Developing a sustainable student support services framework for a distance learning institution

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Abstract
Open and distance learning (ODL) systems are associated with poor retention and high dropout rates. One of the reasons for this problem is the lack of a sustainable student support system in an institution. Effective and sustainable student support is pivotal in ODL, especially in the changing landscape. In this presentation, we discuss the concept of student support in ODL and its importance in enhancing student satisfaction and retention. We also discuss some of the theories and frameworks informing student support services. We then provide our framework for student support, explaining and providing examples on key areas of the framework namely; orientation of new students, academic, psychosocial, technological, online learning and, administrative support as well as support for vulnerable students such as those with disabilities. Conclusions are drawn from the discussion and recommendations are made.

Keywords: Student support. Distance education. Effectiveness. Sustainability. Student retention. Student success.

1.1 Introduction

Open and distance learning (ODL) systems have succeeded in providing access to higher education to students who for some reason cannot study full-time at an institution of higher education (Tembo & Mwale, 2019). The advantages of ODL are in the flexibility of the learning system. Students can study without the restrictions of time and space. As noted by Sadeghi (2019) the utilisation of technology in distance learning enhances communication between students and course instructors, provides means for distributing course material, and improves the teaching and learning processes.

There is, however, a challenge of high dropout and low throughput rates associated with ODL systems. Simpson (2013) compared the graduation rates of conventional and distance education universities and found the latter with comparatively exceptionally low graduation rates. While numerous factors are contributing to low completion rates in distance education institutions, the issue of adequately supporting students would in a way contribute to student retention and ultimate completion of programmes. Hence the focus of this discussion paper to interrogate how students could be supported to retain them in distance education institutions.

1.2 Defining student support in ODL

Student support, as defined by (Simpson, 2012:13) 'is all activities beyond the production and delivery of course materials that assist in the progress of students to succeed in their studies. Particularly, everything that could assist a student to improve their learning process and keep them motivated. Das and Biswas (2018) describe student support as that which is concerned with a variety of human and non-human resources to direct and simplify the educational transaction. The above-mentioned definitions conform with Lehman and Conceição's (2014) who define support as creating an environment that is favourable to learning, growing approaches that build community engagement, and include assistance throughout the process.

Nsamba and Makoe (2017:91) enumerated some typical student support services offered in ODL institutions which include registration, advisory services, learning support services (academic), counseling, tutoring, guidance on learning and feedback on assignments, interaction with teaching and administrative staff, career services, provision of study centres and financial assistance.

1.3 Importance of student support services in ODL

Student support services are important in ODL. Effective student support is one characteristic of an effective ODL institution (Shonhiwa & Ndudzo, 2016). The quality of student support services can be used to judge the effectiveness of an institution (Shonhiwa & Ndudzo, 2016). Similarly, student support is even more important with the increasing competition among ODL Higher Education Institutions (Shikulo & Lekhetho, 2020). Distance education has been characterized by student dissatisfaction, drop-out, and low success rates attributable to lack of or ineffective student support (Ouma, 2019).

According to Shikulo and Lekhetho (2020), effective student support services makes ODL students cope with both academic and personal pressures; and results in higher education institutions providing quality education and student satisfaction and hence attracting new students and retaining current ones, improving their overall performance, and increasing students' progression rates and employability. It promotes student persistence with their studies (Arifin, 2018). It further increases online student success and promotes lifelong learning.

Student support mechanisms should grow with development in technology. Zuhairi, Karthikeyan, and Priyadarshana (2020) argue that technology has enabled the development of a flexible, interactive, and personalised learning environment yet student support services have remained the same yet these environments require new ways of providing learning support for open, distance, and online students

2.1 Theories underpinning student support

In this section, two theories underpinning student support services in higher education are discussed namely Tinto's Theory of Student Departure and the Ubuntu philosophy. The purpose of theorising student support activities is to highlight the importance of developing student support systems that are informed by some imperatives regarding students and institutions.

As already noted, the lack of an effective student support system results in high student dropout rates in institutions of higher learning. According to Tinto (1975), the student's decision to drop out of a programme of study results from the extent to which the student is integrated into the academic, environmental, and social spheres of an institution. Tinto (1993) notes that one of the factors influencing students' persistence with studies is their pre-entry attributes. The issue of pre-entry attributes is applicable to distance education students who join academic programmes with varying pre-entry levels because of the flexible entry routes associated with open and distance learning. To this end, distance education students require academic support in their first year of study to make up for any pre-entry deficiencies they may have which may result in their failure to cope with the academic demands of the university programmes.

As noted by Tinto (1993) that the student's goals and commitments are also important factors influencing the extent they will be integrated into the academic environment. Students who have a strong sense of purpose and are well-motivated stand a better chance of being integrated well into the academic environment and can persist with studies. Academic support initiatives in institutions of higher learning should assist with motivation and the setting of goals. Such academic support programmes assist students to deal with any type of challenges that may derail them from achieving the set goals. Plante, O'Keefe and Théorêt (2013) note that motivation provides the needed energy and zeal to work towards the achievement of the set goals. Students should, therefore, be supported to remain on course to achieving their goals. Distance education students have external commitments such as family and work demands and these commitments may negatively affect their goals and commitments if they are not handled well hence the need for support.

The third aspect of Tinto's theory deals with institutional experiences. Tinto (1993) notes that the formal and informal aspects of institutional experiences influence the student's integration into the academic and social systems. The way the student experiences the different facets of institutional life influences the decision to persist or drop out of the institution. Distance education students experience institutional life through their interaction with academic and non-academic staff. At the commencement of their studies, students should undergo proper orientation of the systems and services of the institution. Such an orientation programme will assist students in navigating through the processes and systems without challenges. there should be an integral support system to assist students with their institutional experiences.

Tinto (1993) also states that a student's involvement in the social environment and the academic environment is important for retention and success in academic programmes. Most of the distance education courses are offered online and there is a need for students' social presence to be enhanced in online learning. d'Alessio et al. (2019) explain social presence as the extent to which students can project their identity in the online environment. Students need to relate with others as living beings by actively interacting with their counterparts in learning. Students should be supported on how they should maximise in a distance and online learning environment by providing them with ways of actively participating in social and academic environments for enhanced learning.

The Ubuntu African philosophy is premised on the assertion that an individual thrives by working together with others hence the 'I am because we are' maxim. As observed by Rampa and Mphahlele (2016) Ubuntu is underpinned by human kindness and the need to honestly serve others through mutual respect and tolerance. Student support services should be informed by the desire to serve students, honestly and with respect. Mayet (2016) notes the articulation gap in the South African higher education system. Students may enter the higher education system without the requisite academic skills to succeed. Such students are deemed 'at risk' for failure and in the spirit of Ubuntu, the students should be supported academically. The academic support provided may involve institutionalising a mentoring system that allows the more able and experienced students to work with the 'at risk' students by nurturing to develop academic skills necessary for success in higher education.

The Ubuntu philosophy also stresses working with vulnerable groups in society in ensuring that they are not marginalised. Any meaningful student support system in distance education should identify vulnerable students such as students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, students from rural backgrounds, and the disabled, among others. There should be specific programmes meant to support disadvantaged students. As noted by Chandra et al (2020) the transitioning to online learning due to the Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in educational, emotional, and social challenges for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. To this end, in the true spirit of Ubuntu, institutions should support the students in a well-organised and systematic way.

2.2 The suggested student support framework

The suggested sustainable framework for student support in distance education should address the preparation of new students for the new learning system and environment,

offer academic, psychosocial, technological, and online learning support as well as supporting vulnerable students, especially those with different forms of disabilities. The figure below summarises the framework;
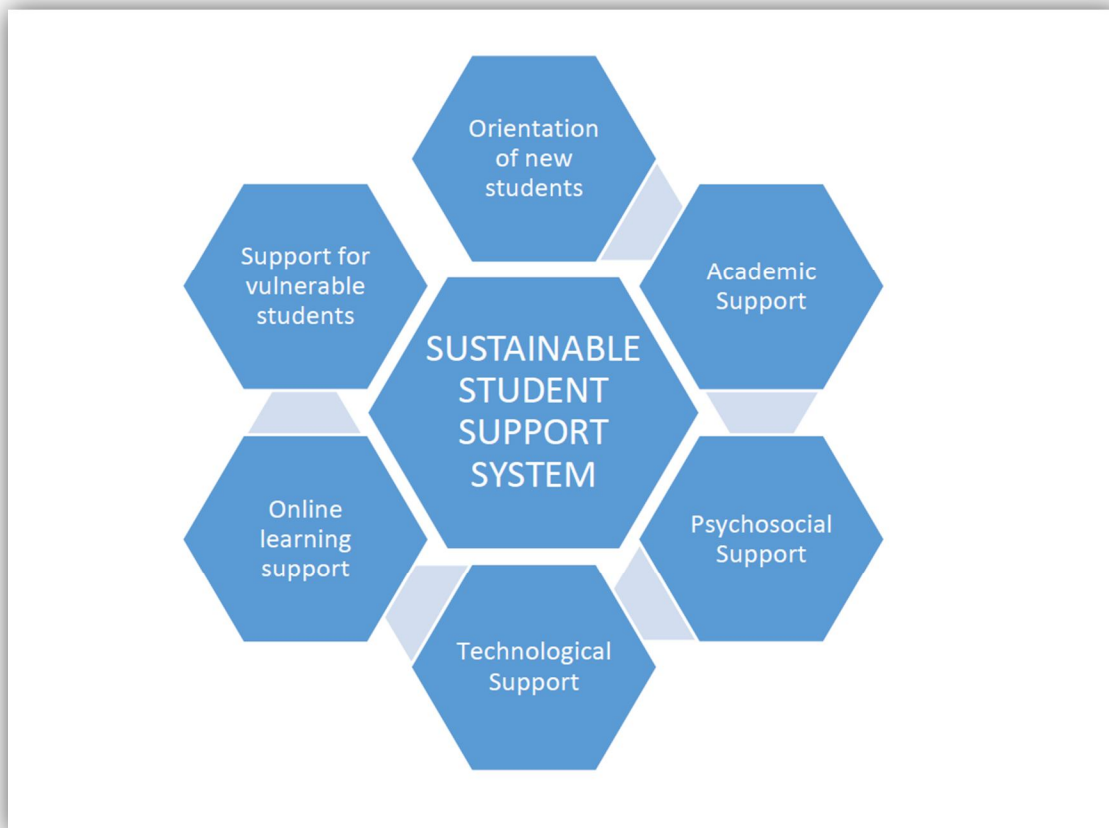
3.1 Orientation of new students

Many students joining an ODL institution will be studying through distance education for the first time, hence the importance to adequately prepare for the expectations of studying through the ODL delivery mode. Heaney and Fisher (2011) note that when students are newly admitted to a distance education institution they may have some challenges and require guidance through purposefully planned and systematic orientation programmes. Jones (2013) notes the importance of exposing students to the new distance education systems to assist them to navigate through their studies. According to Mayhew, Stipeck, and Dorow (2011), students' orientation programmes are meant to initiate the new students into the academic and social arrangements of an institution, to maximise the students' sense of belonging to a learning community. Similarly, Boykin et al. (2015) also underscore the importance of orientation programmes in introducing new students to the academic, cultural, and social aspects of the institution.

The Covid-19 pandemic and the resultant restrictions on gatherings have forced many institutions of higher learning to offer programmes online. Watts (2019) notes that studying

online is different from the conventional way of studying and students should be prepared adequately for online learning through orientation programmes. Melonçon and Harris (2015) further underscore the importance of preparing students for online writing and study skills by emphasising that playing and working online are not the same as learning online. It is, therefore, imperative for institutions to develop and implement orientation programmes to assist students with online learning.

3.2 Academic support

Academic support refers to a variety of instructional methods, educational services, and institutional resources provided to students to enhance their learning and meet the required learning standards for a course or programme (Gurney & Grossi, 2019; Arifin, 2018; Fluke, O'Connor, Strawhun & Peterson, 2014). Similarly, Tamuliene (2014) is of the view that the main function of academic support is to satisfy the students' emotional and social needs that are directly connected to their learning and have a significant impact on their academic performance. In essence, academic support is there to help students overcome any learning difficulty that may hinder them from achieving satisfactory academic standards. Effective academic support service, therefore, has proven to be an important variable in ensuring students' retaining and subsequent success in their academic work. On the contrary, lack of academic support leads to students feeling overwhelmed and they start to disengage as they fall behind in their coursework and eventually drops out of university (Fluke, O'Connor, Strawhun & Peterson, 2014).

Academic support is multidimensional; it incorporates different educational strategies that would help improve student's learning experiences and subsequent success. These strategies include but are not limited to; academic counseling where students get guidance on how to fulfill learning objectives, how to use technology tools and resources, utilise academic tutoring services and supplementary courses. It also involves guidance on how to engage with available learning resources; volunteer mentors, study skills workshops, provision of meaningful library services, technological services, and communities of learning (Munyaradzi & Addae, 2019). Institutions may decide on the strategy to employ in offering the different academic support services to students. For instance, setting communities of practice among students enrolled in a programme regardless of their geographical location.

Since academic support is important to improve students' experiences and increase their retention and completion rate in the distance learning mode, ODL institutions need to ensure that the duties and responsibilities of the students' support services are clearly stated and well-executed. The student support office should ensure that they help ODL students learn how to study through the distance mode; learn essential study skills such as reading online, learning from different media made available, learn how to interact with course lecturers and peers through distance learning modes. They also need to ensure that students understand how they are to be assessed and against which standards and learn to study independently with the use of available multimedia resources. (Gurney & Grossi, 2019; Arifin, 2018; Fluke, O'Connor, Strawhun & Peterson, 2014; Sarkhel, 2014).

3.3 Psychosocial Support

Researchers have observed that an increasing number of university students are being diagnosed with mental health problems attributed to several challenges. According to Brown (2016), mental health is not about having a mental illness, but it is the emotional resilience to cope with pressure and being able to work productively while believing in one's worth and that of others. As a result, intervention from institutions, social workers, and the government is needed to ensure that students are mentally healthy to cope with their studies (Munyaradzi & Addae, 2019; Bukhari & Afzal, 2017; Brown, 2016). Students studying through open and distance education mode also face an array of challenges that include among others; time management as they have to juggle between work, families, and studies; financial stress as they normally are self-funded, personal and psychological stress as they try hard to balance their social and academic responsibilities. The students are further stressed using the ever-changing technologies. The social and psychological challenges students face interfere with their academic achievement (Gurney & Grossi, 2019; Arifin 2018; Tamuliene, 2014). A study conducted by Musingafi, Mapuranga, Chiwandza and Zebron (2015) revealed that students at the Zimbabwe Open University faced a variety of challenges; individual, instructional, and institutional-related challenges. All these interfered with their performance, delayed their completion, and caused others to drop out of their programmes.

Tamuliene (2014) holds that the psychological support of students falls under the non-academic support category of students support services but remains a precondition for students' achievement. He argues that since students' psychological well-being has been seen to have a strong bearing on their academic performance, institutions of higher learning must provide effective psychological support from the day students enroll until they graduate. Offering effective psychological support to students studying through distance education cannot be overemphasised. They are important to help students learn how to cope with learning from a distance and address individual challenges such as balancing work, caring for family and studying. The psychological service is also important to boost students' motivation, self-esteem, and confidence which are significant predictors of students' persistence and completion of their programmes.

Motivation has been identified as the main determinant for the academic success of students. Brophy (2013) defines motivation as a theoretical construct used to explain the initiation, direction, intensity, and persistence of behaviour, especially goal-oriented behaviour. This means that students who lack motivation are less likely to perform well in their academic studies. This is because there is no desire to initiate and direct their energy and focus to the academic work. In corroborating this view, Usher and Kober (2012) observed that high curriculum standards and instruction were less likely to benefit students who were not motivated unless the issue of their lack of motivation was thoroughly dealt with. Institutions of higher learning, therefore, need to improve students' psychological support services to ensure that issues of motivation were addressed.

Arifin 2016 explored the role of self-motivation in student persistence in the Indonesia Open University and the results showed that there was a significant relationship between

intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in ensuring student persistence in the Indonesia Open University. The overacting issue in Arifin's study was that students were motivated to study to learn new things and to get better career prospects. This suggests that if there is nothing new to learn, students are not motivated to enroll in a programme. Universities should constantly improve their curriculum to incorporate the latest innovations that would capacitate students with new ways of doing things, open better avenues and also enable those already in the job market to climb the corporate ladder. In that way, students will be motivated to enroll and also persevere to complete the programmes.

3.4 Technological Support

Technological support is essential both for the instructors and students. For teachers, technological support is needed to ensure that instructors have the resources and skills necessary to integrate technology in their teaching. For students, technological support helps in knowledge construction and skills necessary to meet their learning needs. Technological support includes "installation, operation, maintenance, network administration and security" (Sife, Lwoga, & Sanga, 2011:58).

The success of students in ODL depends on the level and various forms of technical support services available to them. Support systems have a direct impact on the success and quality of ODL (Mir, 2017). Without proper technology support of even the latest hardware and software, the ability of teachers and students to use technology could be compromised (Nawaz, & Khan,2012).

Additionally, at the institutional level, studies (Basak, Wotto, & Belanger, 2018). reveal that, technological problems are linked to the existence and support of the ICT (Information Communications Technology) support department in the institute. Students and instructors need continuous and timely help from the ICT support department, which is reportedly mostly unavailable (Chipembele, & Bwalya, 2016). Therefore, reliance on the ICT support department section and staff is a big issue for online learning users.

Since institutions face the challenge of providing technical support to an ever-increasing number of students, technology tools and resources are often underutilised, due to instructors' lack of self-confidence in using them (Abu-Shanab, Samara, & Ayari, 2020). Furthermore, instructors are sometimes frustrated when they try to incorporate technology in their teaching then it does not work, also they realise they do not have time or skills to fix it. If this happens on several occasions, they may abandon the technology. Nevertheless, every classroom has skilled personnel waiting to be tapped, in the form of students. Some institutions are recognising this and putting these underemployed students to work in student technological support. Institutions can establish organised student-run technology support programs. The students provide both Instructors and other students with the help they need. As a result, students gain a valuable range of new technology skills.

3. 5 Online learning support

Online learning support has an important central role in ODL where students are geographically distant from teachers and the institution. Students might feel isolated and disconnected. Hence, it is important to support students' emotional well-being together

with technical support for participation and engagement in online learning (Hodge, 2020). For social-constructivist principles to work, students need to feel confident as independent learners. The learners are encouraged to engage in collaborative learning, which promotes peer-to-peer interaction, peer-to-instructor interaction, and foster community interaction. This is true whether learning takes place in physical or online spaces (Salmon, 2011). However, extra attention should be given to nurturing these attributes in online spaces because there is a lack of social and cultural signals that are normally transmitted in face-to-face learning.

ICT readiness of the learners of the ODL system in Africa (Mafenya, 2013) shows that the learners indicate a low degree of ICT readiness so far as computers are concerned, but the readiness is high in the case of mobile learning (Chaka & Govender 2017). Efforts have been made to design intelligent applications such as Chatbots (Clarizia, Colace, Lombardi, Pascale & Santaniello, 2018) to manage communication and furnish the right answers to the student. Using their mobile devices, applications such as the Chatbot can become a tool for the first level of support in online learning.

Moreover, to have a better opportunity for success in their studies, ODL learners need access to more than course content and effective teaching. For courses that involve practical work or collaborative learning, online learning can prove to be a challenge. This is where innovative approaches are required from ODL practitioners. An online portal can be designed that provides students with access to digital design tools such as Microsoft Office, and others (Hodge, 2020). The main benefit being that students who cannot access the institution's computer labs physically can gain access to the same programs from home or the workplace.

4.1 Support for vulnerable students

The promotion of inclusive education by international agencies and governments has seen vulnerable learners including those living with disabilities finishing school education and proceeding to higher education. This increased access to higher education has created a need for Higher education institutions to create inclusive environments and adopt inclusive pedagogies. One way to achieve this is by providing effective student support to vulnerable learners.

Brokenshire (2020) broadly defines a vulnerable student as a young person who requires extra support with their education. According to Brokenshire, vulnerable students could be students with special educational needs and disabilities, mental or physical health issues, behavioural difficulties or emotional disturbance, or students who are in difficult circumstances such as from a low-income background. Similarly, Bialobrzeska, Randell, Hellmann and Winkler (2012:4) define a vulnerable learner "as someone who has no access or limited access to basic needs such as sufficient and nutritious food, shelter, adequate clothing, a safe home and community environment free from abuse and exploitation, family care and support, good health care, and the ability to take full advantage of available education opportunities". Vulnerable students can be described as those students who need assistance to access education, participate and succeed.

Like any other student, vulnerable children deserve a high-quality education, and it is crucial, therefore, that those who require additional support have access to it (Brokenshire, 2020). Vulnerable children need support in terms of access and attainment (Kendall & Kinder, 2007). It is argued that the first step in supporting vulnerable children is to identify them (Brokenshire, 2020). Managing information about vulnerable learners and their needs is an integral part of an overall plan to respond proactively to their needs and support requirements (Bialobrzeska et al., 2012:8). The information has to be accurate and reliable to enable institutional management to use resources wisely and to implement appropriate support. It is important, therefore, for educational institutions to identify vulnerable students and then give them the appropriate necessary support for them to succeed. The state of vulnerability for students may be temporary or permanent. For example, those with disabilities may require extra support on a more permanent basis. One effective way to support vulnerable students is offering flexibility because students have varying needs, and they learn at differing rates and in different ways (Brokenshire, 2020).

With online learning becoming mandatory due to the Covid-19 pandemic, Drane, Vernon, and O'Shea (2020) observed that the pandemic has indicated that online learning is possible, but vulnerable students would need support for them not to be disadvantaged. They assert that " for students who are unable to access or sustain the necessary engagement in online learning, the support of other learning options is essential to ensure equity for all students" Drane et al., 2020: 14).

Students with disabilities benefit from specialized support and services to differentiate instruction within online programs. Deschaine (2018) notes that there is a need to consider how students with different special needs will be catered for in any academic programme and this consideration should be made at the planning and implementation of a programme. Catering for students with special needs is mandatory for all programmes whether they are offered through face-to-face instruction or online. Students who are affected by disabilities have an important perspective related to their own learning needs and abilities, and their voice needs to be heard. They need to have the opportunity to express the ways that their learning abilities and challenges can influence the development of a quality support program developed for the online and blended learning platforms.

As institutions offer online learning programmes there is a need to professionally develop course instructors to offer online support for students with disabilities. As noted by Greer, Smith, and Basham (2014) most course instructors are unable to support students with disabilities online. Institutions should put in place measures to identify the students' special needs in online distance learning and offer the appropriate support including providing assistive devices where they are required (Crouse, Rice & Mellard, 2018). To this end, every distance learning institution must operate with a disability centre where students with disabilities are adequately assisted.

4.2 Administrative support

Administrative support is another important aspect that accounts for the success of university students in general but it is more essential for open and distance students in particular since they are geographically separated from the institution, their peers, and their course lecturers. The institution needs to ensure that all information students may need is readily available for collection if they can do so and on stipulated websites and

learning management systems. Kumtepe et. al (2018) hold that information regarding registration, scholarship status, academic calendar, organisation of examination and other administrative contents should be available for students any time they need it. Moreover, institutions should ensure that administrative staff has the necessary technical and administrative capability to support ODL students to create memorable learning experiences. They further advise that as an administrative support measure, institutions should put in place technical help desks and call centres that students can access and get the needed help.

Mlay (2013) states that for an effective open and distance learning system, institutions should establish effective regional centres that would offer administrative support to students and avoid them being overwhelmed by the processes involved in the admission process, registration up to the delivery of the programme. She argues that providing effective administrative support services is congruent with the principles of Open and Distances Learning; accessibility, flexibility, and cost-effectiveness. According to Mlay (2013), the regional centres are an extension of the institution, and their administration to some extent has a bearing on the success and failure of a programme. One may argue that as much as regional centres are important in offering administrative support to ODL students, institutions often lack the funds to ensure the effective operation of regional centres. They often depend on part-time employees from the centres as they lack the funds to employ full-time administrators for the centres. Moreover, the centres may not have the necessary hardware and software for students to use.

Also, administrative support that pertains to the programme of study may include comprehensive information on the programme of studies such as availability of course outlines, schedule of activities in the year, mode of learning to be followed in the programmes, course modules, and timetables (Fluke, O'Connor, Strawhun & Peterson, 2014). Another means of general administrative support advocated for by Sarkhel, 2014) is publicity and promotion of ODL programmes to equip prospective students with necessary information even before they register. This would ease anxiety and stress upon registration as students would have the necessary information on what open and distance learning entails.

5.1 Conclusions

Students' support services are essential for an effective and sustainable open and distance learning system in any institution. They play a major role in motivating students to persist in their programmes and ultimately, develop a culture of lifelong learning. ODL institutions, therefore, should develop a student support model that caters to various students' needs; academic, psychological, administrative, and technological.

The foregoing discussion has made it clear that student support is important in ensuring improved student retention in distance learning institutions. Student support services should be systematic, suitable, and well-planned. It is also vital to offer holistic student support services that address the social, emotional, academic, technological, and other needs of the students. The different theories underpinning student support services assist the ODL practitioners in planning and implementing student support programmes that

address the felt needs of the distance education students. The current transition of higher education institutions to online delivery due to the Covid-19 pandemic call for the need for online support for students to reduce the digital divide causing disparities in education access. Institutions of higher learning providing distance education also require to accommodate all students by identifying vulnerable students and supporting them. Access to higher education without success becomes a challenge in addressing social justice through education.

5.2 Recommendations

Given the issues raised in this discussion paper, the following recommendations are made;

- For ODL institutions to thrive, there is a need to revamp the student support services to align with the principles of open and distance learning.
- ODL practitioners should have a clear and detailed understanding of what student support entails to plan and implement effective support systems that cater to students' diverse needs.
- Student support services provided for students in distance education institutions should be informed by some proven theories.
- ODL institutions should offer a wide range of student support services to address the diverse needs of students.
- Online and technological support is important in assisting students to access and participate in online learning.
- Academic support should be an integral component of a distance education institution's student support systems.

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