

Experiences of tutorial sessions as learning support for distance education students

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Abstract

This article examines face-to-face tutorial sessions as a means of facilitating the learning of distance education students enrolled for the Advanced Certificate in Education at the Distance Education Unit, University of Pretoria. Since distance education is learner-centred learning, students are assumed to be independent and self-motivated in the learning process. Because distance education students study alone most of the time, there is a need to enhance their learning experience by providing support structures such as tutorial sessions. Students attending the tutorial sessions at the University of Pretoria provide feedback on the session in the form of short questionnaires, but there is still a need to further explore their experiences. This is done by using a qualitative approach to capture nuances of how the students and tutors experience and conceptualise learning support in a tutorial session and whether they think that it is worthwhile attending the sessions. The data were collected through interviewing students and their tutors. The findings of the study suggest that although the students experience tutorial sessions as a worthwhile learning support structure, there is a need to redefine the role of the tutors and to review the academic and administrative support structure of the students so as to improve the quality of the tutorial sessions.

Keywords: distance education, students' expectations, experiences, tutorial support, tutors, peer support

INTRODUCTION

In providing distance education courses to students the University of Pretoria shares common features with many other public and private institutions. Sherry (1996, 339) describes distance education as a learning opportunity that gives students a chance to work with course material through postal communications, electronic media, face-to-face tutoring, mentoring, e-mail correspondence or via

the telephone. It has been argued that students who study independently but have periodic contact with support staff as well as feedback and instructions from their supervisors are more likely to experience an attachment to their institution than on-campus students (Beaudoin 1990, 3). However different students have different learning styles. Some may need more support and guidance than others, depending on their learning styles. Carnwell (2000, 137–139) describes the different learning styles as systematic wading, speedy focusing and global dipping. In his study, learners who were systematic waders engaged actively and systematically with their study material and depended less on tutor support and guidance. The speedy-focusing students tend to take shortcuts in their study by focusing only on what is required for the assignment or test. As a result, the speedy-focusing students lack deep learning. The global dippers on the other hand are surface learners who study in a disorganised way, encounter difficulties with the learning material and may need more learning support.

In addition to the different learning styles, distance education students require learning support to be able to complete their studies successfully. Learner support enables learners to access a variety of learning resources such as learning materials, library, media technology and tutors as facilitators (Garrison and Baynton 1987, 6). Some distance education students may need learning support structures to enhance and improve their ability to be independent learners. Others may need learning skills and interaction with tutors, learning material and other students (Dzakiria 2008, 109–110). The need for tutor support may be determined by the type of learning style and the stage of the student's study. According to Brigley and Kell (2007, 260), students in the early stages of their studies may need more tutor support but later in their studies may need more peer support and networking.

Tutorial sessions are learner support systems in which the learner engages with the learning materials and teacher/facilitator (Garrison and Baynton 1987, 6). An action research study with Open University students in the United Kingdom showed that students come to distance education with expectations of support services from the tutors. Students' satisfaction with tutor support increases course completion rates and reduces student dropout (Stevenson, MacKeogh and Sander 2006, 144). In a related study, student and tutor perceptions of effective tutoring in distance education revealed that students and tutors conceptualise effective tutoring in different ways (Jelfs, Richardson and Price 2009, 433). Students associate effective tutoring with subject expertise, development of critical thinking and interaction with other students (which is more task-oriented), while tutors perceive good tutoring as the ability to facilitate the transmission

of knowledge and support learning (which is more student-oriented). The study recommended that both students and tutors should appreciate the importance of support in facilitating learning, whether task- or student-oriented.

Face-to-face learner support in distance education can be seen as ‘scaffolding’, a term described as effective intervention by a peer or other competent person in the learning and optimum development of potential in a learner (Wood, Bruner and Ross 1976, 96). A variety of activities is involved in the learning process such as offering explanations, encouraging students to participate actively, verifying and clarifying student understanding, generating questions and comments, and modelling of desired behaviour (Roehler and Cantlon 1997, 6). Such learning support can be achieved by establishing contact with the students in a tutorial session.

Fung and Carr (2000, 42) explored the factors that contribute to successful tutorials and found that initially students expect tutors to lecture them and help them understand the course better in order to improve their academic achievement. However, as they continued with their studies and realised that their expectations were being met, the students indicated a need for interaction with their peers. In earlier research, Sherry (1996, 349) indicated that the most important factor for successful distance learning is the teacher’s ability to be caring, confident, experienced, creative and interactive with the students. The support that the student receives may lessen the feeling of disconnection with the educational institution during the self-study period.

This study contributes to the body of knowledge on distance education by exploring the experiences of students and tutors in a tutorial session.

CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

The University of Pretoria offers an Advanced Certificate in Education (ACE) and a Bachelor of Education as part of a Distance Education Programme. Most students are teachers in service who want to upgrade their qualifications and improve conditions at their schools by becoming better education managers. The programme consists of six modules, each covering a different aspect of education management.

In 2008 the University of Pretoria introduced a structure on a pilot basis where tutors conduct tutorials for students in the ACE Education Management programme (University of Pretoria 2010, 34). The tutorial sessions approach in this programme is based on constructivist learning. The facilitator/tutor is not the sole constructor of knowledge but guides and interacts with students to construct knowledge or new theories.

Although recent literature in distance education suggests a paradigm shift from the traditional learning support structures to technological media (Lawton 1997, 1081–1082; Zhang, Perris and Yeung 2005, 789–790; Alonso and Blazquez 2009, 331), distance education students in many societies still depend on traditional ways of learning support. Such students are mostly in areas where new technologies are absent or used minimally (Tait 2000, 288). Most distance education students enrolled with the University of Pretoria live in remote and rural areas where there is no electricity or other resources to facilitate the use of technological innovation in learning. These students rely on traditional face-to-face instruction which takes place through contact lecturing and tutorial sessions.

The Distance Education Unit has in excess of 15 tutorial venues in different provinces where local tutors have been identified and trained to facilitate the sessions. The students have to register for each of the four tutorial sessions in a cycle (November to March and May to September). These sessions are integrated into the course and students are encouraged to work in groups and build up peer support learning. Each tutorial session lasts four hours and covers 25 per cent of the work (University of Pretoria 2010, 34).

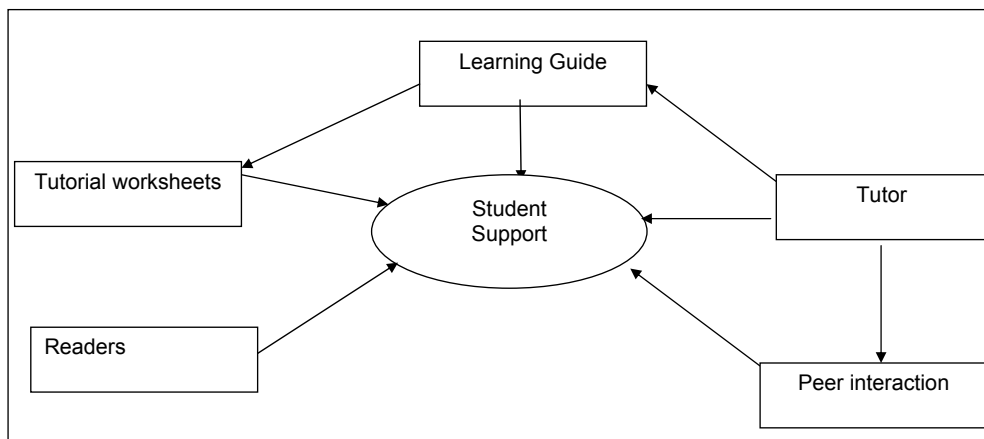


Figure 1: Framework of components of the learning support structure in a tutorial session for ACE at University of Pretoria

Figure 1 shows the different components of the learning support given to distance education students (ACE Education Management) at the University of Pretoria. The components are interlaced and used simultaneously during the tutorial session. For successful distance education learning to take place, there has to be interactivity between the tutor and the student, between the student and the course material and active learning through interaction with peers.

Peer support that takes place through discussions enables the students to share and review ideas and provide feedback (McConnell 2000, 86). The students not only gain new knowledge but also acquire new social skills through communication and collaboration with their peers (Sherry 1996, 346). Peer support enables students to share advice and common experiences of the challenges of distance learning (Cain, Marrara, Pitre and Armour 2003, 49–50). Learning support during the tutorial session for ACE (Education Management) mostly takes place in the form of peer support that enables the students to engage critically in exploring and evaluating their own school situation in the process of knowledge construction (University of Pretoria 2010, 35). Students discuss and work through the activities provided in the worksheets in groups of four to six. They share information, review ideas and exchange feedback with peers (McConnell 2000, 86). The mutual support in group discussions reduces the isolation and loneliness experienced by some distance education students (Dzakiria 2008, 110) and is important for networking (Lawton 1997, 1080).

Study materials such as learning guides, tutorial worksheets and readers are designed in such a way that the content and structure are suitable for independent study (Beaudoin 1990, 3) and active participation in learning. They should be designed to optimise content and space, and be suitable for different student learning styles. Use of case studies and examples that are relevant to the target audience makes the course more meaningful to the students as education managers. In the ACE programme, the learning guides explain the structure and content of the course, as well as exercises and activities that should be completed by the student during self-study or when working in groups. The work sheets are designed to provide scenarios and case studies for the students to reflect on and apply what they have learnt to real-life situations. The reader contains a number of articles and research literature related to specific modules. The readings are provided to stimulate students and make them reflect critically on issues related to the modules and the practical application of different management theories.

The role of the tutor mostly entails facilitating group discussions by using tutorial worksheets developed by the lecturer and based on the subject content of different core modules (University of Pretoria 2010, 35). Brigley and Kell (2007, 260–261) argue that the tutor must help students to make sense of the course material, integrate the acquired knowledge with educational practice and self-develop as educators. The tutor should be knowledgeable about the subject, prepare for the session and be able to refer students to other sources of support (Lawton 1997, 1080; Sherry 1997, 339). According to Fung and Carr (2000, 43) students perceive tutor support as enrichment in understanding course material and guidance for doing assignments – especially when tutors are interesting, helpful and able to express themselves clearly.

Some studies show that students attend tutorials to listen to the tutors explaining course material and providing guidance for doing assignments, and not necessarily to facilitate student interaction (Fung and Carr 2000, 43). In such cases the role of the tutor entails assisting the learners to make sense of the course content and integrate knowledge with practice (Brigley and Kell 2007, 260–261). In contrast, Beaudoin (1990, 2) considers the tutor as a facilitator rather than a lecturer/teacher, because self-directed learning empowers learners and reduces their dependency on the tutor's traditional role of lecturing. In the context of this study, the tutor should facilitate group discussion and not necessarily be a subject expert (University of Pretoria 2010, 35).

The purpose of this study was to explore the views and opinions of students and tutors on the integrated support components in a tutorial session, to identify students' needs in terms of learner support and to recommend strategies for improving tutorial sessions. It also shed light on students' and tutors' views and expectations of the tutorial session and tried to determine a link between the intentions of tutorials and student expectations of the sessions (Fung and Carr 2000, 39).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study design was based on an interpretive paradigm. It was assumed that to understand the world of distance education students, it was necessary to explore their lived experiences and the realities of their everyday life. The subjective knowledge of the participants' experiences was gathered through semi-structured interviews. Six students and four tutors participated in the study and volunteered to be interviewed after the tutorial session. All participants had to be distance education students enrolled in the ACE Education Management programme and attending tutorial sessions. They were from different age groups and ethnic backgrounds, and taught in primary or secondary schools. The study was limited to two tutorial venues, namely Polokwane and Mokopane in the Limpopo province of South Africa.

The interviews were based on the following questions:

1. What can you say about tutorial sessions?
2. What is your role in and expectations of a tutorial session?
3. What kind of support do you receive in a tutorial session?

4. What are the challenges?

To enhance credibility and trustworthiness, triangulation was done by means of different data sources. Interview responses from students and tutors were checked against each other to determine the differences and similarities in their experiences and expectations. Peer triangulation enabled the two researchers to compare transcript codes, emerging patterns and themes. Recommendations to improve the tutorial sessions were made from the findings.

FINDINGS

Four major themes emerged from the interviews. The first pertained to general perceptions of a tutorial session, clarification of the subject content and motivation to study after attending the sessions. There was also a strong awareness of the importance of collaborative learning through peer support. The second theme concerned the different ways in which the role of the tutor was comprehended by both tutors and students. The third theme related to the nature and importance of the support that students get from tutorial sessions, while the fourth involved administrative problems experienced by the students.

Theme 1

Experiences of a tutorial session

Tutorial sessions were perceived by all students as a useful support structure that gave them the opportunity to better understand the course material through interaction with other students:

You know it is difficult to study by yourself at home and sometimes you relax but after attending the tutorial session it is like I have been recharged. When I go home, I can go on for a week studying very seriously trying to consolidate what I gained from the tutorial sessions. (Student 3)

Sometimes when you are alone you pretend to know certain things only to find that you are answering them in a wrong way. (Student 2)

Some students were aware of their role during group discussions and the tutorial session as a whole:

I think that it is important for me to participate in the discussions during the sessions, to share ideas and listen to each other's opinion. (Student 1)

I think my role in a tutorial session is to participate in order to help the tutor to try to

Experiences of tutorial sessions as learning support for distance education students understand us. If I participate I contribute a lot to the tutorial. (Student 4)

The tutorial sessions were perceived by some of the students as a chance for self-development and lifelong learning. The knowledge gained and experience seemed to have meaning to the students beyond the scope of the exam:

I would recommend that they attend the sessions. I would tell them that this is not only for the exams, but [for] lifelong learning [because] even after passing the exams you will apply it in life. It can even help you to become a better person outside your working environment. (Student 3)

I feel that if I miss one tutorial session, I would have missed something that I would have applied in the weeks to come. What I gain here I can practically apply in our school even before I write the exam. (Student 2)

It seems that both tutors and students benefit from the tutorial session as an opportunity to learn from each other. The tutors also felt motivated when the students appreciated their support after passing the exams:

I may be a tutor but there is somebody with more experience who can help me. Being a tutor I gain more from the students. (Tutor 1)

The students come to me telling me that they have passed. (Tutor 4)

After getting their results in December last year, they came to me and praised me for helping them. They tried to give me some presents. I was very happy. I was not sure if what I was doing was helping them. This thing I do wholeheartedly. (Tutor 2)

Theme 2

Expectations of and roles played during a tutorial session

Some students expected the tutors to teach them during the tutorial session. They later realised that the role of the tutor is to facilitate, guide and monitor their discussions and not necessarily to teach them:

I expected them to give us answers but now it's not like that. We break into groups and we interrogate certain aspects in the guide. We ask questions and learn from each other. After the discussion you feel that there is no need for a tutor to give you answers. (Student 3)

Some students expected the tutor to play a dual role of facilitation and teaching. The following excerpts express their feelings:

I am not saying that the tutor should be an expert, but in one way or another the tutor should give clarification. I have attended many tutorial sessions and when we encounter problems the tutor will refer the question back to us even if the entire class

does not know the answer to the question. (Student 5)

I expect them to answer some of our questions and correct us. You find that they do not help us. Our tutor says that all the answers are correct but I do not expect that from them. (Student 4)

Other students felt empowered and fully accepted that their role was to make a contribution to the learning process during contact sessions:

My role at the tutorial session is to participate in order to help the tutor to try to understand us. If I participate, I contribute a lot to the tutorial session. (Student 6)

Among the tutors there were two different perceptions of their role. One tutor considered the task of the tutor as teaching and answering students' questions. The tutor explained:

When training they should touch on the questions. You find that when you are busy teaching there are those who want to ask you about the exam questions. We do not know anything about the exams; we are just tutors. We must not be embarrassed standing in front of them. (Tutor 2)

Two tutors described the tutor role as to facilitate learning and not to teach students. They expected the students to be involved in group work and to learn through peer support:

Not much is expected from me with regard to being an expert. I am just required to facilitate the learning process. It is very interesting because the students themselves are engaged, they work themselves. I give them a platform to learn. (Tutor 6)

What I do not want them to do is to keep quiet and be passive listeners as if manna will come from heaven and drop down like bread and they will start eating. I want them to get down into the books and get it. They should debate and come up with answers. If they do not understand, I contact the module co-coordinator and say—look, this is the problem. (Tutor 4)

Theme 3

Support received during tutorial sessions

From the responses it is clear that some students felt that tutorial session support prepared them for doing assignments and writing exams. The students felt that it was also an opportunity for networking with other students and establishing study groups:

I want to assure you that for each and every assignment I wrote I got high marks because of these sessions. The notes you take at the sessions help you when you go home. When it comes to assignments the tutorial sessions are number 1. (Student 2)

The tutors also regarded the support that they offered to students during the tutorial sessions as important:

I would tell them just to come and hear and see the activities and get the worksheets that they can use to revise at home. If you do not attend the sessions you lose a lot. (Tutor1)

They give our learners direction and important aspects which can assist them in an exam. (Tutor 3)

Theme 4

Challenges and recommendations from participants

Administrative problems such as venue change, cancellation of tutorial venues and last-minute confirmation of tutorial venues constituted a challenge mentioned by all students and tutors. Other students complained of lack of response when they call the university and many expressed their disappointment about poor service delivery:

We are supposed to register by SMS but we do not get responses, or when they respond they give you a wrong venue. I am looking at a scenario supposing that the students who register are less than ten only to find out that the tenth student is the one re-located to Umtata. This is doing injustice to the nine students. (Student 1)

They respond to us at the eleventh hour. We are supposed to come here on Saturday and we get the SMS on Friday. (Student 2)

The comments of the students indicate inadequate management of the administrative communication structures, probably due to technological and contextual challenges and compounded by registration requirements for attendance of the sessions.

Contrary to the negative experiences of many students with regard to administrative support, some seemed satisfied with how the university organised the tutorial sessions:

I am happy with the arrangements. The environment is conducive for the sessions. The tutors are very friendly. So what I could say is that the university should keep on doing what they are doing. (Student 3)

These views were corroborated by tutors who interpreted the administrative problems as the result of negligence by the students in adhering to the regulations of the Distance Education unit:

The students' SMS communication is a problem. You find that while you are busy in one venue the students are in another venue that was previously used for a tutorial session. Also the question of making sure that you register first: you do not just decide to go. Adhering to the rules and regulations was a challenge. (Tutor 5)

My concern is the attendance of students. We were supposed to be 20 but only 6 attended the tutorial sessions. Others went where we were the other time: because of their ignorance they did not check their SMS. (Tutor 2)

Other challenges not of an administrative nature concerned the use of vernacular language during the tutorial sessions, lack of adequate preparation before doing assignment 1, and questionable tutor competency. The students explained:

Some of our colleagues who are primary school teachers sometimes find it hard to express themselves in English. Somebody teaching grade R will use vernacular throughout but we have to reproduce the material in English and that is when it becomes a problem. (Student 1)

If possible, the tutorial sessions should come before the first assignment – it can help us in writing the assignment. (Student 2)

Another student expressed the need for more tutorial sessions:

They should be increased from 4 to 6 so that the students should be regularly in touch with their books to remind them that they are students of the University of Pretoria having enrolled for a particular programme. (Student 1)

The demand to increase the number of content sessions suggests the students' lack of understanding of the cost implications involved in extending such sessions.

DISCUSSION

The distance education students interviewed in the study found tutorial sessions to be beneficial. They could better understand the subject content through peer learning and support, which enabled them to perform well in assignments and examinations. The extent to which students expressed their appreciation to the tutors after passing exams confirmed that the tutors were doing a good job and they felt motivated by the students' acknowledgement. Stevenson et al. (2006, 146–150) reported similar findings. In their study, the positive feedback from the students on tutor leadership motivated the tutors to continue looking into the key issues of the course material. For most learners the support received during tutorial sessions seemed more beneficial than studying alone. Dzakiria (2008, 106) also noted that students studying alone may feel isolated and experience learning problems. Similarly, Cain et al. (2003, 51–52) found that some of the students in their study regarded their peers as an important learning support

structure and suggested that course instructors should develop a community forum for informal peer support networks. In this study, the students were able to connect and share advice and common experiences. They were able to learn from one another. The tutors were also able to learn from students who were experienced teachers. The students had a lot to contribute in terms of applying theory to practice.

Another important aspect of this study was the divergent conception that students and tutors themselves had of the *role of the tutor*. In the study by Stevenson et al. (2006, 147), some students wanted discussion and interaction with others, while others wanted lectures that focus on course content. Brigley and Kell (2007, 260) reported that third-year students need tutor support with reflective learning and content-oriented skills rather than pastoral care. By the third year the students are likely to have developed self-directed and peer supported learning. Different students have different learning styles and needs. Some students engage more deeply with the study material and need passive tutor support, whereas others are detached from the learning material and need active tutor guidance and support (Carnwell 2000, 139). The divergent understanding of the role of tutors suggests a need to reassess and re-examine the role of the tutor as it may influence the way in which students experience the session. Although the present tutorial sessions are based on the constructivist learning approach, the paradigm shift from lecturer-centred to student-centred learning still needs to take place. This is evident in cases where the tutors are expected to be experts in the field of study and to promote a better understanding of the subject content.

The administration booklet of the University of Pretoria (2010, 35) states that the tutor need not be an expert. However, it appears that the tutor needs to be competent in and conversant with the content knowledge of the subject discussed in a tutorial session to be able to contribute effectively during discussions. Tutors who were more inclined to teaching did not have adequate time for group work and thus encouraged student dependency on the lecture approach to learning.

The main challenge regarding tutorial sessions evident in the data was students' dissatisfaction with administrative support from the university. The students' experiences of administrative problems suggest disengagement from communication with the university. They insisted on a tutorial venue at a convenient place and on being informed of such venues in time for them to attend. Dzakiria (2008, 110) stresses the crucial role of management in successful learning support for distance students. Effective communication is another vital element in this regard (Cain et al. 2003, 50). In the current study, the use of SMS technology should be considered in the students' context. For example, communication by means of SMS may be totally inadequate where signal reception is weak or unavailable. Using SMS as the main mode of communication

for confirming tutorial sessions attendance (University of Pretoria 2010, 34) may be a typical case of reliance on technology, which Ntshoe (2010, 39) asserts may alienate students from rural and remote areas where network coverage is problematic.

Implications for practice

- The university should encourage peer support networks beyond the tutorial and contact session settings.
- The tutors need to be well prepared before the sessions, as a lack of thorough preparation results in students questioning the integrity of the facilitator.
- A common understanding of the role of the tutor is crucial so that tutors and students will know what to expect in a tutorial session. Students had high expectations of the tutor as academic supporter.
- Tutor training should focus on strategies that develop tutor competency on course content knowledge.
- Additional communication strategies are needed to complement the use of SMS technology.
- Communication with students should be timely and, if possible, reminders should be sent.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study focused on learner support during distance education tutorial sessions. Students involved in the study experienced tutorial sessions as a useful learning support structure. Peer support seemed to contribute to the sharing of knowledge and skills among the students, which resulted in knowledge ownership by the students. Students were encouraged to collaborate and network beyond the tutorial session and they acquired useful knowledge and practical skills from such relationships. Tutor support was assessed by some as the tutors' ability to clarify the subject content in a way that leads to better understanding of the theory. The students benefited more from tutors who had knowledge and communication skills, and who encouraged critical thinking. The tutor also benefited from the discussions by listening to the experiences of the students. A recommendation of this study is that more experienced and competent tutors should act as role models and mentors to new and less competent tutors.

The students and tutors had different perceptions of the role of the tutor. This perception apparently influenced what were expectations of a tutorial session and the behaviour of both tutors and students. The students experienced the tutorial sessions as more or less enriching, depending on their understanding and expectation of what the tutor should do in the tutorial session. It is argued here that the role of the tutor should be balanced between providing insight into course content and facilitating peer learning through group discussions. The study recommends that the role of the tutor should be reconsidered and redefined. In addition, tutors will need to be retrained so that there is a common understanding of what is expected of them and how they should conduct a tutorial session. The tutors must also understand the situation of the students in terms of knowledge base and experience so as to adjust their facilitation approach accordingly.

Tutorial sessions should be conducted in a manner that satisfies the needs of the students and improves pass rates. Tutors should be aware of and consider adult learning skills when facilitating the sessions. Learning support structures should be organised in such a way that student learning is not hampered. It is crucial for programme coordinators to conduct quality control, identify the strengths and weakness of tutors, and work towards excellence.

Success in tutorial sessions depends on the link between facilitation, learning resources and administrative support. Students' concerns with regard to administrative challenges should be resolved in the process of continuous improvement of the distance education tutorial sessions. Attendance of the tutorial sessions should be confirmed during registration to avoid overwhelming logistical demands before every tutorial session. Many students reside in rural or remote areas where cellphone network signal strengths fluctuate, thus disadvantaging them. SMS communications to students should therefore be supported by additional modes of communication, such as through tutors in the various venues sending letters by bulk mail to confirm attendance and communicate with the university.

Future studies in learning support for distance education students should explore the impact of student administration support on the success of tutorial sessions, student motivation and performance. Further research should also investigate a more effective communication system for distance education students in remote areas where cellphone network coverage is poor.

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