of individuals and institutions investing in ICTs to enhance access to reading materials in Uganda (Mlay et al., 2015) need a supportive socio-economic environment by the government to have a positive impact.

In line with Marsap and Narin (2009), the students revealed that they received modules from the university as the basic course materials. However, 55.6% of the students expressed their view that both the modules and coursework were not distributed in time to be used by the students to complete the coursework assignments:

We are given modules as essential reference materials but delivered late which affects our ability to read through properly. We are also given coursework but very late towards the deadline for handing in the completed work. This affects our quality of work negatively (Student 8, FGD 2).

Although operating under different socio-economic conditions from the UK, Uganda's educational institutions can gain some insights from the recent studies at the OU UK (Slater et al., 2015; Toetenel

& Rienties, 2016) that highlight the need for training institutions to build a database of their course materials and review them regularly to meet the changing needs of the students. Building a data base of the course materials improves on their management and delivery, but would need commitment of institutional management to allocate adequate resources for effectiveness.

Field visit support featured in the results and its usefulness has been underscored (Brindley, 2014; Hadjinicolaou, 2014). Like 83.3% of the staff, 86.1% of the students highlighted the central role of field support in facilitating the in-service teacher training in the study. Field support is a key learner support that is benefiting the students:

We invite the students to meet us during field support at the different university centres and guide them in research and coursework completion. They are usually fewer in number in each centre and able to express their study challenges, share their concerns with fellow peers and the visiting staff (Uni staff 2).

The lecturers came near our places of work and briefed us on question approach and how to conduct research and search for information. They also reminded us about deadlines for handing in coursework and paying fees, and encouraged us to work together but not to copy the work done by others. But the university should separate the field support for new and continuing students because we have different needs (Student 5, FGD 1).

The results showed that during field support, pertinent distance learning issues like coursework challenges, learner-learner interaction and learner-staff interactions were managed. It is clear that the physical and practical challenges in getting staff and students to the learner support centres for field support are significant. Staff often have to travel long distances with attendant costs of travel, accommodation and meals. An obvious solution would be to provide learner support on-line rather than face-to-face. However, provision of on-line support requires considerable technological and infrastructure investment if the students working in rural and remote areas are to benefit.

The study found the practice of organising face-to-face residential workshops for students as a precursor to end of semester examinations. This was revealed by all the staff and the majority of the students (94.4%) in the study. Like in South Africa (Olivier, 2016), during face-to-face period, the students meet their lecturers physically to help them clarify some concepts that were not clear in the modules. They also meet fellow students for academic discussions and do examinations for end of semester. Face-to-face sessions were compulsory for the students to attend to be allowed to sit end of semester examinations. It involves “blended learning environment” whereby distance education features learning activities supported by face-to-face sessions and some on-line (Shemahonge & Mtebe, 2018). This finding is congruent with that of Shimoni et al. (2013) which claim that students are provided with academic and tutorial support during face-to-face workshops.

Action research support was consistently perceived by staff (83.3%) and students (88.9%) as an academic responsibility of the staff to all the distance learning students:

Every student is allocated a supervisor for research support and guidance. The research areas are developed depending on the problems students face in their schools of work. Each student is assigned a research supervisor who guides him/her during the research period (Uni staff 3).

We were allocated supervisors for action research who guided us when writing proposals, developing action plans and implementing them in our schools. They are also guiding us in the report writing after collecting data on the intervention, but some delay to respond when we send our work (Student 1, FGD 4).

Results reflect that the students’ research aimed at improving on their classroom teaching as research areas were derived from the classroom challenges faced and identified by the students. Research supervision entails physical meetings, use of postal services, mobile telephony and SMS,

and exchange of emails (for those with access to internet facility). However, 33.3% of the students indicated that some research supervisors took long to give feedback on the students' research progress. Such anomalies were attributed to factors such as staff overload (given many supervisees) and the limited use of modern ICT facilities in communication between staff and students. This finding is consistent with Bunoti (2010) who found that lecturers were on average allocated 20–24 research supervisees and several students complained of inadequate research supervision time in one university in Uganda. Related studies conducted in Europe (Andrew, 2012; Nasiri & Mafakheri, 2014) indicate a disconnection between the supervisor and the supervisee due to technology imbalance posing research supervision challenge in distance education. The point is that having ICT facilities is a necessary step to improving research supervision, but the sufficient condition is that both the supervisor and the student should have access to those facilities.

5.2. Library and technology support

83.3% of the staff revealed that different library resources were introduced to the students. These included both physical reading materials accessed in the library and e-learning resources that the students could access from whenever and wherever via the internet:

We advise our students to search for more materials for reference purposes in addition to the modules. They are encouraged to visit our university library or access e-library materials. The problem is that many have no time to visit the libraries and lack access to e-library resources (Uni staff 2).

We have noted that for the case of public primary and secondary schools, the government has equipped their libraries with a variety of reading materials some of which are relevant to our courses. We encourage our students to make use of such resources in their studies (Uni staff 3).

The challenge of students lack of time to visit the library and/or lack of internet to access e-library resources stood prominent the study. Nonetheless, the students were encouraged to use the library services in their workplaces to fill the knowledge gap. Though workplace libraries can lessen the challenge of access to reference materials, they cannot be a solution to the problem since most of the reading materials stocked in the primary school libraries mainly suit the intended level of the pupils. Such work-based libraries had limited internet connection and could not sufficiently support the use of electronic materials (Lee, 2003; Mears & Clough, 2015).

Besides, 72.2% of the students observed that a variety of reading resources were provided by the university library and there was desire for the library staff to support the students:

I did not know how to use the library. By visiting the university library and consulting the staff, I can now search for books in the library and obtain other library reading materials on-line in my town (Student 3, FGD 3).

The training of students in library use was provided by the library staff based on the student's need and personal request. This indicates that students who did not seek guidance on library use missed such useful learner support to enrich their learning. This finding is inconsistent with those of earlier studies that consider provision of library support a must to all the students (Mayende & Obura, 2013; Oladokun, 2014; Tait & Mills, 2004).

About the perceived nature of technology learner support, 66.7% of the staff noted that arrangements are in place to train the students in computer use to enhance their research skills for doing coursework and action research:

Of recent, the faculty has started teaching computer use to distance learners. We have realised that many of them lack prior training and find it difficult to research when given coursework. It is our hope that the new programme will improve on their skills and quality of research (Uni staff 4).

Contrary, the majority of the students (80.6%) expressed their limited exposure to learning computer use by the university. This finding contrasts those of earlier studies that stress the central role of computer aided learning to ease communication and reduce a feeling of isolation from peers and instructor on the part of the students (Bates, 2005; Douce, 2018; Puri, 2006). The course only indirectly contributed to their acquisition of skills in computer use in order to complete the coursework assignments and do research:

At bachelor's degree level, our first assignment in Professional Educational Studies needed us to use google scholar to search for information. I started learning how to use the computer. The problem is that I spent more money to acquire such skills outside the university (Student 8, FGD 3).

In order to stimulate pedagogic and psychological support to erase a feeling of isolation among distance learners, technology support should involve providing the facility and teaching the students how to utilise it (Bertin & Narcy-Combes, 2007; Lee, 2003). In Uganda, Busulwa and Bbuye (2018) found that teachers appreciated the importance of using simple technologies like for m-learning only after being sensitised and trained on their use.

5.3. Counselling and career support

83.3% of the staff and 86.1% of the students were in agreement that counselling and career support for the students were administered by the faculty teaching staff and administrators who were not specialised counsellors:

We do not have specialised counsellors but our Faculty administrators and lecturers counsel the students. A part from academic counselling, other personal problems are sorted based on individual initiatives (Uni staff 3).

The students were counselled and guided on dealing with issues of sickness, stress, lack of tuition, fear of examinations, missing results, unfriendly lecturers, failed coursework and what one can study after completing the current course. The limited counselling support was mainly provided during face-to-face period. This finding reflects the limited investment and efforts by the university to develop and strengthen counselling to support both students and staff, which could put many students in a state of social and psychological confusion (Moore & Kearsley, 2005; Shimoni et al., 2013). In line with LaPadula (2003) and Tait (1999), the training university should commit sufficient resources to enable the students' access to the services of professional counsellors.

5.4. Communication service support

83.3% of the staff revealed that communication learner support involved the use of cell-phones, internet, postal service, printed materials and face-to-face. This finding was consistent with the view of 97.2% of the students who noted the use of similar media. The university study centres were also avenues for delivering information to students in the different parts of the country:

We provide faculty telephone numbers for the students to consult and give feedback on our services; we also provide telephone contacts of the facilitators on each subject coursework assignment to enable interaction between the students and their respective subject facilitators (Uni staff 1).

We encourage our students to regularly check on the university website and the public print media to know what is happening at the university. Prospective students can download application forms from the university web-site or get hardcopies at the university campuses (Uni staff 3).

The results underscore the value of both on-line (internet) and off-line (face-to-face, use of faculty brochures, flyers) communication in distance education (Mayende et al., 2014; Tait & Mills, 2004; Trindade et al., 2000). Providing telephone contacts of the facilitators was intended to ease students' access to their course facilitators for academic support. Though majority of the students

(97.2%) used the telephone contacts to seek clarification on some difficult issues in the modules and coursework assignments, 13.9% were discouraged to consult because the telephony numbers provided were often busy or off-air. Such anomalies precipitated feelings of discomfort in the students about the nature of communication from the faculty. The effectiveness of the university website and email facility in learner communication support could not be ascertained as it was reported that many students lacked access to internet facilities in their workplaces especially those teaching in rural schools.

5.5. Administrative services support

The study found that finance department in conjunction with the registry department communicated information on tuition to the students. All the staff and majority of the students (94.4%) indicated that fees clearance was done at the main university and study centres but students were free to pay in the different banks provided by the finance department. However, 52.8% the students highlighted that the tuition charged was so high and the fees clearance process was cumbersome. Although several students considered university fees to be so high, it could not be easily proved given that in Uganda and elsewhere (Okopi, 2010), it is common knowledge that the fees paid by distance learners is lower compared to fulltime students.

Results from all staff and 97.2% of the students were consistent that the faculty in conjunction with the registry department organised the registration and orientation programme for students:

The faculty working with the registry department support our students by registering them at the beginning of every semester. New students are then orientated in distance education and enlightened about their expectations from the faculty, and the faculty's expectations from them (Uni staff 4).

The involvement of the registry department in registering and orientating the new students underscores the central role of the registry department (Brindley, 2014; Shimoni et al., 2013; Stewart & Wright, 2005). The faculty invited some current and former students to participate in the orientation of new students and to share their experiences in distance education. This practice created a bond of unity between the current and former students.

The study found a consistency on the perceived lack of formal students' leadership. About 83.3% of the staff termed it "lack of sensitivity" to students' representation, and 88.9% of the students called it "lack of political space" for distance learners. The phrase lack of "political space" was used to mean absence of formal students' leadership structure for distance learners that limited their representation in the institutional students' leadership. Students' increased representation in leadership enhances their sense of institutional belonging (LaPadula, 2003). However, it can be quite challenging to engage the distance learners in the students' leadership since they live and do most of their studies away from the university.

Whereas a few staff members (33.3%) revealed that there was a security problem in some of the students' residences during residential face-to-face period, majority of the students (94.4%) indicated the same problem. There were limited security lights and loss of material things like cell-phones and bags in some hostels which posed a security threat to the students' lives and property. This finding is consistent with those of earlier studies (Akpoiroro & Okon, 2015; Bunoti, 2010). The university authorities working with the private hostel owners should ensure improvement in physical security by engaging more security personnel and improving on the security lights.

There was a unique learner support of providing child day care. I consider it unique in the sense that it was not identified by any staff, but by a few students (only 5.6%) and could not be traced in the literature. These students were mothers who reported for face-to-face sessions with their babies. Baby-sitters continued taking the crying babies to class that affected the concentration of some students. This issue has a gender bias cultural connotation in the

African context (Singh & Lewa, 2014). It was a concern of only women (breast feeding mothers) who were facing a challenge of taking care of their babies as they attend lessons. They could not leave their young children at home with their husbands because society considers them responsible for child care and up-bringing. While the students have a genuine reason to request for a child day care, it has cost implications for the students and the university.

6. Conclusion

Staff and students perceived nature of learner support for in-service teachers in Uganda focussed on: academic advising (provision of modules, field support, face-to-face workshops, and research supervision), library and technology, counselling and career, communication service, and administrative support (security and safety, fees clearance, child day care, students' registration and orientation, and students' involvement in leadership).

There are discrepancies between students and staff perceptions of the nature of technology, communication, and administrative learner support services. Whereas staff showed a perceived improvement in communication and technology use in distance education, the students revealed their dissatisfaction and a feeling of discomfort with the provision of those university support services. There is need to synthesise the staff and students' discrepancies to inform improvement in learner support.

The university is committed to blended learning involving both off-campus and some on-campus activities for the students. On-campus activities like face-to-face classes benefited the majority of the students by providing an interactive and discussion forum with fellow peers, and their course facilitators. There was limited on-line learner support, an indication that distance education development trend mainly featured the second phase in the study context.

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Appendix A. Informed Consent Form

Managing and delivering learner support for Ugandan in-service teachers: incorporating workplace and university support systems

Please initial each box if you are happy to take part in this research.

I confirm that I have read and understood the information given to me about the above named research project and I understand that this will involve me taking part as described above.	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand that the purpose of the research is to inform improvement in the training of in-service primary school teachers in Uganda	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand that data will be stored securely on a password protected computer and only the researcher will have access to any identifiable data. I understand that my identity will be protected by use of a code	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand that my data will not be identifiable and the data may be used;	<input type="checkbox"/>
In publications that are mainly read by university academics	<input type="checkbox"/>
In presentations that are mainly attended by university academics	<input type="checkbox"/>
In publications that are mainly read by the public	<input type="checkbox"/>
In presentations that are mainly attended by the public	<input type="checkbox"/>
Freely available online	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand that data will be kept for five years after which it will be destroyed.	<input type="checkbox"/>

(Continued)

(Continued)	
I understand that data could be used for future analysis or other purposes	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand that I can withdraw my datum at any point during data collection and up to three months after data are collected	<input type="checkbox"/>



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