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An Analysis of Student Support Services for the Completion of Studies by Distance Students at the Centre for Open, Distance, and e-Learning of the University of Namibia

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ABSTRACT

The Centre for Open, Distance and eLearning (CODeL) at the University of Namibia (UNAM) implemented a student support system to assist students in meeting their personal and academic needs. However, despite this effort, distance students at UNAM do not always complete their studies on time. This article reports on the results of a study that analysed the student support services towards the completion of studies by distance students at CODeL. The study adopted a mixed method approach with a case study design and a questionnaire as well as an interview guide to collect data from 60 students and 15 staff members respectively. The study findings show that face-to-face Saturday classes and vacation school were the most popular student support services provided by UNAM, and these services offer students the opportunity to meet lecturers, ask questions, learn about module content, and receive administrative support. However, the support services at CODeL were inadequate. The areas of CODeL's student support services that need improvement include communication, systems, study material and support services. The recommendations address the need for administrative staff to improve communication with students, that academic staff should undergo annual capacity building workshops, respond to student inquiries on time, and receive training on how to provide personalised feedback on student enquiries. In turn, students should bargain for the best student support services through student representation.

Keywords: Student support services, Completion of studies, Distance students, Student progress, CODeL

1. INTRODUCTION

The Commonwealth of Learning (COL) was created by the Commonwealth Heads of Government to encourage the development and sharing of open learning and distance education knowledge, resources, and technologies. Members of the COL are Botswana, Cameroon, Eswatini, Gambia, Ghana, Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Nigeria, Rwanda, Seychelles, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Tanzania, Togo, Uganda and Zambia. A review of literature shows that COL, as a capacity builder, is helping to develop nations by improving access to quality education and training (Ally & Wark, 2019). COL plays an important role in the promotion of knowledge equity, as it is mandated to function as an enabler, capacity builder and catalyst for higher education within the Commonwealth nations. Nekongo-Nielsen et al. (2008) explain that COL has assisted education ministries to formulate policies and practices pertaining to distance education.

As a member of COL, Namibia has embraced and implemented the mode and practice of distance education as one of the means to offer higher education opportunities to the population (Hummel, 2010). The view held by the authors of the present article is that distance education is a mode of education that can make it possible for Namibia to realise the goals of equity, access, quality and democracy, as outlined in the document

titled *Towards Education for All: A Development Brief for Education, Culture and Training* (Namibia, Ministry of Education, 1993). This idea appears to be aligned with the formulation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), in particular, SDG 4, subsection 4.7: to *ensure inclusive and equitable quality* education *and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all* (Tang, 2015).

The University of Namibia (UNAM), an institution of higher education that was established by an act of Parliament, established the Centre for External Studies (CES) in 1992. This centre later became known as the Centre for Open, Distance and eLearning (CODeL). The name change occurred when UNAM merged the Centre for External Studies (CES) and the Centre for eLearning and Interactive Multimedia (CeLIM) in 2016. One of the reasons for doing so was because CES was print-based. The integration of eLearning and Interactive Multimedia into CES meant that it would henceforth serve students from all corners of the country, who would be able to study through distance education using online learning management systems.

Distance education is not always an easy endeavour, especially if there are no student support services. Nsamba and Makoe (2017) assert that student support services are designed to overcome student learning difficulties. Most UNAM students who are enrolled on distance education struggle to complete their courses on time. Kaur (2016) views student support services as a factor that is important in breaking the isolation that distance education students may experience while studying. Despite this understanding, there is no empirical record at UNAM's CODeL about the contribution made by student support services to ensure that distance students' progress and complete their studies.

1.1 Problem Statement and Research Questions

Institutions of higher learning should understand the need to provide support to students enrolled in different programmes of study (Sundy, 2017). The role of student support services is to assist students in handling academic challenges. At the University of Namibia, CODeL has a system of student support that assists students in meeting the personal and academic needs of distance education students. These student support services are set out in the prospectus (University of Namibia, 2018). However, distance students at UNAM do not always complete their studies in the given time. For example, in 2009, 120 students registered for CODeL's degree programmes, but only 16 students completed their studies by 2015 (R. Ihemba, personal communication, June 15, 2018). Distance students are expected to complete degree programmes/courses in a minimum of four years, and they are given a maximum of eight years. One of the reasons why students fail to complete their programmes on time is that they do not make adequate use of support services. This view is supported by Cummings (2014), who claims that students often underutilise the available support services.

Möwes (2008) undertook a study that focused on student support services offered to distance education students in the Faculty of Education in the northern regions of Namibia and concentrated on distance students who studied education. Möwes's study concentrated on the effectiveness of the student support systems that were offered by CES, concentrating on students who were based at UNAM's northern campus (Ondangwa East and Ondangwa West). Students were enrolled for Bachelor of Education degrees. The study concentrated on the role that student services played in the completion of studies by distance education students at the UNAM's CES. Möwes argues that the success of any distance learning programme depends on a university's responsiveness to educational needs and the expectations of students. The study findings being reported in the current paper differ from those of Möwes (2008) because the present study focussed on distance students all over the country and includes the views and perspectives of staff members at CODeL. The current study, therefore, responds to the lacunae that was not addressed by Möwes (2008).

In view of the foregoing, the purpose of this paper is to report on the results of a study that analysed student support services that were intended to help distance students to complete their studies at the CODel of UNAM. The following research questions were developed to facilitate an understanding of the research problem:

What types of student support services are mostly used by distance students of the CODeL of UNAM?
How effective are student support services for distance students at the CODeL of UNAM?
What areas of student support services need improvement at the CODeL of UANM?

2. THEORETICAL AND EMPIRICAL REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The literature review section provides a theoretical review and thematic review. The theoretical review discusses the theories chosen to guide the study, while the historical review reports on a case study from South Africa.

2.1 Theoretical framework

The study to analyse the student support services to encourage timely completion of studies by distance students at the CODeL of the University of Namibia was underpinned by retention theory, which is discussed in relation to its originators, meaning, characteristics and relevance to the study.

Draper (2008) explains that Vincent Tinto introduced retention theory in 1987. The retention theory explains how students can stay in a course from the first year until they graduate. Tinto (2003) observed that students remained enrolled with an institution only when there was a match between students' academic goals and what the institution had to offer. Tinto (2000) points out the conditions that promote retention, namely, the provision of academic, personal, and social support. These support functions show that students are valued, and the support function is achieved through the introduction of frequent contact with students. Tinto's integration model is presented in Figure 1.

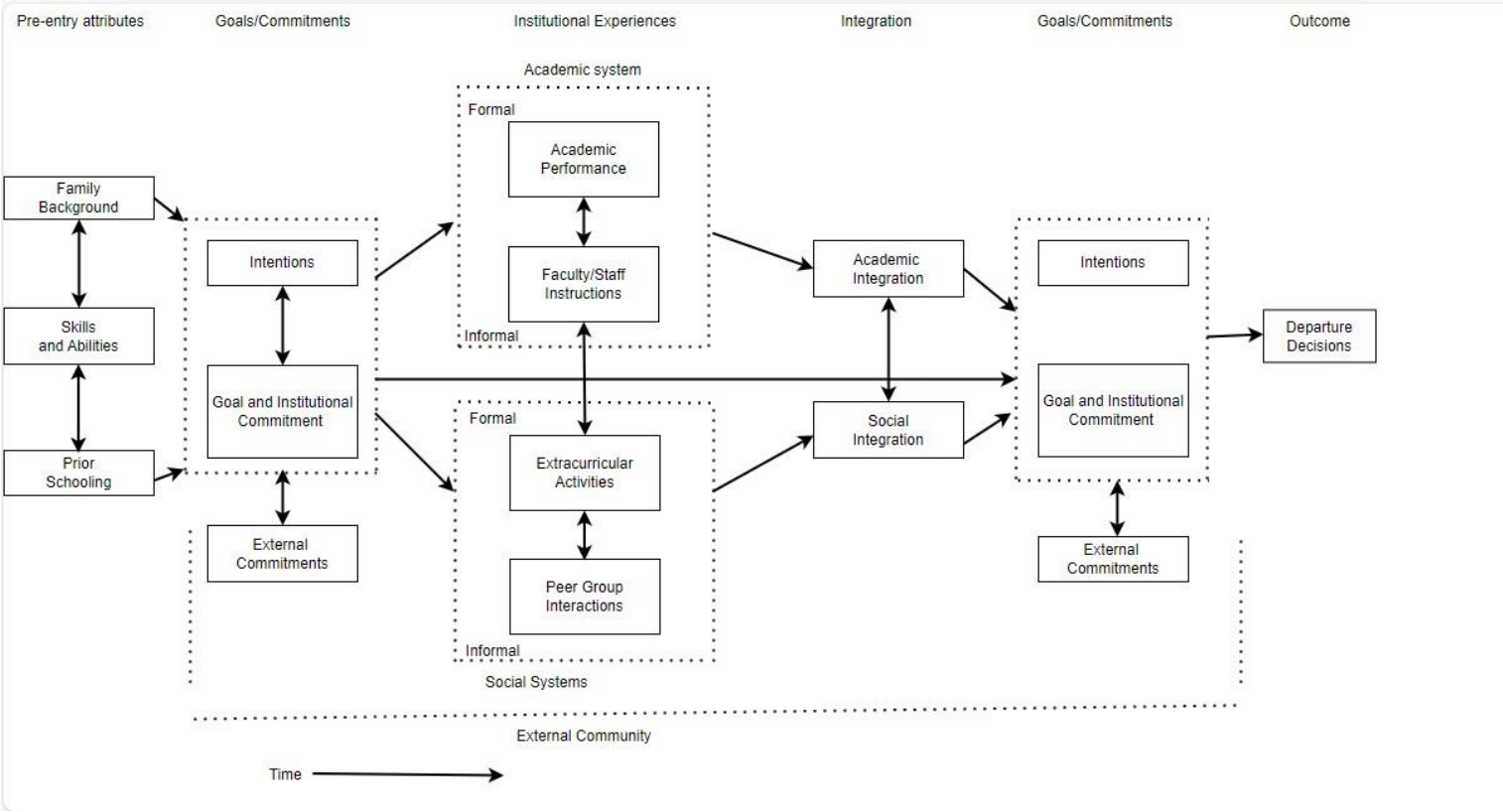

Figure 1. Tinto's integration model

Source: Adapted from Tinto (1993)

The left-hand side of Figure 1 lists **Pre-entry Attributes**, which include family background, skills and attributes, and prior schooling, which will, in the end, determine if a student will be able to persist and stay with the institution. Roberts (2018) explains that pre-entry education experience is a major contributor to student success. Secondly, goals and institutional commitments represent a strong sense of purpose – if students do not set goals for themselves, they are unlikely to be committed to achieving an educational goal; therefore, greater effort might be needed to motivate students to learn. The notion of **Institutional Experiences** indicated in Figure 1 refers to the way academic and administrative staff interact with students to promote commitments that create conditions conducive to student satisfaction (Rizkallah & Seitz, 2017). Academic and social integration refers to student assimilation into an institution and students' responses to institutional goals (Strayhorn, 2018). Social integration occurs when there is interaction with other members of a community of practice; therefore, it refers to the extent to which a student interacts with staff and other students at a university.

Retention theory directed the present study, and it helped the researchers to establish the types of integration that could be set in motion to retain students and help them to continue learning. The types of integration are academic and social integration, which would indicate that students are able to integrate into an institution and are able to respond to institutional goals. The institution needs to understand how student support services can assist to ensure student retention so that the completion rate can be improved.

2.2 Empirical review of literature

The purpose of this section is to present a case from the University of South Africa (Unisa).

2.2.1 University of South Africa student support services

Arko-Achemfour (2017) investigated the access challenges that students face in their open distance learning mode of study at Unisa. The study reveals several support services at Unisa, which are as follows: face-to-face support, which includes orientation of students in their first year, group tutorials, weekend tutorials and individual help from tutors, guidance and counselling, communication and technologies, and regional hubs, where students can access computers or an ICT service. Moreover, Unisa has a learning portal called MyUnisa, where students can submit their assignments, check their financial statements, and access marks (Aralu, 2014). The author explains that Unisa has regional hubs that students use to access student support services and obtain textbooks, study materials and information about student finance, billing information and student fee payments (Arko-Achemfour, 2017).

Despite the availability of student support systems, Arko-Achemfour (2017) explains that not all functions are used by students. One of the reasons that contributed to the scenario is related to students' poor computer literacy and skills. Another challenge is that though most support services are in place at UNISA and at its regional offices, most students live in rural areas, therefore, they are not able to access the available student support services adequately, thereby impacting their studies and progress.

2.2.2 Lessons learnt from the case study of student support services offered by Unisa

Student support services require adequate planning and need to be aligned with learners' needs. It appears that the establishment of study centres in areas where students live and work can provide access to support services. From the Unisa case study, it can be reasoned that the presence of support services does not guarantee the completion of studies within the specified time frame. There are other impediments that students experience, such as the available student support services, having a low level of accessibility, some students not being aware of the available student support services, and support services being located far from students.

The student support services at Unisa focused on the challenges that students face in accessing student support services. It appears that there were challenges regarding student support services, challenges on the university side, as well as challenges from the student side. For example, a university might offer all the student support services, but students might not be able to access the available student support services. Also, universities might not be able to roll out all available student support services due to limited resources. A university can have a support service, but the level of accessibility might be low.

3. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

3.1 Research methods

A mixed method approach was used. This is an approach that involves the collection of qualitative and quantitative data sets (Shorten & Smith, 2017) to gain an understanding of the study phenomenon. The quantitative part of this research presented and analysed numerical data relating to the student support services for distance education students at the CODeL of UNAM. The main instrument for collecting the quantitative data set was a questionnaire. The qualitative, non-numerical data comprised the opinions and views of participants about student support services for distance students at CODeL of UNAM. The main instrument for collecting this data set was an interview guide.

This study also used a case study approach to analyse student support services. According to Yin (2014), a case study is an inquiry that mostly investigates a contemporary phenomenon in its real-life context. A case study has the benefit of enabling the exploration of a variety of contexts relating to a case and can be used to explore complex research questions. This approach was chosen because it can capture the reality of participants' situations in both qualitative and quantitative research designs. The participants who took part in the study were familiar with the role of student support services for the completion of studies by distance students at the CODeL of UNAM.

3.2 Population, sample, and sampling procedures

The population of the study consisted of all 510 students of CODeL who were not progressing, as measured by the extended time they were taking to complete their courses, plus a target population of 17 full-time staff members at CODeL. Therefore, the total population of the study was 527 respondents. The sample comprised 60 students and 15 staff members. The researchers used a combination of purposive sampling and simple random sampling for staff and students, respectively. Purposive sampling was used because the researchers selected staff members whom the researchers believed were experienced and had insights and knowledge about student support services for distance students. The following mathematical formula was used, which is related to the manual calculation in Table 1:

$$\frac{Z^2\,X\,P\,(1-P)}{e^2}$$

$$1 + (\frac{Z^2 X\,P\,(1-P)}{e^2\,N}$$

Table 1: Data values to determine the sample size

Particulars	Values (Students)
Population size	510
Margin of error	10% = 0.10%
Confidence level	90% Z value = 1.65
Population proportion if unknown use 50%	0.50%
Calculated sample size	60

Based on the calculated sample size, simple random sampling was used to select the calculated sample size of 60 students. The simple random sampling allowed the researchers to generate a class list of students from the institutional database. Thereafter, one of the researchers cut individual names from a piece of paper, folded the pieces of paper which consisted of student names and student numbers, and then the folded papers were put in a bowl. One of the researchers randomly picked the papers, one by one, until the sample size of 60 was reached.

3.3 Data collection procedures, data analysis and ethical considerations

Data was collected using a questionnaire and an interview guide. A questionnaire was administered to students, and the interview guide was used to collect data from staff members. The researchers drafted the questionnaire using Google Forms (https://forms.gle/BSNRHn99R3qt73ay7). The questionnaire was distributed to respondents via email. The questionnaire could be viewed and completed on a smartphone. The qualitative data were collected by visiting the staff members in their offices after appointments had been made and interviewing them. One of the researchers took notes while interviewing the participants. Staff members who were not near the campus or at regional offices were interviewed telephonically.

The quantitative data were imported into Excel sheets, percentages were calculated, and figures, bar charts and pie charts were generated. The qualitative data were analysed using content analysis. The researcher looked for words and phrases and repetitions whilst analysing the primary data, and identified the most used ones and assigned codes to them. Data that had been assigned codes were added to Excel to count the occurrence of words and then converted into percentages.

Before data collection, ethical clearance was obtained from the UNAM's Centre for Research Services. Thereafter, a research permission letter was obtained from the Deputy Director of the CODeL of UNAM, which allowed one of the researchers to collect data. The participants were informed in advance about the purpose of the study and their right to withdraw from the study at any time without any penalty. Participants were also informed about how they would benefit from the study. The introductory part of the questionnaire read, "Please note that participation in this survey is voluntary", whilst at the beginning of the interviews, the participants were informed in advance that participation in the study was voluntary.

3.4 Presentation of data

The data were collected from 60 students who were not progressing and completing their studies and who had overstayed their courses. Data were also collected from 15 staff members who were providing student support services to students at CODeL. The data collected provided answers to the research questions.

Support services used most by students.

The following are the student support services which staff reported as most used by students:

Staff views on the most used student support services by students

- Face-to-face and Saturday lectures.
- Vacation school, because that is when students can see the lecturers, ask questions and learn about the subject or module content; and
- Administrative support, as most student enquiries are about administrative matters, such as their registration, missing assignments and exam marks.

The types of student support services that staff viewed as the most used by students were face-to-face and Saturday lectures, vacation school and administrative support. In general, these responses show that students value face-to-face or contact sessions. It appears that administrative support services were utilised to make inquiries about registrations, missing assignments and exam marks. One of the staff members remarked the following:

> *On a daily basis, I receive students who are inquiring - they are inquiring about their modules not registered under a right block code, a module not linked on Moodle and students inquiring about their missing exam marks.*

Reasons why students accessed certain types of support services
Students provided several reasons for accessing the support reported by the staff.

Box 1: Reasons students gave for accessing certain types of support
- Face-to-face will help me to understand well where I have difficulties and during vacation school, lecturers provide notes as in our study guides there is not enough information.
- Administrative support is always there. I find administrative support very effective.
- Vacation school for better improvement on our studies.

Box 1 lists the reasons students provided for using the student support services, and it shows the benefits students get from the support services being offered. According to Tinto's retention theory (1987), academic and administrative staff need to interact with students, as doing so promotes commitment for students to progress and complete their studies. Furthermore, it is regarded as a way to increase student satisfaction with the institution where they are registered. It is through student support services that students can interact with administrative staff to resolve their administrative inquiries and interact with academic staff, especially during vacation school, when they can attend face-to-face lectures.

Effectiveness of student support services to distance students at CODeL of UNAM views of students.
Lecturer availability for consultations (Information from students)
Figure 2 shows lecturer availability during consultation times.

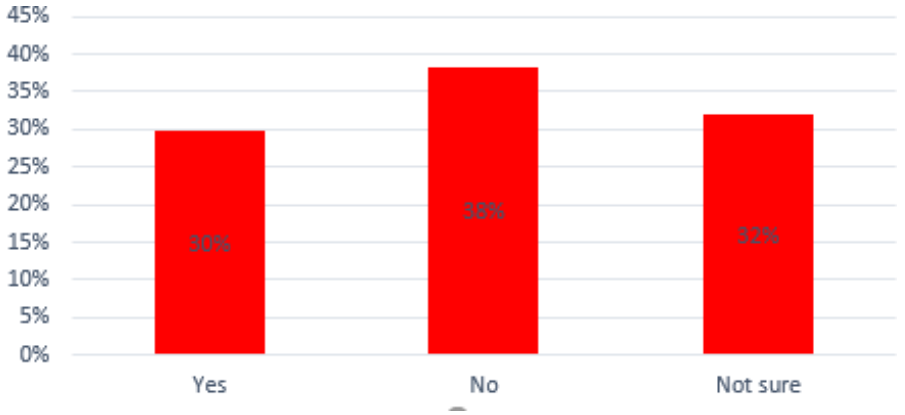

Figure 2. Lecturer availability during consultation hours at CODeL

Figure 1 indicates that the majority of students failed to find lecturers in their offices at the times indicated as office hours set for consultations. One of the students remarked:

> "I travelled all the way from Swakopmund to come and see one of our lecturers for research, and I waited for him during consultation hours only to waste my transport money as the lecturer was nowhere to be found."

However, some of the students (30%) reported meeting lecturers during consultation office hours. One of the students indicated the following:

> "I managed to find the lecturer in his office, but consultation time was limited as he had to go for a class."

There seems to be a significant percentage of students who were not sure if lecturers were available for consultation during office hours. One of the students indicated the following:

> "I don't use the support service [lecturer consultation]; therefore, I will not know if lecturers are available during consultation hours or not."

Students' views on the effectiveness of student support services at CODeL
Table 2 presents the students' views on the effectiveness of student support services provided by CODeL.

Table 2. Students' rating of the effectiveness of student support services

Rating of student support services at CODeL	Percentage
Poor	47.8%
Good	32.6%
Cannot say	19.6%

Total	**100**

Table 2 shows that most students (47.8%) viewed the support services provided as unfavourable, while a smaller percentage of 32.6% viewed the services as favourable. This seems to suggest that students have differing experiences of the effectiveness of support offered by CODeL. Box 2 details the reasons students gave for their negative views on the support.

Box 2: Reasons students gave for rating support services as poor

- They don't answer their office phones; they have an attitude when you approach their offices.
- They take long to attend to problems you email to them.
- Study materials are made available late to students.
- If you call a staff member at CODeL, you will be put on hold for a long time or even ignored.
- Important information reaches students very late.

Box 3 lists some of the reasons for the lack of effective support, ranging from lecturer attitudes and study materials not being available to failure to disseminate information.

Areas of student support services that need improvement at CODeL

Table 3 lists areas of student support services at CODeL that need improvement, according to the students.

Table 3. Areas of student support services that need improvement, as expressed by the students

Themes	Frequency	Percentage
Support services	17	41%
Communication	14	34%
Study materials	7	17%
System improvements	3	7%
Total	**41**	**100%**

Table 3 shows that support services, communication, study materials and systems are areas that require improvements. Further elaboration of the areas of improvement is expressed in Table 4.

Table 4. Elaboration on areas of student support services at CODeL according to the students

Area of support	Elaboration
Communication	Staff members should always reply to e-mails on time Attend to students' inquiries on time Telephones must always be answered Update information on time both on Moodle and on the student portal
System improvement	Moodle as a learning management system needs some attention. The system is not user-friendly. The University of Namibia should provide enough internet services and student computers to use at the university distance centres.
Study materials	Online and study materials should be made available to students on time Assignments should be uploaded on time so that the students can find time to do the assignments The material distribution department should be improved so that study materials are distributed immediately after registration, and materials should be distributed even on weekends to students. Study materials should be written before courses are run. They give us assignments when there are no study materials, saying that we must use books in the library.

Support services	Face-to-face Saturday classes should be introduced at all regional centres. There should be more time allocated for the vacation school. Decentralise all support services to the entire regional centres. Increase the number of tutors per module for prompt feedback on students' assignments.

Table 3 elaborates on aspects of student support services that require improvement. In terms of communication, the respondents seem to suggest that two-way communication between lecturers and students is needed. Lecturers should respond to emails, answer telephone calls and update course content on Moodle. Regarding system improvements, the respondents suggested a need to improve the learning management system by making it more user-friendly. Moreover, they recommended that the online and other study materials should be made available to students on time and that assignments should be uploaded in good time so that students have enough time to complete the assignments. Moreover, the department that is responsible for material distribution should be improved so that study materials are distributed immediately after registration, and these can even be distributed to students on weekends. Finally, students explained that face-to-face Saturday classes should be introduced at all regional centres and that more time should be allocated for the vacation school. In addition, the participants suggested a need to increase the number of tutors per module for prompt feedback on student assignments.

4. DISCUSSION OF DATA

The discussion of the data is centred on the types of student support services that are most used by the distance students of the CODeL at UNAM, how effective students rate support services, and the areas of student support services that need improvement.

4.1 Support services most used by students and are considered effective

The types of student support services used by students at the CODeL at UNAM are face-to-face lectures that usually take place on Saturdays and the vacation school, which usually takes place twice a year, for a week in April and a week in August. The students explained that it is through support services such as face-to-face and Saturday classes that students get an opportunity to see lecturers face to face and ask questions about module content. Another student support service that is used by the students is administrative support. Administrative support provides students with the opportunity to enquire about administrative matters such as registration, missing assignments and exam marks. For example, at times, students are not always able to register on the self-service system; therefore, they would call or email administrative support staff to assist them with registration.

Regarding face-to-face Saturday lectures and the vacation school, the findings confirm the findings of Nsamba (2016), who was of the view that Saturday face-to-face lectures are usually organised for complex modules that the university believes students find difficult and are attended by a lot of students. Du Plessis et al. (2016) affirm that the most used student support service is vacation school. They further report that students always asked permission from their employers to travel to where lectures would be presented. Though students attend face-to-face lectures, Saturday classes and the vacation school, there are challenges regarding the support services faced by both students and the institution. For example, Shikulo and Lekhetho (2020) point out that vacation lectures are at times poorly attended by students, as well as by tutors or lecturers. Lecturers tend to forget that they have to present vacation school lectures, and students end up searching for them in their offices.

4.2 Reasons why students prioritise certain types of support at CODeL

Participants gave their views on why some types of student support were preferred. They preferred face-to-face lectures, vacation school and administrative support. They were of the view that these forms of student support services provided an opportunity for students to interact with administrative and academic staff. Nsamba (2016) points out that interaction with lecturers has an impact on student performance; one of the participants in Nsamba's study narrated, "I obtained some distinctions after having physical interactions with my lecturers". The participant explained further that "interactions with the lecturers created enthusiasm to the whole group of students, interacting with the lecturers and hearing them speak motivated students" (Nsamba, 2016, p. 106). A study by Arifin (2018) found that students' preference for face-to-face tutoring is because it promotes interaction, which at the end helps students to understand the module content and promotes academic performance. Administrative support is regarded by the students as the starting point of interaction before they enrol for a course, and it continues until the student graduates. The study by Nsamba (2016) confirms the reasons why students find the administrative support service valuable as administrators assist students with registration, the dispatch of study materials, and the administration of tutorial lessons.

4.3 Effectiveness of student support at CODeL

The following were the support services that were judged as not effective at CODeL. Firstly, students mentioned telephone tutoring. Students expressed the view that lecturers were not available for this type of tutoring; at times, they did not answer their telephones to enable students to make a pre-arranged consultation session. Furthermore, this type of student support service requires a strong cell phone network, which is always a challenge for students based in rural areas, where network coverage is not always sufficient. This finding is aligned with Shikulo's (2018) study, which found that although the contact details of tutors and lecturers are given at the time of registration and appear in the tutorial letters, students do not make maximum use of this type of student support. One of the reasons is that some of the distance tutors do not work for the university full time and can only respond to inquiries after working hours. Moreover, students mentioned that lecturers' consultation hours were not effective. This mode (lecturer consultation) of student support service is underutilised, as few distance students are always on campus, and students who wish to make use of the service struggle to find lecturers in their offices. This study confirms the findings of the study by Shikulo (2018), who found that distance students find it difficult to find lecturers in offices to consult them on matters related to assignments.

4.4 Areas of student support services that need improvement

A need exists to improve the student support services that are most used by the students. The support services that require improvements are face-to-face lectures that should occur on Saturdays at all CODeL regional centres. The decentralisation of student support services enables students to make use of the support services at a centre nearest to them so that they do not have to travel to the main centre in Windhoek. Another area of student support that needs improvement is the vacation school, for which more time should be allocated to facilitate the coverage of module content. Generally, class duration is two hours per week per module, which students viewed as insufficient. This finding is supported by Shikulo (2018), who recommends that face-to-face tutoring as a student support service provided by universities must be continuously improved. Another student support service which requires improvement is the counselling services. Shikulo (2018) recommends that universities in Namibia that are offering distance courses should consider employing more student counsellors. Counsellors can be situated at the main campus (Windhoek) and provide counselling services online to students who are at UNAM centres across the country.

5. SUMMARY, RECOMMENDATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

This article presented and analysed data relating to student support services that are intended to facilitate the completion of studies by distance students at CODeL. The article reported on various student support services that were provided by CODeL. These include face-to-face and Saturday lectures, vacation school, and administrative support, which involve student inquiries on administrative matters, such as their registration, missing assignments and exam marks. These support services allow students to interact with administrative and academic staff, especially during the vacation school, where students can attend face-to-face lectures. However, the results seem to suggest that the student support services at CODeL were inadequate and ineffective. Some reasons for this are that lecturers and administrative staff did not answer their office phones, had negative attitudes when they were approached by students in their offices, and took too long to attend to problems when emailed by students. Moreover, study materials and important information often reach students very late.

Areas of student support services that need improvement at CODeL include communication, systems, study materials and support services**.** In terms of communication, it was suggested that two-way communication between lecturers and students is improved by lecturers responding to students' emails and answering telephone calls. System improvement relates to the need to improve the learning management system so that it is more user-friendly. With regards to study materials, a quick distribution of study materials is encouraged to enable students to complete assignments on time. The call for strengthening support services was mainly about the introduction of face-to-face lectures at all regional centres on Saturdays, the allocation of more time to the vacation school and the allocation of a greater number of tutors to each module so that they can mark and provide prompt feedback on student assignments.

Based on the results reported in this study, the following recommendations are made:

- CODeL administrative staff should improve communication with students because communication is a means by which students can be supported.

- Staff should be urged, through annual capacity-building workshops, to reply to all student inquiries on time; they should also be trained on how to provide personalised feedback.
- Student inquiries through emails and telephone calls or any inquiry in any form of communication must be responded to as quickly as possible.
- Students should be urged to bargain for the best student support services and must be urged to address any failure to provide support through student representation.

This study analysed the contribution of student support services to distance students' progress and completion of studies at CODeL. The researchers visualise a need for further studies that can be undertaken at UNAM to explore full-time students' support needs so that a balanced understanding of the needs of distance and full-time students can lead to remedies that ensure the full progression of all students towards the completion of their studies.

5.1 Conclusion

The aim of this article was to report the results of the study that analysed the contribution of student support services to distance students' progress and completion of their studies at CODeL at the University of Namibia. The need for distance education was explained. Student support services are an important component of distance education courses. The type of student support services that students at the CODeL used were face-to-face lectures on Saturdays, vacation school and administrative support. These types of support were preferred because face-to-face lectures on Saturdays and vacation school offer an opportunity to see the lecturers personally and to ask questions and learn more about the subject or module content. The administrative support provides an opportunity for students to inquire about administrative matters such as registration, missing assignments and exam marks.

The student support services provided by CODeL were not rated as effective. Telephone tutoring was not effective because lecturers could not be reached for telephone tutoring and because this support service requires the caller to have strong network coverage, which students did not always have. Student support relating to lecturers' consultation hours was also highlighted as not effective. This student support service is underutilised, as only a few distance students are readily available on campus, and those who may wish to consult a lecturer seldom find lecturers in their offices. The areas of student support services that need improvement are face-to-face and Saturday lectures, which should be available at all regional centres, and vacation schools as well as Saturday lectures, which require greater time allocation to facilitate the coverage of module content.

The recommendations that were made focus on the need for CODeL administration staff to improve communication with students because communication is a means by which students can be supported. It is also recommended that staff should, through annual capacity building workshops, be encouraged to reply to all student inquiries on time and they should receive training on how to provide personalised feedback. Moreover, students' email, telephonic or other enquiries must be responded to as quickly as possible. In the final analysis, it is recommended that students bargain for the best student support services through student representation.

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