

DISTANCE EDUCATION STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF LEARNING SUPPORT SESSIONS

Dr Teresa Ogina
Education Management and Policy Studies,
University of Pretoria
taogina@up.ac.za

ABSTRACT

Distance education is a learner-centred approach to education that emphasises independent learning based on the assumption that students are self-motivated and active in the learning process. However, due to the fact that distance education students study alone most of the time, there is a need to enhance their learning experience by providing support structures. Besides supplying learning materials, the University of Pretoria offers face-to-face support sessions to facilitate learning. Although students provide feedback on the sessions in the form of short questionnaires, there is a need to further explore their experiences using a qualitative approach to capture nuances of how the students experience and conceptualise learning support. It should also be established whether they think that it is worthwhile attending the sessions. This paper draws on theoretical insights from transactional distance theory, focusing on learning support in terms of dialogue in the learning facilitation process, the structure of the programmes and learner autonomy. Data was collected by interviewing students enrolled for the Advanced Certificate in Education (ACE): Education Management at the Distance Education Unit of the University of Pretoria. The study's findings suggest that the students consider learning support sessions to be beneficial. The knowledge and skills gained during these sessions and through dialogue in the form of networking with other students contribute to their professional and personal development and – to some extent – to their learner autonomy. However, a need is identified for the continuous development of learning support facilitators, material and administrative support structures to enhance the quality of the support system and to reduce transactional distance.

Keywords: Distance education; learning support; students' expectations; facilitator support; transactional distance theory; South Africa.

INTRODUCTION

There are many public and private institutions offering distance education courses to students. This mode of learning often involves students working independently with course material, using postal services and electronic media such as email or the telephone as a means of communication, and being involved in mentoring and face-to-face tutoring (Sherry, 1996). According to researchers like Rumble (2000), course material alone cannot be relied on for the successful completion of studies. Face-to-face learner support can make a difference in ensuring students' success in distance education.

Additional learning support for distance education students can be provided in the form of "scaffolding" – a teaching strategy in which information and instruction from a teacher or facilitator serve as a means of assisting students in engaging with new knowledge (Rymarz & McLarney, 2011). Scaffolding involves a variety of activities in the learning process, such as offering explanations, encouraging students to participate actively, verifying and clarifying student understanding, generating questions and comments and modelling the desired behaviour (Roehler & Cantlon, 1997). Such support can be achieved by establishing contact with the students in a learning support session.

Some distance education students are independent and self-directed learners. Anderson (2007) describes independent learning as the learners' ability to self-monitor, recognise and manage their learning goals. However, since students are not homogeneous and have different needs, it is important to identify and understand the students' individual differences to be able to design appropriate learning support services (Rumble, 2000). Some may need more support and guidance than others, depending on their learning styles. In his study, Carnwell (2000) describes the different learning styles as systematic wading, speedy-focusing and global dipping. Learners who are systematic waders engage actively and systematically with their study material and need less facilitator support and guidance. The systematic waders experience deep learning. The speedy-focusing students (who also depend less on the facilitator) tend to take shortcuts in their studies by focusing only on what is required for an assignment or test. Such students experience limited deep learning. The third group, global dippers, are surface learners who study in a disorganised way, encounter difficulties with the learning material and may need more learning support. Distance education students may fall into any of the above three categories of students.

Regardless of their different learning styles, most distance education students need learning support and encouragement to be able to complete their studies successfully. Learner support structures include services, such as tutoring and face-to-face contact sessions, and a variety of resources that may incorporate media technology (Tait, 2000). In distance education, it is often assumed that students have the ability to be self-determined and self-regulated. Self-regulated learning is a strategy of dealing with academic challenges that involve personal motivation, knowing when and who to ask for help and learners' ability to use contextual motivational resources (Newman, 2002). Some distance education students may be in dire need of learning support structures to enhance and improve their ability to be independent learners who are able to interact with the learning material and with other students (Dzakiria, 2008).

The need for a particular type of learning support structure may be determined by the type of learning style and the stage of a particular student's study. According to Brigley and Kell (2007), students may need a greater degree of tutor support at an early stage of their study, while at a later stage a higher priority may be given to peer support, social integration and networking.

An action research study with Open University students in the United Kingdom revealed that students enrol for distance education with high expectations of support services from tutors. Students' satisfaction with tutor support increases the course completion rate and reduces the student drop-out rate (Stevenson, MacKeogh & Sander, 2006). In a related study, student and tutor perceptions of effective tutoring in distance education show that students and tutors conceptualise effective tutoring in different ways (Jelfs, Richardson & Price, 2009). Students relate effective learning support to subject expertise, the development of critical thinking and interaction with other students, while tutors perceive good tutoring as the ability to facilitate the transmission of knowledge and support learning. Students' expectations focus more on the tasks to be performed, while tutors are more inclined to focus on the students. The study recommends that both students and tutors should appreciate the importance of support in facilitating learning and whether it is task- or student-oriented.

The things students and tutors/facilitators expect from a learning support session may change as the students progress in their studies (Jelf et al., 2009). A study conducted at the Open University of Hong Kong (Fung & Carr, 2000) explored the factors that contribute to successful tutorials and revealed that the data collected

at an earlier stage of the research indicates that students expect tutors to lecture them. The students want tutors to help them understand the course content better in order to improve their academic achievement. However, as they continue with their studies, students realised that interaction with their peers reduced their dependency on their tutor. Thus, when providing support services in distance education, the students' wishes should not be ignored and their needs should be taken into consideration (Rumble, 2000).

In an earlier study, Sherry (1996) suggests that the most important factor for successful distance learning is the ability of the teacher to be caring, confident, experienced, creative and to interact with the students. The support the student receives may overcome any feeling of disconnectedness with the educational institution during the self-study period. Tait (2004) argues that student retention in distance education is, in part, related to human relationships, which should have the ability to overcome different emotional and cognitive challenges experienced by the students.

The purpose of this study was to explore students' views on, and opinions of the integrated support components of a support session; to identify the students' needs in terms of learner support; and to recommend strategies for improving support sessions. The study investigates the students' perceptions and expectations of learning sessions, as there could be a discrepancy between their perceptions and expectations and the purpose of the sessions (Fung & Carr, 2000). An understanding of students' experiences of support sessions may contribute to improving facilitation, learning materials and support structures for distance education students.

Transactional distance theory

The underpinning theoretical framework used in this study is Moore's Theory of Transactional Distance, which deals with the physical, psychological and communication separation between teachers and students in distance education (Kang & Gyorke, 2008). The patterns of behaviour of the students and teachers that affect the teaching and learning process in distance education are determined by examining the relationship between the learning structure, dialogue and the students' ability to be autonomous (Moore, 1980). Moore theorises that when learning programmes are highly structured, there is a tendency towards reduced learner communication and interaction, and when they are less structured the learners need greater direction. The relationship between the structure of distance

education programmes and learner communication is concerned with the nature of transactional distance in distance learning. Less structured programmes call for high learner dialogue, which results in low transactional distance. Programmes that are highly structured require less communication and dialogue and make the learner feel more isolated. Learners who have more opportunities to communicate with their tutors and other learners will feel more autonomous. According to Moore (1980), learner development in distance education is based on bridging a gap through procedures, instructional design and communication.

The context of the study

The University of Pretoria offers the Advanced Certificate in Education (ACE): Education Management as part of its distance education programme as well as a Bachelor of Education programme – mostly to in-service teachers who wish to upgrade their qualifications and improve conditions at their schools by becoming better education managers. ACE: Education Management consists of six modules. Each module addresses a different aspect of education management, organisational management, the professional and social context of education and education law.

Because of an increase in the use of technology in teaching and learning, the more recent literature on distance education suggests a paradigm shift from traditional learning support structures to technological support media (Lawton, 1997; Zhang, Perris & Yeung, 2005; Alonso & Blazquez, 2009). Although the general movement is towards a more technological world, there are distance education students in many communities that still depend on traditional approaches to learning support. These students are mostly in areas where new technologies are absent or used minimally (Tait, 2000). Most of the students enrolled in distance education at 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 the learning process; they rely on traditional face-to-face learning support to complement the course material and instructions. Such support should be given during the tutorials and support sessions.

Learning support framework

The different components of learning support given to distance education students enrolled for the ACE: Education Management at the University of Pretoria are learning guides, readers, worksheets, tutor facilitation and opportunities for peer interaction



in group activities arranged during the facilitation sessions. The components of such learning support structures are interlaced and they are used simultaneously during the session. For successful distance education learning to take place, there needs to be interaction between the tutor/facilitator and the students, between the students and the course material, and active learning should result from students' interaction with their peers.

Brigley and Kell (2007) found that the role of the tutor in learning support was to help students make sense of the course material, integrate the acquired knowledge with educational practice, and develop as educators. The tutor's role is also to facilitate interpersonal relationships of friendship between the tutor and the students and among students in the process of learning (Price, Richardson & Jelfs, 2007). Learning support that takes place in peer discussions enables students to share ideas, review ideas and provide feedback (McConnell, 2000). Students do not only gain new knowledge, but they also acquire new social skills in communicating and collaborating with their peers. Ferguson (2010) notes that, unless peer interaction is well managed, it may have a negative effect on students' learning due to strong emotional and social elements that may be involved in the established relationships. On a positive note, through peer support students are given the opportunity to share advice and common experiences of the challenges of distance learning (Cain et al., 2003).

Learning support during the contact sessions of the ACE: Education Management takes place mostly in the form of facilitator presentations and peer support learning. These contact sessions enable the students to engage critically in exploring and evaluating their own school situation as part of the process of knowledge construction. Students work in groups of four to six, working through and discussing the activities provided on the worksheets. In a similar study, McConnell (2000) found that students share information in group discussions and review ideas based on feedback from peers. The support that the students receive from one another in group discussions not only reduces the feeling of isolation and loneliness that some distance education students experience (Dzakiria, 2008), but it is also important for promoting networking (Lawton, 1997). Price, Richardson and Jelfs (2007) suggest that the role of the facilitator is to encourage student interaction with others in terms of course content.

In view of the argument presented earlier that different students have different needs and learning styles, it seems that study material for distance education

students should be designed to cater to the contextual content and to the students' particular environment. For distance learning, study materials such as learning guides, tutorial worksheets and readers are designed in such a manner that the content and structure are suitable for independent study and allow students to participate actively in learning.

In this study, the use of case studies and examples are relevant to the target audience. This provides the students with a better understanding of the course as education managers. In the ACE programme, the learning guides contain the structure and content of the course. They also include exercises and activities that should be completed by the students during self-study or when working in groups. In addition to the learning guides, students are given worksheets that have been designed to complement the learning guides. The worksheets provide scenarios and case studies for students to reflect on and to apply what they have learned to real-life situations. The readers contain a number of articles and research literature related to specific modules. These readers contain case studies that are relevant to their context and that stimulate students' thinking and make them reflect critically on issues related to the modules as well as the practical application of different management theories.

The role of the tutor/facilitator during the support session is to explain the content material to make it easier for the students to understand the theories and concepts involved. The tutors/facilitators also encourage and monitor group discussions using the provided worksheets that were developed by a university lecturer, based on the subject content of different core modules. Brigley and Kell (2007) believe that the role of the tutor is to help students make sense of the course material, integrate the acquired knowledge with educational practice and develop as educators.

In order to facilitate learning, the tutor/facilitator should be knowledgeable about the subject and prepare thoroughly before a session. The tutor should also be able to refer students to other sources of support (Lawton, 1997). According to Fung and Carr (2000), tutors working with groups of students during contact sessions help students to better understand the course content and provide guidance in completing assignments – especially if such tutors are interesting, helpful and able to express themselves clearly.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study design was based on an interpretive paradigm, qualitative approach. The author assumed that to be able to understand the world of distance education students, it was necessary to explore the life experiences of the students and the realities of their everyday life. Participants were given full details of the aims of the study and what was expected from them in responding to the interview questions. They were assured that the information they shared with the researcher during the interview would be treated confidentially and that they could withdraw from the study at any time. The identity of the participants was protected by using pseudonyms. They were requested to sign consent forms before the interviews. The subjective knowledge of the participants' experiences was collected through semi-structured interviews with ten participants who volunteered to be part of the study.

All participants were distance education students who were enrolled in the ACE: Education Management and had attended tutorial sessions. The participants were from different age groups and various ethnic backgrounds and they taught in primary or secondary schools. The interviews were used as a data collection method to explore the learning support needs of the students, their experiences and concerns. All the interviews took place at the tutorial venues after the sessions and lasted for approximately 30 minutes each.

To gain some knowledge about, and a better understanding of the current learning support structures for distance education students, the following questions were asked:

- What can you say about the learning support sessions?
- What is your role in and expectations of a session?
- What kind of support do you receive in a learning support session?
- What are the challenges?

The data from the interviews was analysed in terms of the themes in the interview questions. To enhance credibility and trustworthiness, triangulation was done by means of different data sources. Participants were given the transcribed data to see if there was any information that may reveal their identity and to confirm the accuracy of the data. The interviews with the students were compared to determine the differences and similarities of their experiences and expectations.

Peer triangulation enabled the researchers to compare transcript codes, emerging patterns and themes. Recommendations were made based on the findings about how learning sessions could be improved. The study was limited to two learning support venues, namely Polokwane and Mokopane in the Limpopo Province of South Africa.

THEMES THAT EMERGED FROM THE INTERVIEWS

Four major themes emerged from the interviews. The first theme was appreciating the ability of the tutor to clarify subject content and to motivate students during the sessions. Students recognised the importance of a combined effort of peer support in collaborative learning. The second theme involved the different ways in which the role of the tutor was perceived by tutors and students. The third theme is concerned with the nature and importance of the support that students were getting from support sessions, while the fourth theme dealt with the administrative problems experienced by distance learning students.

Theme 1: Students' experiences of learning support in respect of subject content

Learning support sessions were perceived by all students to be a useful support structure that provided them with the opportunity to improve their understanding of the course material through lectures provided by the tutor/facilitator and meaningful interaction with other students. The sharing of ideas among peers seemed to motivate the students and reduce any feelings of isolation. The following comments were made in this regard during the interviews:

Without contact sessions I would not have made it. Books alone are not enough because there are questions at the end of each unit that you may not be able to answer if you are alone. (Student 3)

When you come from a support session, you feel that you want to read. Even on your way home, you start reading. You feel as if someone is telling you to read. (Student 2)

Some students felt that it was important for them to participate in group discussions during the session:

Groupwork is good in a contact session. It gives us a chance to learn. 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 opinions. Even if you do not talk, you gain something from those who talk. (Student 1)

I think my role in a 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. You would have a problem if you try to do assignments on your own. (Student 4)

The learning support sessions were perceived by some of the students as an opportunity for self-development and life-long learning. The knowledge and experience they gained seemed to have more meaning for the students – beyond the final effects of an examination:

I would recommend that they attend the sessions. I would tell them that this is not only for the exams, but life-long learning. You will apply it in life even after passing the exams. It can even help you to become a better person outside your working environment. (Student 7)

When we were discussing problems in our groups, one of the group members talked about a similar problem I was having and how she solved it. We share with others the problems we have in our schools. After the sessions when I went back to my school, I was able to handle some of my problems better. (Student 6)

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 4)

Some participants seem to experience a wider transactional distance in terms of structure and the content of the learning support materials. They appear unable to fully engage with the learning content independently, and acknowledged that the support from their peers and the facilitators was valuable.

Theme 2: Expectations and roles played during a learning support session

Some students expected the tutors/facilitators to lecture them and give them the answers to the questions asked on the worksheets, while others expected the facilitator to guide them in terms of the course content and its application to real-life situations. After attending the session, students commented as follows:

I want to gain insight on what the course entails, how to approach the work, how to prepare for exams and what is expected of me. I find that sometimes at home I struggle with what is expected of us. When I come to the contact sessions I say it's like a formal class where I can share my experiences and what I understand in the programme. (Student 10)

I expect to get knowledge, to share the problems around our school and classrooms with others. (Student 5)

It must guide me to get to know how to study on my own because we do it individually. It should teach us to work in groups. You find that there are people from your area who are doing the same course and you can make a study group. You can read books but you find that doing an assignment is still difficult when you are alone without guidelines. (Student 6)

Other students felt empowered and saw their role as making a contribution to the learning process during contact sessions:

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

We as students have a role to play in the sessions. We must come prepared and not blame the facilitators for not being prepared. (Student 2)

It seems that the students' interaction with their peers during the support session tends to reduce the gap in the transactional distance. The students talked of taking an active role in the learning process through discussions with their peers.

Theme 3: Support received during the sessions

The responses show that some students experience the learning support session mainly as a means of preparing them for completing assignments and for writing examinations. 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 when you work at home. When it comes to assignments, the support sessions are number 1. (Student 2)

The worksheets help us a lot. They give us what is expected of us. The worksheet summarises what is in the study guide. If you do the worksheets with others you are already preparing for exams. (Student 9)

Worksheets are designed according to the study guide and they encourage you to read the study guide. (Student 6)

I find the tutors very supportive. We gain a lot of knowledge from them. We achieve the outcomes of the module units through group discussions with the help of the tutor. (Student 8)

The quality of the facilitator is really good. The first time I came here, I wondered what the module was all about. Through the help of the facilitator, I now understand the module better. I am also able to do the assignments. (Student 3)

The participants' narrations indicate the use of a well-designed learning structure and the interaction between the facilitator and the students as being fruitful. A better structure and an increase in dialogue seem to reduce the transactional distance and improve the ability of the students to complete assignments and prepare for examinations.

Theme 4: Challenges and recommendations from participants

A common challenge mentioned by all students relates to administrative problems, such as venue changes, the cancellation of tutorial venues and last-minute confirmation of tutorial venues. Many students complained about the lack of response when they called the University. The students 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 relocated to Umtata. This is doing injustice to the nine students. (Student 1)

There is a breakdown in communication with the University. Lately, there are no SMS reminders for contact sessions. Sometimes our names are not on the list and you feel embarrassed because you sent the SMS. Sometimes the SMS does not go through because of poor network signals. For long

contact sessions an SMS is not enough, we should fill in a registration form. (Student 2)

We did not attend the long contact session last time because our SMS was not registered due to weak signal. We were embarrassed because we came here and the session had been cancelled, although we had a confirmation message on our phones. (Student 7)

We have administration problems – sometimes when we come for learning support sessions there is nobody to help you. We phone the University but we cannot get through – the lines are always busy. (Student 4)

Contrary to the negative experiences that many students had with regard to administrative support, some seemed satisfied with how the University organised the learning support 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)

All in all, the contact sessions have been excellent. (Student 10)

Other challenges that were not of an administrative nature concerned the use of the vernacular during the sessions as well as questionable tutor competency.

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

At times you find that the tutor knows only one module and the second one is too difficult for him – when you ask him a question he cannot answer. Language is also a problem. (Student 4)

With reference to the study guides, some students struggled to obtain additional study material.

The recommended study materials are not easily available. Sometimes we have to move around the country to get some references needed. Perhaps the University should supply a summarised version for us. (Student 9)

The University should come up with more information because some of our study materials give us brief or little information, then refers us to some books that we should buy or information to search on the Internet. The Internet is not always available. (Student 1)

DISCUSSION

The distance education students who were interviewed during this study found learning support sessions useful in the sense that they could more easily understand the subject content because of tutor facilitation and peer learning support. The experiential knowledge gained through peer discussions seems to have had an impact on the work environment of the students. Peer interaction seems to reduce the feeling of isolation by decreasing transactional distance (Moore, 1980) between the facilitators and the students. The students appeared excited to be able to apply theory to practice in their work environment. They appreciated the role that the tutor/facilitator played in providing insights that made the course content easier for them to understand.

Stevenson et al. (2006) report similar findings. In their study, students' positive feedback on tutor leadership motivated tutors to continue to evaluate the key issues of the course material. For most of the learners, the support they received during learning support sessions seemed more advantageous than studying alone. This finding shows that a high level of dialogue reduces transactional distance (Moore, 1980). This links up with Dzakiria's (2008) warning that students studying alone may feel isolated and experience learning problems.

It is suggested that students want more than just lectures from the tutor/facilitator; they want to be able to share their experiences, learn from each other and in the process increase learner autonomy, which results in low transactional distance. Some of the students in the current study felt that they were contributing to the body of knowledge during the sessions and, thus, they did not rely exclusively on the tutor/facilitator as an expert.

Another important aspect of this study is concerned with the students' expectations of a learning support session. The role of the tutor/facilitator was perceived in different ways, as some students expected the facilitator to lecture and give answers to the worksheets and the assignments, while others expected the facilitator to provide guidance only as they took charge of their learning. Both

groups of students needed some form of dialogue with the facilitator, although one group seemed more inclined to being autonomous. In the study by Stevenson et al. (2006), some students wanted discussion and interaction with fellow students in a learning session, while others wanted lectures and a focus on course content. According to Brigley and Kell (2007), third-year students need tutor support with reflective learning and content-oriented skills rather than pastoral care. Different students were found to have different learning styles and needs. Some students would engage more deeply with the study material and needed passive tutor support, while others were “disengaged” from the learning material and needed more active tutor guidance and support (Carnwell, 2000).

In this study, the students expected the facilitator to explain the course content and give them additional information that would be helpful in assignments and examinations. The implication of this finding is that the role of the tutor/facilitator and that of the students should be clearly defined so that there is a common understanding of the nature of the learning session. Facilitators should be trained to balance the two roles to meet the learning needs of the different students. They should explain the difficult course content to improve students’ understanding and, at the same time, provide an opportunity for the students to share their own knowledge and understanding.

This paper argues that the role of the tutor should be balanced between providing insights into the course content and facilitating peer learning through group discussions. Furthermore, findings in this study reveal that tutors/facilitators who were more inclined to teaching did not give adequate time for groupwork and students tended to become more dependent on the tutor/facilitator as the holder of knowledge. On the other hand, tutors/facilitators who believed in constructivist learning were more likely to encourage group discussions and conducted interactive sessions.

With regard to the actual support received during the learning sessions, the students in this study seem to have benefited from the knowledge and expertise of the tutor/facilitator, and peer participation in group discussions contributed positively to the learning process. The tutor’s contribution was linked more to examination preparation and successful assessment outcomes, like obtaining pass marks for assignments and examinations, while the peer contribution was of a practical nature and addressed the work environment of the students. The sessions provided an opportunity for networking and collaborative learning, which was a

way of overcoming the loneliness and reducing the transactional distance that is often experienced by distance education students.

A noteworthy finding involves the problems experienced by the students in the process of registering for, and attending learning support sessions. There seems to be serious communication problems between the students and the University's administrative structures. The situation was described by one student as a "breakdown in communication".

The University's infrastructure for communicating with students by means of SMS technology seems to be inadequate, at times, in terms of recording students' confirmation of attendance of the sessions. The discrepancy between the data records of the administrative section and students' cellphone notifications indicates a serious malfunction in the communication system. The consequences of such malfunction is that students are denied access to the learning support sessions, as some venues are cancelled due to a low number of registrations that are confirmed *via* the SMS system. It seems that the system requires a back-up or alternative means of confirming attendance for students in areas where there is poor network coverage and where students are not able to receive or send SMSs.

Ntshoe (2010) asserts that a reliance on technology for distance education students may alienate students in rural and remote areas where network coverage is problematic. In terms of the student context, it would be worthwhile exploring how communication can be improved to benefit all students rather than being a barrier to learning support for some students. Dzakiria (2007) argues that the role of management is crucial for successful learning support to take place in distance learning, while Cain et al. (2003) maintain that effective communication is a vital element in providing constructive learning support for distance education students.

Another aspect of communication that constitutes a part of the reported problems in this study is related to the language of communication. It is evident from the experiences of some students that not all the facilitators are comfortable communicating in English and rather use the vernacular during the sessions. The use of colloquial speech may be problematic, as some of the terminology may not be easy to translate. In addition, since assignments and examinations are written in English, it would be better for the students to understand the subject content in English in order to make it easier for them to answer the examination questions in that language.

It should also be noted that students mentioned that they had difficulty accessing the recommended additional study material. The reasons for this could be a lack of Internet access for some students due to the underdeveloped technological infrastructure in their region and/or the non-existence of local libraries that could serve as resource centres.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

From the study, it is clear that a number of steps should be taken to improve distance education students' experiences of learning support sessions. The following recommendations are made:

- The University should encourage peer support networks during and beyond the learning support sessions.
- Tutor/facilitator training should focus on strategies that develop the competency of the tutor/facilitator in respect of course content knowledge and the ability to motivate and facilitate group activities.
- A reliable and effective mode of communication should be put in place. It seems that it is not enough to rely on SMS communication. The University administration should consider implementing additional communication strategies to supplement the use of SMS technology. The messages sent to students should be timely and, if possible, reminders should be sent as well.
- Examinations and assignments are mostly written in English. Thus, when facilitators are recruited and prepared, their proficiency in English should be a prerequisite and a priority for further training.
- When the training course material is designed, it is crucial to take into consideration the availability of additional course material before drawing up the reference list., It is essential to provide an alternative means of obtaining the learning material for students who are unable to download reading material or who do not have access to libraries. These measures can include arranging for mobile resource units to be available as part of the learning support structure.

CONCLUSION

In the current study, it was found that distance education students generally experienced learning support sessions as useful and worth attending. There was a close link between what the students expected from a learning support session and what they actually experienced during the sessions. The students positively valued the role and function of the tutors/facilitators. In their view, tutor/facilitator support managed to make theoretical content easier to understand and the support sessions encouraged practical activities by means of group interaction. Interaction during group discussions was viewed as the sharing of knowledge and experience among peers, which seemed to reduce transactional distance. In their work environment, some students made practical use of the relationships and networks they had established during the discussions. The sessions also helped to develop the students, both professionally and personally. It was found that the high dependency on the use of SMS communication for registering students for support sessions was likely to disadvantage some learners in areas where mobile phone network coverage was poor or unavailable, widening the transactional gap between the students and the support system. These students struggled to confirm their attendance, thus limiting their opportunity to attend learning support sessions. Further research is required to establish a more effective communication system to meet the expectations of the students and to enhance the process of learning support.

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