

Assessment Of Student Support Services Rendered To Undergraduate Students At Selected Distance Education Institutions In Kenya

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Abstract: Learning through distance education (DE) requires special skills including time management, multitasking, self-regulation and independent learning skills. Few students enter into distance learning with the requisite skills that can mitigate DE demands including the impact of 'distance', isolation and competing needs. DE students need intentional support for both academic and non academic issues. 'The net generation' and 'digital natives' are now in college but with skills not automatically transferable to learning technologies. Information and communication technologies (ICT) providers are mostly focused on the 'use' rather than the 'user'. Universities are continuously adopting new technologies leaving the student bewildered as to the focus; learning or technology training. The internet has 'everything' with all sorts of information. The students are unable to focus or easily sieve relevant information.

Design and Objective: This was a quantitative survey study designed to assess the student support services available for distance learning undergraduate students in two universities in Kenya i.e. Northern University (NU) and Western University (WU).

Methods: Nine (9) components/indices of student support were tested through an online questionnaire. These were; registration procedures, orientation and skills training, ICT, counselling and mentorship, interactions and communication, feedback, regional centres and library, students association and representation and course progression and satisfaction.

Results: The main student support indices that distinguished the two universities were registration, ICT, counselling/mentorship and regional centres and libraries with *p* values of 0.008, 0.012, 0.036 and 0.015 respectively at 0.05 level of significance.

Conclusions: DE universities need to intentionally isolate and plan for student support services.

Key words: Distance education, Student support services, Student support indices, Student characteristics.

I. INTRODUCTION

Distance education (DE) continues to grapple with challenges of student registration, persistence, retention, attrition and success (Drake, 2011; Hawkins, Graham, Sudweeks, & Barbour, 2013; Subotzky & Prinsloo, 2011). Studies have shown that the provision of student support positively impacts on the foregoing challenges (Subotzky & Prinsloo, 2011). In Kenya, delivery of distance learning on recognisable scale has only happened in the last twenty (20) years (Nyerere, Gravenir, & Mse, 2012). Therefore, policies on

the practice of DE in individual universities are still under formulation and in some cases, completely lacking (Graber & Bolt, 2011). The results of this study intends to contribute to formulation of guidelines for best practice DE student support systems in Kenyan Universities. In addition, DE researches also need to move from studies that test technologies alone to those that test other variables which influence and drive DE (Hannum, 2009). Despite all available and changing technologies, distance educators are reminded that, in the heart of the whole digital experience, remains learning and that central to learning activities is the student (Gandhi, 2011). This

study focused on the student's characteristics, contextual needs and the interface that influences learning activities.

Some support e.g. face-face lectures, learning materials, physical cues, psychosocial presence are inbuilt while others e.g. information literacy, study skills, mentorship, counselling, guidance and tutorials have to be integrated intentionally. One difficulty for most universities adopting DE is whether to conceptualise student support structures as a subsystem or a complementary service. Most dual-mode universities have not equalised their commitment to student's needs (King, 2010). Often the off-campus students experience less support than their on-campus colleagues. Interactions and social relations (support), important elements that contribute to learning, are mostly, only available for on-campus students (Heo, Lim, & Kim, 2010). Student support consists of all the learning resources and processes that are generically designed for a particular student cohort based on the general societal trends and the perceived needs derived from students' profiles (Gunawardena et al., 2010). It also aims at reducing the transactional distance between the teacher, the student and the university. Other aims of student support include (Rangara-Omol, 2018):

- ✓ Provide guidance to enable the student to assess his/her capacity to engage in the DE course/program.
- ✓ Enable student growth, engagement and success through the provision of within-reach skills training, tutoring, guidance, counselling and mentoring services.
- ✓ Help the student to sustain his/her motivation and drive to persist through the life of the course/program leading to a successful completion and subsequent graduation.
- ✓ Reduce attrition rates and raise the institution's profile in its ability to attract and successfully graduate students through well designed and relevant programs.
- ✓ Provide a learning environment free of transactional barriers especially within communication, administration and any other transactions.

There are varying perspectives to the concept of student support (Jacklin & le Riche, 2009). Proponents view support as a necessity, partner, service and a component required by the student throughout the academic journey (Shillington, et al., 2012; Stevens & Kelly, 2012; Boyle, Kwon, Ross, & Simpson, 2010). Disapproving views believe that support implies the presence of problems experienced by students, requiring 'support' as the 'answer' to the problems. They argue that support involves pastoral care, vulnerability, uplifting the weak and patriarchal care with the existence of a superior overseeing the activities of a weak student such that the system is always seeking incidences or problems and encouraging dependency (Jacklin & le Riche, 2009). One study on student support, showed that students perceive support as a necessity and appreciate it's presence albeit not in the formats in which the university provides it (Jacklin & le Riche, 2009). The same study shows that students view other forms of support, which are sometimes not captured by the institution including family, friends and colleagues are very important (Jacklin & le Riche, 2009). Another study on the impact of student-to-student mentorship, concluded that support such as mentoring and guidance have positive impact on student persistence (Boyle et al., 2010).

Literature is scanty on student support provided to new students who have never before had a DE (Shillington et al., 2012). Students coming from backgrounds of teacher-centred learning methods definitely need an orientation on the paradigm shift they are about to experience upon admission into DE programmes (Tait, 2013). Many students entering distance learning for the first time may not have conceptualised the differences between face-to-face and distance learning formats. They are required to quickly move from dependency to independent learning and take personal control of all their studies. While varied student support services may be available for on-campus students, this study aimed at assessing the availability and accessibility of such support for registered undergraduate students of DE. There is need, for DE universities to inform and be prepare solutions to foreseeable challenges for their students (Lentell, 2012).

This study was conducted in two universities in Kenya with pseudonyms of Western University (WU) and Northern University (NU). Both are full accredited public universities. They are supported by government funding and the students are admitted through the national joint admissions board (JAB). The universities' websites were easily accessible online from various search engines and also from direct web addresses. The web pages and learning management systems (LMS) for DE were also accessible through the main university website. In WU, the directorate of DE was commissioned in September 2014 under the name of directorate for open, distance and e learning (ODEL). Because undergraduate DE programs had been in existence for the previous three (3) years in the school of nursing, ODEL was formally established to expand the scope of DE in the university as a platform to involve more departments. At the time of this study, there were four (4) more undergraduate programs already running under ODEL.

NU was founded in the year 2001, gazetted in October 1990 and rolled out its first e learning courses in 2011, eight (8) years after the initial plan. Previously, the university, in 2007 had planned and implemented print-based DE on small scale. During that time, the senate had resolved to embrace open and distance learning (ODL). But as revision of plans continued, new ideas and formats of DE emerged. Later, the university purchased videoconferencing equipment with the intention of using it as the main component of DE. However, all these did not fully take off until 2011 when a formal DE directorate was established under the name of E campus. The new directorate implemented DE programs based on web based / e learning formats.

II. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following are the specific research questions that guided this study;

- ✓ To what extent are support services available to undergraduate students of distance education upon registration?
- ✓ What support indices can constitute the formulation of guidelines for student support systems for new students of distance education?

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN

This study was a survey design using quantitative methods of data collection. Information was gathered from registered undergraduate students of DE courses in two universities in Kenya. Purposive sampling was used to identify the participating universities. A total of 21 application letters were sent to DE universities and the first two that responded within the time frame were selected for the study. An online questionnaire link was sent to the students through their email addresses compiled from the directorate of ODEL in both universities. The first page of the questionnaire contained the consent form. The questionnaire was configured so that the respondent could not progress to the second page in the absence of consent. Census sampling (all consenting undergraduate students of DE) was used to identify the participating students. This was in consideration of the total student populations and the shortfalls associated with online surveys. Other sampling techniques such as random samples were not applicable due to the varied geographical location of the students and the unlikeliness of having them together in one venue.

Nine (9) common indicators of student support structures requisite for newly registered students in DE were compiled from previous studies. The indicators, also referred to as indices, were identified from five (5) universities; University of Ulster, National Distance Education Centre of Ireland, University Teknologi of Malaysia, University of Southern Mississippi and University of South Africa (Alias & Rahman, 2012; Lorenzi, MacKeogh & Fox, 2012; O'Donnell, Sloan & Mulholland, 2012; Zawacki-Richter, 2012; Ward, Peters & Shelley, 2010; Oosthuizen, Leodolf & Hamman, 2010). The indices were:- 1) Registration procedures 2) Orientation programme and skills training 3) Technology and learning materials 4) Counselling and mentorship 5) Interactions and communication 6) Feedback 7) Regional centres and library 8) Students association and representation 9) Course progression and satisfaction. The quantitative data was analysed using online survey monkey software and exported to Microsoft Excel and SPSS version 23 for descriptive and inferential analyses.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

This study showed variations in the availability of student support components in the two universities: Western University (WU) and Northern University (NU).

University	Student Population	Sample (all undergraduate students)	Questionnaires returned	Questionnaires for this study
WU	300+	135	44	36
NU	1000+	103	60	54
TOTAL	1300+	235	104	N =90

Table 1: Demographics of Survey Participants

		Mean	Std. Error Mean	t	sig
Regis Process	WU	11.0516	.35125	2.708	.008
	NU	12.0206	.17536		
Orientation1	WU	17.5127	.72923	1.973	.052

	NU	19.0010	.38616		
ICT1	WU	11.2895	.35803	2.557	.012
	NU	12.3859	.25661		
CM1	WU	15.8185	.46675	2.130	.036
	NU	14.5488	.37241		
IntCom1	WU	13.2326	.40442	.994	.323
	NU	13.6649	.23416		
Regional1	WU	11.3057	.70411	2.477	.015
	NU	13.3382	.47845		
STDFBK1	WU	11.4179	.44540	.643	.522
	NU	11.8050	.39124		
SAR1	WU	8.1907	.31206	.891	.376
	NU	7.8276	.25843		
CPS1	WU	20.2382	.64564	1.725	.088
	NU	21.6040	.48402		

Table 2: Rotated Components by Principal Component Analysis

Results showed that support services were available at both universities, but there were certain challenges with facilitation and their use. There were variations and differences in ratings on accessibility and/or effectiveness. The main characteristics that distinguished the two universities were registration process, ICT, counselling / mentorship and regional centres and library where the t-test showed significant differences between them (Table 2). The p values were 0.008, 0.012, 0.036 and 0.015 respectively at 0.05 level of significance. In all of them, NU had a relatively high mean score than WU except for the index of counselling and mentorship. This corroborates the results in the descriptive statistics for individual indices illustrated in the figures 1 to 9. In the registration, ICT, Counselling/ Mentorship and regional centres and libraries support indices, the absolute percentage scores indicated differences between individual indices and between the universities. The differences were statistically significant not in one being better than the other but mostly in the scale of dissatisfaction by respondents. This however, did not exempt, orientation and skills training, interactions and communications, student association and representation, feedback and course progression and satisfaction. All the indices had internal strengths and weaknesses.

Individual indices were analysed from data with the following measurements:

Key: Strongly agree = 5, agree = 4, neither =3, disagree = 2 and strongly disagree =1.

Always =5, Often = 4, Sometimes = 3, Rarely = 2 and Never = 1.

Western University = University 1 and Northern University = University 2

Registration Process: Students from both universities seemed pleased with the services in this support. However, there were differences in absolute percentages. The universities' application procedures outlined the prerequisites for registration. There were numerous online links from which prospective students could access information for applications and registration. At both universities, there was the assumption

that students would be computer-literate in order to access the information index.

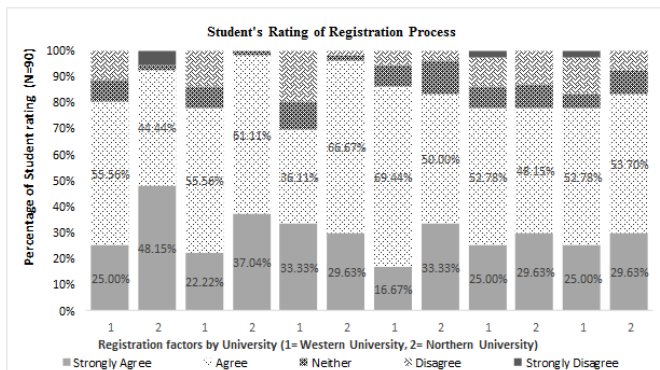


Figure 1: Student's Rating of Registration Process

Figure 1 indicates slight differences in the ratings on registration processes. Both universities seemed to have provided sufficient registration information to students with scores of over 90% (n=90) for 4. Understanding the registration process (question 4) had the highest indication that students encountered some problems in this index. Here, up to 20% (n=36) of students in WU rated 1 while in NU the same was rated by less than 5% (n=54) of the students. In receiving guidance to the registration process (question 6), students from both universities indicated equivalence at about 80% (n=90) for combined score of 4 and above.

Orientation and skills training: The universities differed in the modalities of providing this support. In WU, the student was expected to travel on campus for orientation and skills training while in NU, the student was expected to take it online. In WU, orientation was not stated as mandatory and the student could proceed to the learning phase even without it. In NU, on the other hand, orientation was mandatory and gradable. The student had to attain an acceptable pass grade before proceeding to the learning phase. Skills training was lacking for both universities with students showing no definitive answer as to whether or not they received training of skills.

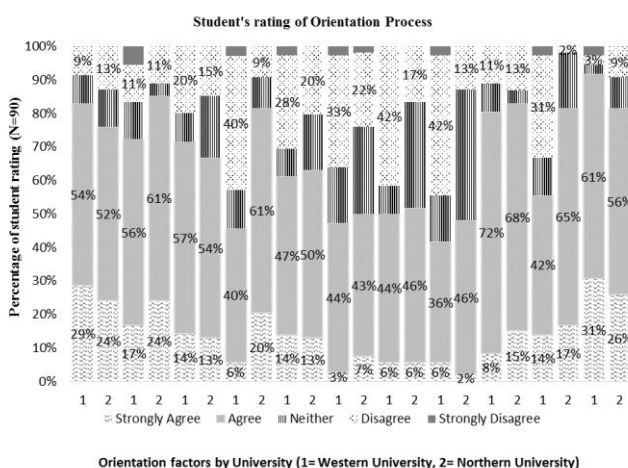


Figure 2: Student's rating of Orientation Process

Figure 2 indicates that the highest rating on 5 for both WU and NU was on the fourth (4th) indicator in orientation on how and where to access help which scored 31% (n=36) and 26% (n=54) respectively. The highest rating for both universities was in orientation to examinations and assignments (question

9) which scored 72% (n=36) and 68% (n=54) on 4 for WU and NU respectively. Other than this, there seemed to be a wide variation in the ratings on the orientation indicators. The lowest rating indicating dissatisfaction was orientation to study groups (question 8). Here, 45% (n=36) of respondents in WU scored 2 and below while the same recorded 13% (n=54) of those at NU giving a difference of 22%. The highest disparity between Universities was in orientation to independent study skills (question 4) where 4 rated 40% (n=36) in WU respondents and 9% (n=54) by those of NU giving a difference of 27% (n=90).

Technology and learning materials: Technology is a modern tool of trade for education (Ertmer & Ottenbreit-leftwich, 2012). The use of computers and the internet in the fifth generation remains a challenge for many students (Kelly & Stevens, 2009). There is a significant impact of technology in DE to the extent that students must have access to computers and other relevant technology (Power & Gould-Morven, 2011). The course delivery mostly required students to have internet access points. Most students reported that they had to incur substantial costs in order to access internet services.

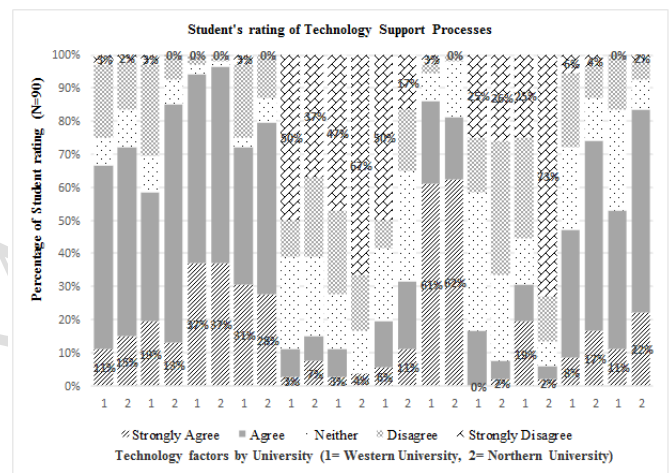


Figure 3: Student's rating of Technology support processes

In the use of internet and access through a personal modem (8th question, Figure 3), the majority of students were in tandem. Over 80% (n=90) of respondents rated 4 and above from both universities. Delivery of learning materials through ICT formats (10th question) received the widest disparity of ratings, with a rating of 1 from 25% (n=36) by respondents of WU and 73% (n=54) by those in NU. Figure 3 also shows that the issue of possessing ICT skills required for the program / course (3rd question) received equivalent rating of 37% (n=90) from both universities at 5. While the previous question which assessed whether the students had received knowledge and skills for ICT use from the university was rated as satisfactory by 58% (n=36) by WU and 85% (n=54) by those at NU. This indicated disparity in the way the two universities equipped the student to use ICT for distance learning programs. The use of computers at regional campuses was rated 1 by 47% (n=36) and 67% (n=54) by WU and NU respectively. This is an indication that the majority of students rarely used the computers at the regional centres. Assistance from the ICT personnel (12th question) did not score very highly in WU with less than 50% (n=36) seemingly happy while in contrast, NU had over 80% (n=54) of respondents in the same score of 4 and

above for the same question. This also indicated disparity for technology support as provided by both universities.

Counselling and mentorship: Both WU and NU did not have a defined framework for supporting DE students. However, there was presence of the services in the student's day to day interaction with staff and peers online.

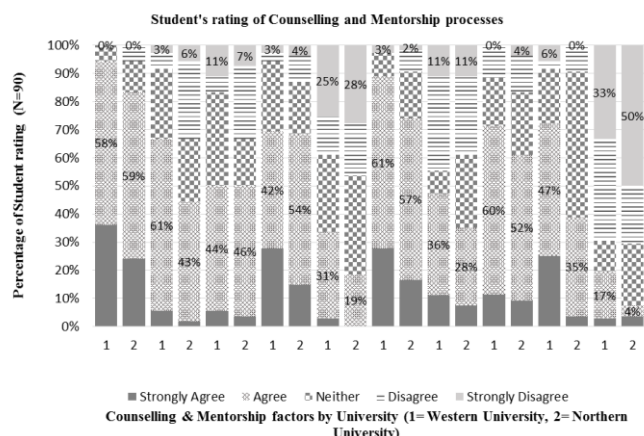


Figure 4: Student's rating of Counselling and Mentorship processes

Figure 4 indicates that only 36% (n=36) and 24% (n=54) rated 5 (1st question) for WU and NU respectively. Here, the respondent was required to rate his/her knowledge on the difference between a lecturer, counsellor and mentor. The results are an indication that problems may arise in the student's decision making skills as to whom to approach when in need of any particular support. WU respondents had the highest rating of 61% (n=36) in 4 for acknowledging that they receive counsel from their lecturers and that they regarded mentors as important to their studies (6th question). NU on the other hand had the highest rating of 59% (n=54) in 4 for the knowledge in differentiating the services of a lecturer, counsellor and mentor as far as counselling and mentorship is concerned. Figure 4 also indicates that on the index (5th question) of the counsellor's availability when needed by the student, there was rating of 1 by 25% (n=36) and 28% (n=54) of the respondents in WU and NU respectively. Additionally, 33% (n=36) of WU respondents rated 1 on the tenth (10th) question enquiring whether the student would consider asking for help from the counsellor for non-academic issues. In this, 50% (n=54) of respondents at NU also rated 1. These may be indicators that students were dissatisfied with the availability and access of counselling and mentorship support.

Interactions and communications: Communication is a major component of distance learning (Dabaj, et al., 2011; Blackmun & Thibodeau, 2004). The MOODLE interface provided discussion forums where interactions, communications and discussions could be held. On average, these forums were underutilised with WU falling far short than NU. In addition, all parties could make phone calls, use social media and write emails. At WU, the director observed that students preferred to make phone calls than write emails.

Figure 5 is a chart of the student's rating of this index. It illustrates high ratings on most of the questions. The majority of students from the divide seemed to have experienced support from this index. There was a combined rating of over 70% (n=90) satisfaction for all questions except for the 10th one which asked the respondent to rate the university's

administration's ability to communicate information coherently and effectively. On this, there was 45% (n=36) rating of 4 and above by respondents from WU and 59% (n=54) for those from NU. Although both scores indicated that students were somewhat pleased with the support service, there was a disparity of 14% (n=90) between universities.

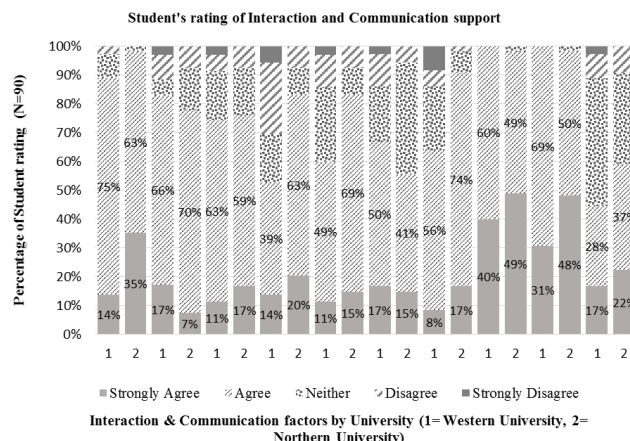


Figure 5: Student's rating of Interaction and Communication support

Feedback: Students' scores had no clear pattern on the availability of this index. However, they rated highly for issues of examination feedback and faculty availability. Interviews with faculty and analysis of discussion forums on the LMS revealed a different picture. In both universities, the faculty admitted that there were problems especially in examination feedback. They indicated that being dual mode universities, there were clashes in policy between on-campus programmes which were semester-based and those of DE which were modular-based.

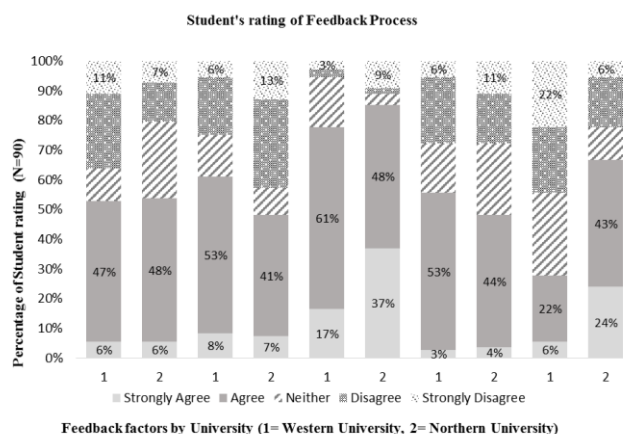


Figure 6: Student's rating of Feedback Process

Figure 6 displays an almost similar trend in students' rating for 5 and 1. Up to 10% (n=90) of students from the divide did not express very strong feelings either positively or negatively concerning this index. This may indicate that on average, this support system was widely available. However, it is noteworthy that the 5th question concerning timely feedback from all staff was rated 1 by 22% (n=36) and 6% (n=54) from WU and NU students respectively. And that 5 was rated by 6% (n=36) and 24% (n=54) for the same. There seems to be an inverse relationship whereby students at WU strongly disagreed on the issue of timely feedback at 22% (n=36) while those at NU strongly agreed on the same at 24% (n=54).

However, it is not possible to establish the significance of this from the chart. Figure 6 also illustrates a distributed response with no index scoring less than 3% (n=90) from the divide. On the 4th question concerning the availability of lecturers when students desired to discuss feedback, 56% (n=36) of students from WU and 48% (n=54) of those at NU rated 4 and above indicating an average satisfaction with the support in this index.

Regional centres and library: The regional centres would have been beneficial to DE students in many ways especially because the universities had not fully established the DE online framework. Both WU and NU had not established a complete online application and registration process; the regional centres would have then assisted as registration centres.

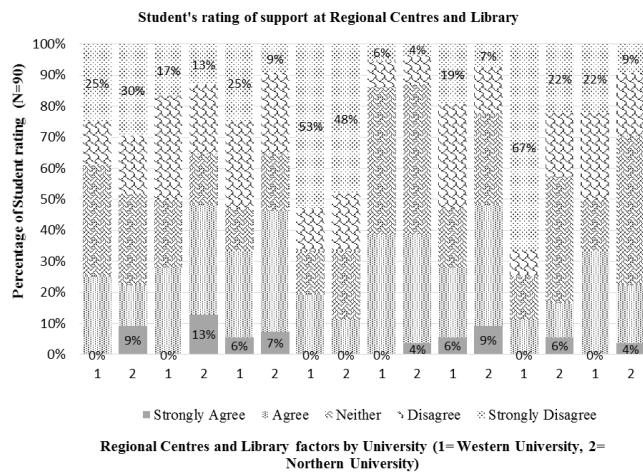


Figure 7: Student's rating of support at Regional Centres and Library

Figure 7 illustrates the student's rating for regional centres and library. There was a high score of displeasure consistent to the divide of 1 by over 25% (n=90) for most of the questions. Particularly for the fourth (4th) question which enquired whether the student visits and utilises the library at the centre. In this, 53% (n=36) of respondents at WU and 48% (n=54) at NU indicated that they did not use this facility. The highest rating in 5 for WU was 6% (n=36) for two (2) of the questions, 3rd and 6th while that of NU the highest score for 5 was 13% (n=54) in the second (2nd) question. This shows that the majority of students, approximately 90% (n=90) did not strongly agree with the support at regional centres. The generally high ratings for 1 is an indication that this support system was not working very well. The use of the library, both online and at the regional centre scored highly in 1, indicative that that the student was not efficiently using the library. In the 7th question, the student was asked to rate his/her use of the university's online library; 67% (n=36) and 22% (n=54) of the students rated 1 for WU and NU respectively. This shows that the library whether physical or digital was not providing sufficient support.

Student association and representation: Students from both universities seemed dissatisfied with this support. They seemed unaware of how to join the associations. Most of them stood a middle ground as whether or not the support was accessible on many fronts.

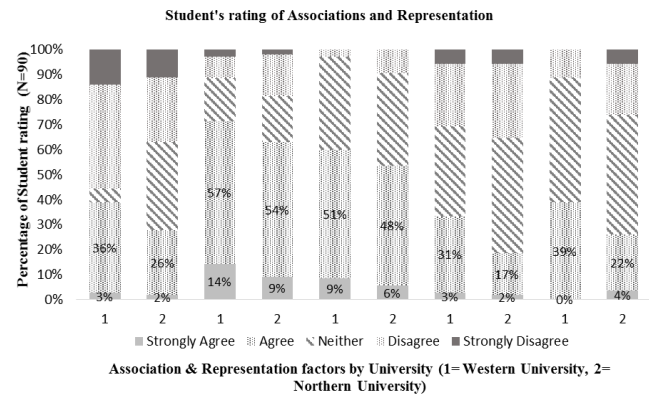


Figure 8: Student's rating of Associations and Representation

Figure 8 indicates that this index lacked a distinct pattern from the scores by respondents from both WU and NU. There was over 50% (n=90) of respondents scoring on 3 for whether the associations / councils are representative (4th question) from both universities. Equally, there was over 50% (n=90) on 3 for whether there were sufficient opportunities for associations and representations (5th question). The highest rating was in the second (2nd) question which asked the student to rate whether this index was important for his/her learning. Most students seemed to agree with this. 71% (n=36) and 63% (n=54) of respondents from WU and NU expressed satisfaction respectively. Additionally, over 60% (n=90) also from both sides of the divide were in agreement to the statement that the university supports student associations.

Course progression and satisfaction: Students expressed satisfaction with the way their courses were being administered even though they were rarely provided with forums or opportunities of evaluating the courses and programmes. Both universities, although purposed, had not implemented course evaluation and monitoring systems in ways that could provide feedback on student and customer satisfaction.

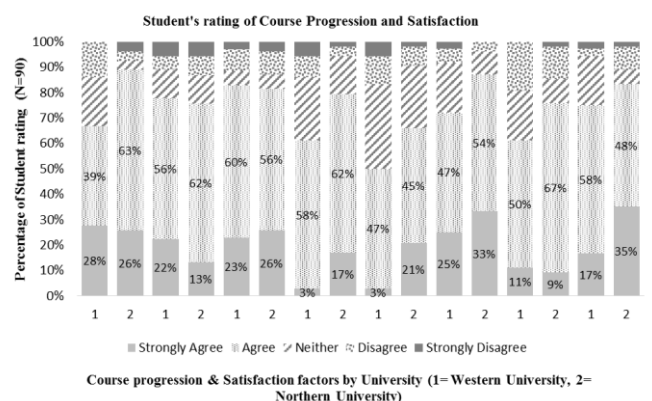


Figure 9: Student's rating of course progression and satisfaction

Figure 9 illustrates that the highest rating of 4 and above was 89% (n=54) by respondents in NU who seemed to be satisfied with the way the university was running their particular program / course. This was in the first (1st) question where the student was asked to rate the availability of information for assessments. Comparatively, at WU only 67% (n=36) of respondents expressed satisfaction with the same question. Although respondents from both universities seemed

happy in this question, there was a disparity of 22% (n=90). In general, respondents were happy with the support for course progression. This is also evident from the ratings in 1 from less than 10% (n=90) of respondents for any of the eight (8) questions by from either university.

V. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Student support is an important requirement for distance learning students. The overarching policy document for both universities was from the Commission of University Education (CUE) which had a detailed section on guidelines for practice of DE. However, this was a general policy document out of which universities were supposed to adopt and contextualise their DE practices. Of the support services that were available in both universities, some had been planned for while others just happened to be. The study showed that despite DE moving into the information age and the fifth generation of education technology, the demographics, characteristics and needs of DE students have not undergone drastic changes. Therefore, support services need to be contextualised within the prevailing education technologies against the background of student needs.

Dual mode universities need to differentiate policies and practices between on-campus and DE programmes. Many dual mode universities do not equalise their commitment to student's needs (King, 2010). Often the off-campus student experiences less support than his/her on-campus colleagues. In addition, constant change and use of the latest learning technologies are indications to institute support (Stevens & Kelly, 2012). The DE student may require additional learning and coping skills. Therefore, special effort should be made to include student support into the planning of any DE program. It should not only be considered a subsystem of DE but also a part of all the integrated processes within DE (Tait, 2013). A practical approach would be to conceptualise student support as a key function of the program making it both a subsystem and an integrated part of the DE program (Gunawardena et al., 2010; Qakisa-Makoe, 2005).

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