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Corresponding author: Richard Ouma, Department of Educational Administration & Management, Faculty of Education, Uganda Martyrs University, Kampala, Uganda, P.O Box 5498, Kampala, Uganda
E-mail: rouma@umu.ac.ug

TEACHER EDUCATION & DEVELOPMENT | RESEARCH ARTICLE

Transforming university learner support in open and distance education: Staff and students perceived challenges and prospects

Richard Ouma

Abstract: This article cross-examines the views of the university staff and selected students on institutional challenges in managing and delivering learner support for in-service teachers engaged in distance education in Uganda. A qualitative approach using in-depth interviews and reflective logs provided the study framework. The results showed several challenges faced by the university in administering learner support: a limited number of full-time staff at the faculty, lack of a reading culture, poor citations and referencing styles by students, untimely communication, and failure of some students to attend faculty field support. Further analysis revealed challenges of organising successful face-to-face workshops, inadequate counselling and guidance, inadequate action research supervision, students' lack of ICT skills, inadequate library support, limited financial resource base, inadequate faculty support from the university management, and limited distance learners' representation in their leadership and governance. The article concludes that building institutional capacity for distance education should be a driver to transform learner support challenges into opportunities for enhanced service delivery.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Richard Ouma is a Director, Quality Assurance and Lecturer in the Faculty of Education, Uganda Martyrs University, Kampala, Uganda. He holds a doctorate degree in Education from the University of York, and a master's degree in International Educational Management from the University of Leeds, UK. His research interests include Educational Management & Leadership, Quality Assurance in Higher Education, Teacher Education and Professional Development, School Improvement, Participatory Approaches and Distance Education. The research in this paper relates to teacher education and professional development using the distance education mode.
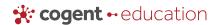
Richard Ouma

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Appreciating the views of the stakeholders (especially the students and their trainers) about learner support management and delivery in open and distance education is an integral effective planning component which is often given limited attention by higher institutions of learning in Uganda. This study examined the views of the university staff and students on institutional challenges in managing and delivering learner support for in-service teachers engaged in distance education. The results showed several challenges faced by the university in administering learner support: a limited number of full-time staff, lack of a reading culture, untimely communication and failure of some students to attend faculty field support. Further analysis revealed challenges of inadequate counselling, inadequate research supervision, lack of ICT skills, inadequate library support and limited financial resource base. Therefore, building institutional capacity for distance education should be a driver to transform learner support challenges into opportunities for enhanced service delivery.

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1. Introduction

Distance education and learner support is believed to have started as early as 1957 in Uganda. It was termed correspondence study and was used to up-grade Grade III teachers to Grade V (Senkomago, 2004). This programme did not have adequate study materials and support to the learners and hardly survived beyond 1962. Literature indicates that in the 1960s, Makerere University trained teachers on distance education mode and could use "the people" newspaper to print and distribute the reading materials (Bbuye & Mango, 2005; Senkomago, 2004). It is not clear how the learners sent their work for marking and how they obtained feedback from the trainers. The training programme lacked clear direction given that the trainers like their students, had limited knowledge and skills in running correspondence courses.
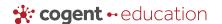
In the wake of liberalisation of the economy in the 1990s, several private universities came on board to provide distance education in Uganda (Binns & Otto, 2006). Those universities mainly rely on printed course materials in the form of modules, and short face-to-face sessions for learner support (Basaza, Milman, & Wright, 2010). In their studies, distance learners undertake activities like; collecting and reading modules, doing coursework assignments, attending field support and regular face-to-face sessions, sourcing information from the library and electronic sources, discussing with peers, consulting tutors, and doing examinations at the end of every semester. However, there has been a slow development in learner support practices (Aguti & Fraser, 2006; Bbuye, 2006).

The limited provision of basic telecommunications infrastructure and connectivity both at country and institutional level is a big snag in managing and delivering learner support in distance education in Uganda (Mayende, Muyinda, Isabwe, Walimbwa, & Siminyu, 2014; Mutonyi & Norton, 2007). Despite the shortcomings in learner support delivery, there has been a general increase in the number of students enrolling on the distance education courses. The increase is attributed to the need for job security, reducing on the high education costs, and ensuring family stability (Lejeune, 2005; Senkomago, 2004). The practice is augmented by the strong social ties and extended family African culture such that the family, especially the children, spouses and elders, is not denied of their continuous services from the adult member studying. Analysing the university staff and students' perceptions of the institutional challenges faced in supporting their trainees provides evidence-based support for decision-making aiming at transforming the quality of the university learner support.

2. Challenges and prospects of learner support in Uganda

A critical challenge facing distance education in Uganda is limited learner support for the ever-increasing number of students (Bbuye, 2006). Research has revealed that in Uganda like other African countries, universities providing distance education are faced with several learner support problems ranging from infrastructural and financial constraints, to human resources and quality enhancement bottlenecks (Gulati, 2008; Nankanja & Bisaso, 2011). However, improved learner support in distance education can be pivotal in meeting the various professional progression needs of distance learners (Cacheiro-Gonzalez, Medina-Rivilla, Dominguez-Garrido, & Medina-Dominguez, 2019; Rumble, 2001; Simpson, 2013). The reasoning is that distance learners are more likely to persist and complete their studies as they work because their learning needs are effectively addressed.

In Uganda, the absence of a national policy framework for distance education impedes learner support leading to supply of sub-standard services (Ouma, 2003). Butcher (2010) observes that at continental level, the African Union's efforts for tertiary education development and quality rating

mechanism does not consider distance education a priority. Nevertheless, Bottomley and Calvert (2003), and Muyinda (2012) claim that with a proper distance learning policy reflecting institutional mission and value commitments, distance education can generate funds for self-sustenance and meet its goals and objectives. While citing examples of the UK, USA and Australia, Belawati and Zuhairi (2007) state that the pro-active policy guidelines valuing distance education like the traditional methods have enhanced the quality of learner support.

The poor national socio-economic infrastructure poses a challenge to quality learner support in the developing countries (Gulati, 2008; Ouma, 2003). In Uganda, the economy's level of electrification and communication network, including the use of computers, internet and m-learning, is still limited. Several commentators (Basaza et al., 2010; Juma, 2003) argue that the insufficient commitment of funds to distance education programmes by universities makes it difficult to effectively cater for the learning needs of distance learners. Insufficient funds limit the teacher training department's capacity to effectively plan, organise and support the learners by providing adequate course materials, qualified staff, infrastructure and facilities, meals and utilities.

There is limited use of ICTs such as live broadcasts and videoconferencing to support distance education in Uganda (Mutonyi & Norton, 2007; Nankanja & Bisaso, 2011). While referring to the state of affair on the African continent, Sife, Lwoga, and Sanga (2007) raise the issue of poor and inequitably distributed information infrastructure in several universities. Research indicates that though operating costs may be low, investment and fixed costs on ICTs are high hence the need for a strong financial resource base (Rumble, 2001). In Uganda, facilities like broadcasts and videoconferencing are used where there are donor funds (Bbuye, 2006). This shows that there is a drive to use ICTs but limited by the means. Similarly, Lim, Fadzil, and Mansor (2011) in their research on mobile messaging via SMS at the University of Malaysia recognised that in Africa, efforts to use text messages were significant at some universities in Uganda and South Africa. Contrary, in a later related study in Uganda; Mayende et al. (2014) point out the limited use of simple technologies like mobile telephony for Facebook. They found the challenge of limited access to internet, low ICT literacy levels and several students' phones not supporting Facebook. Nonetheless, the use of mobile telephony to enhance learner support in the developing countries is significant (Makoe, 2012; Motlik, 2008; Tagoe & Abakah, 2014; Valk, Rashid, & Elder, 2010). Uganda institutions can tap and benefit from Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) across the global higher education sector to equip staff with relevant ICT in the digital age (Mirriahi, Alonzo, McIntyre, Kligyte, & Fox, 2015).

The challenge of poor internet connectivity with a bigger burden on students from rural areas compared to their urban counterparts is widespread (Basaza et al., 2010; Mutonyi & Norton, 2007). In Uganda, the internet facility is available at the universities and in urban public internet cafes hence not easily accessible to many in-service teachers living and working in rural villages (Bbuye, 2006). To improve learner support delivery, there is a need for a reliable communication system (Trindade, Carmo, & Bidarra, 2000). Limited communication has been identified as the major limitation to improved quality learner support in distance education especially in the developing countries (Makoe, 2012). In Uganda, the limited bandwidth in most institutions affects both staff and students' access to the internet for research, teaching, community service, learning and general communication.

Basaza et al. (2010) cites the lack of adequate skills and knowledge in distance education by both academic and support staff in many Ugandan universities. Studies conducted in the neighbouring Kenya and other developing countries like India have mentioned the lack of supportive skills by the teacher trainers that has hampered the quality of the trainees and promoted frustrations in delivery and learning (Bwire, Nyagisere, Masingila, & Ayot, 2015; Gulati, 2008; Kishore, 2014; Nyerere, Gravenir, & Mse, 2012). The limited exposure and staff training in distance education in many sub-Saharan countries needs an overhaul to improve the effectiveness of learner support and avoid what Tait (1989) describes as "living in a fool's paradise".

Much reliance on print course materials which are poorly developed impedes quality learner support in Uganda and other sub-Saharan countries (Binns & Otto, 2006; Gulati, 2008). In addition, most of the references are derived from western developed countries which poses a challenge of how to localise what is international on part of the instructor, and how to internalise what has been derived from other environments and use it in a different context by the in-service teachers.

The use of traditional methods of teaching and limited exposure to learner-centred methods limits the effectiveness of tutoring support in the context of Uganda (Muyinda, Lubega, & Lynch, 2009). The challenge is that the traditional methods such as the lecture method put the teacher in the centre of teaching-learning process instead of the student who is the intended learning beneficiary. Countries like Namibia, Ethiopia, South Africa and Botswana are focusing on the student rather than the teacher as the key focus in instructional practices (EFA GMR Team, 2015). The implication is that teaching support should focus on the student, and the teacher playing a facilitation role. This is difficult to adopt by both the teacher and student in a teacher-centred learning environment in Uganda.

Poor reading culture limits the effectiveness of learner support in many African countries (Kaberia, 2012). The poor reading culture among Africans is rooted from the African culture where there is much preference for talking as opposed to reading which is solitary and considered to demean the social attribute of the African culture. Contrary to the above assertion of Kaberia, research shows that many people on the African continent are underprivileged and lack access to economic resources which adversely affect their reading and learning (Nkuyubwatsi, 2016). The argument is that the issue of poor reading culture is more of a stereotype and cannot convincingly be used to explain the ineffective learner support in many African countries as limited access to economic resources have left many people in poverty. In Uganda, Mlay, Sabi, Tsuma, and Langmia (2015) attribute the poor reading culture to the forceful means used by some parents to initiate their children in reading. However, the same study agrees with Baryamureeba (2007) who found that ICT use helps to promote reading by enabling the students to have access to different reading resources. The slow development of the reading culture could be in-line with the low level of ICT use in distance education in the "developing world" (Gulati, 2008; Mutonyi & Norton, 2007).

3. Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to examine the views of the university staff on institutional challenges in managing and delivering learner support for in-service teachers engaged in distance education. The bottom line is to provide an empirical basis for the distance education providers to appreciate the current learner support challenges and strategies in order to transform them into opportunities for enhanced service delivery and fill the gap in the literature in the study context. The study was guided by the research question: What are the challenges faced by the university in managing and delivering learner support to in-service teachers on distance education?

4. Methods

4.1. Data collection

The study adopted a qualitative research approach using in-depth interviews and reflective logs to collect data from the selected staff and students engaged in distance education in the faculty of education at a Ugandan university. It involved intensive interactions with six university staff (interviewees) who were knowledgeable about learner support in distance education (Boyce & Neale, 2006). The selection of the category of interviewees was purposive because they had to be knowledgeable about the context of the research relating to what Gillham (2005) terms "elite interview". After identifying the category of 14 full-time staff members at the faculty of Education involved in running distance education courses, the final selection of six members who participated in the study was voluntary.

In line with (Creswell, 2014), in-depth interviews enabled probing and eliciting responses from the respondents. The draft interview tool was piloted, the questions were refined and sequenced logically based on the research themes before data collection. The interview periods varied ranging from 40 to 90 minutes. It depended on the explanation given by each interviewee and probing based on their respective responses. Though challenging to keep on recording during the interview (Gillham, 2005), I jotted down key issues but also audio recorded the process and was able to listen to the recording and internalised the discussion after the interview. The audio recording was done with full knowledge and permission of the respondents.

In line with Gambhir (2010) who considers a reflective log as a record of the learner's experience, thinking and reflections on learning, the tool was used to collect data from four students in this study. Although the participants individually volunteered, continuous access to the internet was a pre-requisite for participation. The aim was to ensure continuous communication between the respondents and the investigator during the logging period. The draft tool was piloted on one student outside the main study that informed further improvement hence making the tool more valid and reliable.

It involved the in-service teachers recording personal experiences of the learner support challenges faced by the university. The findings were triangulated with those of the interview method. It was worthwhile to use learner log as a data collection method because the respondents record what they see happening hence inserting concrete effect on the research design (Ortlipp, 2008). A simplified log template was developed and a briefing for the identified participants was conducted before they started logging.

4.2. Data analysis

The analysis was guided by the thematic analytic model (Miles & Huberman, 1994) considering data reduction, data display, data verification and drawing conclusions. In data reduction, data recorded during interviews were transcribed and verified by checking and cleaning the audio, the field notes and transcript. Review of the transcripts was done to improve on the logical flow of ideas, identify grammatical errors, punctuations and general quality of the transcripts. During data analysis, the following themes emerged from the findings; staffing challenge, reading culture challenge, communication challenge, field support and face-to-face organisation challenge, student counselling challenge, research supervision challenge, ICTs and library support challenge, behavioural challenge, financial challenge, and distance learners' representation challenge. These themes were generated based on the main categories of challenges obtained from the study findings.

Nvivo 11 qualitative data organisation computer software was used to prepare and organise the research data for meaningful interpretation. I coded the respondents and field data as a component of data reduction. This is because as a transition from data collection to analysis, there was a need for a word or group of words to symbolise big text narrative or visual data (Saldana, 2013). The six university staff were coded: Uni staff 1, Uni staff 2, Uni staff 3, Uni staff 4, Uni staff 5 and Uni staff 6. The numbers were given randomly and do not indicate staff position or seniority in the faculty. For the case of the four Log respondents, they were identified by numbers instead of their actual names: Log respondent 1, Log respondent 2, Log respondent 3, and Log respondent 4. Coding thus provided a form of summarising while maintaining the findings.

From the word processor, the data were exported to Nvivo computer software for improved data organisation and preparation for analysis and interpretation. The study themes shown in the findings section were coded as nodes. Related nodes were placed in the same parent node based on each of the study themes. The Nvivo nodes were preferred over creating manual codes because they could be easily organised, traced and merged (Wong, 2008). The organised data were exported to word for further interpretation and display. Data display took the form of text.

5. Findings

5.1. Staffing challenge

There was a critical challenge of a limited number of full-time staff at the faculty that could not adequately support the students. The reflective log findings indicated that even among the few full-time, not all of them could be found at the faculty during working hours. This implies that the available full-time staff could not sustain quality in the provision of learner support to the in-service teachers:

> We have a limited number of fulltime staff that affects (sic) the quality of our work adversely. Relying on part-time staff helps to reduce the monetary costs but seems to be more expensive in terms of time. It takes much time to coordinate part-time staff during setting coursework assignments and examinations, marking and giving feedback to the students, and meet the university deadlines (Uni staff 2).

The importance of having adequate teaching and support staff in managing and delivering learner support was revealed. Reliance on part-time staff support could help to reduce monetary expenses but poses a challenge to proper and timely coordination of learner support activities. This is because part-time staff are either not readily available or may not be reached in time.

5.2. Reading culture challenge

The lack of a reading culture among the students in the study negatively affected learner support. The interviewees conveyed that while the university took the initiative to provide course materials, the students did not effectively utilise them:

> For some of our students, their reading culture is low. This has been a challenge to the effectiveness of our courses. This could be attributed to a few public libraries and limited emphasis on reading at the lower education levels in the country (Uni staff 2).

The students noted the inadequate preparation and support from the faculty to enable them improve on their reading and writing culture being adult learners. A manifestation of low reading culture in the community is congruent with earlier studies (Bunoti, 2010; Mamdani, 2007) who found a limited reading culture among staff and students in Uganda.

There was a poor citation and referencing among the students:

> Many of our students have a challenge of citations and referencing their work correctly. We use the Harvard referencing system in the faculty, but you find students mixing it up with other referencing styles (Uni staff 2).

While the faculty recommended the use of the Harvard referencing style, the students (in-service teachers) continued using different referencing styles. The influence of the referencing styles used in higher educational institutions attended by the students prior to this enrolment was highlighted. It was, however, not clear to ascertain the extent to which staff had supported the students to learn and use the recommended faculty referencing style. This because there was no information received about any course in academic writing taken by the students.

5.3. Communication challenge

There was untimely communication between the faculty and the students with limited feedback:

> There is a challenge of effective communication which is a two-way between the faculty and the students. Sometimes messages are sent on cell-phones but not received by some students. If they all had emails, it would be better and easier to serve all of them (Uni staff 5).

> The university should improve on communication especially when giving out modules and coursework so that we can meet the deadline. Sometimes we get information through rumours (hearsay). For example, when it is time to collect the coursework, we fail to pick them in time because of lack of proper communication (Log Respondent, 2).

There was an indication that at times messages are sent to the students' mobile telephony but received late. This can be explained by the lack of ready supply of electricity and poor communication network in several rural areas in Uganda (Mayende et al., 2014). The lack of email contacts especially among students in the hard-to-reach places limited timely communication:

> There is a challenge accessing our students working in hard-to-reach places such as remote villages, islands and mountainous areas. They cannot be easily reached by a phone call, SMS, WhatsApp, and written letters making communication difficult (Uni staff 1).

Hard-to-reach areas in the Ugandan context refer to places with poor communication and infrastructure network such as mountainous, semi-arid areas and islands detached from the mainland by waterbodies. Such places lack good roads, access to electricity, and experience unstable communication network.

5.4. Field support and face-to-face organisation challenge

Some students missed the faculty field support organised near their home and workplaces. Whereas the students attributed the poor communication by the faculty to lack of ready supply of electricity and poor communication infrastructure in many rural places, staff related it to students' personal commitments:

> When we organise field visit support for the students, some of them do not turn up because of personal commitments elsewhere or sickness. These are the groups that later complain that they did not get some information, yet such information could have been communicated during the field support (Uni staff 4).

The faculty seems to make important communications during those field visits which students who do not attend miss and later complain. This could be an indication to the faculty that relying on a particular communication medium for distance education students may not profit all, hence the need to vary the communication media.

It was problematic to organise face-to-face residential workshops in the study. This is because the period for residential workshops was too short for effective learner support. Findings consistently indicated that many activities (organising for teaching, doing examinations, introducing modules for the next semester, and counselling trainees) were conducted during a short time of two weeks of residential workshops posed a challenge that reduced learner support efficiency. The practice in Uganda is that many of those activities are shelved by distance education providers until the short residential workshops.

Unexpectedly, incidences when several students delayed to report for residential workshops without having read the course materials commonly featured in the study:

> Many students report late for face-to-face workshops when they have not read the modules. The common argument given is the lack of time for revision as they have busy work schedules in their schools and communities (Uni staff 2).

Although the problem of funds and time constraint for in-service teachers cannot be underestimated, the nature of their preparation for distance education by the faculty needs attention. This is because the absence of proper induction of students in distance education limits their ability to cope with the course demands.

5.5. Student counselling challenge

The study consistently found that the faculty lacked an organised programme to provide counselling services to the trainees:

> Providing guidance and counselling to our students has been a big challenge. These key issues are not timetabled but mainly handled when need arises. We even do not have a faculty staff in-charge of providing guidance to others (Uni staff 1).

This implies that support could only be given when requested by the trainee and delivered by unprofessional counsellors. The results point at the need for an institutional counselling and guidance department or programme to support the staff and students for improved learning facilitation and learning, respectively.

5.6. Research supervision challenge

Relating to learner research supervision, staff were allocated many supervisees some of whom end up producing unsatisfactory work:

> The number of the students has increased. For example, the number of BED 1 students is 216 compared to about 80 BED 2 students. This high enrolment has posed a challenge of ensuring effective learner research supervision (Uni staff 2).

> Some of us lack access to computers and the internet for email communication with our research supervisors. Some supervisors take long to give feedback on research drafts making it difficult for us to meet deadlines for submission (Log Respondent, 4).

In the context of the study, BED refers to Bachelors of Education. As such, BED 1 and BED 2 meant first-year and second-year undergraduate students, respectively. The implication is that staff capacity to provide effective research supervision could not match the students' enrolment levels amidst limited use of modern ICTs leading to poor quality students' research output. This finding corroborates Bunoti (2010) study that found a high students:lecturer supervision ratio, with several students complaining that they were not given adequate supervision time at another university in Uganda.

5.7. ICTs and library support challenge

Many students from rural remote areas could hardly use the computers as they lacked both the necessary knowledge and the computer facilities:

> Many of our students are computer illiterate which makes email communication so difficult. Among those living in rural areas, a few have regular access to computers. A good number of them still want to handwrite and present their coursework yet we insist on typed work (Uni staff 3).

Surprisingly, in this era of modern communication technologies, there was an indication that several trainees preferred to handwrite their coursework and yet the faculty expected typed work. The students stated that they lacked modern ICTs in many rural places. This should be a driver for the government and training universities to invest in ICTs and ensure that the majority of the Ugandans access and use such facilities.

There was inadequate library learner support reflected in the form of insufficient resources to meet the specific needs of each student. Findings consistently indicated that the libraries in the study centres are not well equipped with all the necessary reference materials because of the costs involved. Some students who could not access e-learning materials had to travel for long distances to the main university library which is expensive and time-consuming. The students travelling for long distances to access study materials are a clear justification of many being underprivileged (lacked resources), and not necessarily having a poor reading culture (Nkuyubwatsi, 2016). The onus is on the university library to scale-up learner support informed

by students' feedback based on learner support evaluations. There is a prospect of using some of the existing university library resources to extend services to the rural and hard-to-reach areas via mobile library support.

5.8. Behavioural challenge
The study found a peculiar behaviour of some staff and students that limited learner support:

> Some lecturers are rude/selfish and unapproachable, but also some students are uncooperative. These are hiccups to effective learner support that I have observed in the faculty (Uni staff 6).

This view reflects that some staff precipitated learner support challenge through their behaviours of being rude or selfish. The implication is that such characters could not be easily approached by the trainees for support. Similarly, some students are shown to be uncooperative, which reflects their inability to smoothly work with peers and their facilitators. Such improper behaviours limited effective learner support management and delivery to maximise collective gains for both the students and their trainers.

5.9. Financial challenge
Surprisingly, only a few staff cited the challenge of limited financial resource base and yet regarded it the biggest challenge they faced in learner support:

> The biggest challenge we face is the limited resource base. We mainly rely on the students' tuition to provide all the necessary support such as producing the course materials. If they do not pay in time, it limits our learner support efficiency (Uni staff 1).

This view implies a direct relationship between the students' ability to pay and the university's ability to provide relevant learner support (the higher the revenue from students' tuition, the better the learner support). This could act as an eye-opener for the university to diversify its sources of revenue rather than entirely relying on students' tuition for improved learner support management and delivery. The limited faculty support from the university management mainly hinged on the finances and policy issues, which limited the faculty's capacity to reach all students in hard-to-reach places and to use multi-media.

5.10. Distance learners' representation challenge
Findings were consistent that the students lacked adequate representation in their university representative bodies which was termed, lack of "political space" for distance learners:

> The students' guild is only composed of full-time campus students. The lack of effective representation on the university students' leadership body has limited our distance learning students in participating and organising themselves to represent their interests before the faculty and university administration. They therefore need a political space to organise their own leadership (Uni staff 4).

> We should also be organised to manage our affairs politically; by electing leaders like the Guild President for distance learners, and ministers of different responsibilities for the distance education programme (Log Respondent, 4).

This view highlights that distance learners are excluded from the students' leadership at the university, hence lack sufficient "political space" (meaning excluded in the students' leadership structure) to agitate for quality learner support.

6. Discussion and conclusions
Distance education demand is on the increase in Uganda, but the quality of learner support remains a big challenge. The few full-time staff at the faculty could not adequately support the students since they even lacked the necessary skills. This reflects the central role played by staff in

learner support. The inadequacy of staff skills and knowledge in distance learning is exemplified by some staff exhibiting rudeness and being unapproachable. Bunoti (2010) describes staff rudeness in learner support as "unprofessional behaviour". Several studies (Basaza et al., 2010; Bwire et al., 2015; Nyerere et al., 2012) echo that lack of supportive skills by the teacher trainers impedes the quality of the trainees and promotes frustrations in learning. The implication for practice is that DE service providers ought to plan for effective human resources development and deployment for quality learner support delivery. Whereas this study found that learner support was limited by much reliance on part-time staff by the faculty, further research should investigate the relationships between the staff skills, learner support and students' satisfaction in DE. In line with Mukamusoni (2006), there is a need for a clear government-driven agenda to train teacher trainers to be able to support their trainees physically, socially, psychologically and emotionally, and nurture quality learner support systems.

The societal culture has a bearing in nurturing the quality of the people's reading culture. The African culture's emphasis on listening rather than writing has penetrated Uganda's education system with even adult learners being reluctant to read the course materials leading to poor quality coursework and research output. Results indicate that though the university took the initiative to provide learning materials, the students did not use them effectively. Studies indicate that limited reading culture is a national-wide problem in Uganda which is partially explained by a few public libraries and inadequate emphasis on reading in the primary and secondary schools (EFA GMR Team, 2014; UNEB, 2005). Kaberia (2012) considers it an attribute of the African oral culture where there is much preference for talking as opposed to reading. Conversely, many students lacked the resources to access reading materials, many had to move for long distances to source library materials; such students' efforts should not be stereotyped as lacking a reading culture. This finding corroborates that of Nkuyubwatsi (2016) study in the neighbouring Rwanda, which found many underprivileged students who could not access learning materials to read and yet they wanted to learn. In this case, the students' reading culture could have been influenced by their socio-cultural system. Mlay et al. (2015) attribute the poor reading culture to the forceful means used by some parents to initiate their children in reading. The implication for DE practitioners and policy makers is the need to inculcate a conducive socio-political environment to ensure that reading is embedded in the national education system curricula at all levels. Baryamureeba (2007) observes that ICT use helps to promote reading by enabling the students to have access to different reading sources. While using ICT is commendable, the practical limitation in Uganda is attributed to the limited ICT infrastructure. Therefore, increased investment in ICTs at institutional and national level can be a precursor to nurturing a reading culture by providing access to a variety of reading materials.

Besides, many students poorly cited and referenced their academic work due to prior limited reading exposure. The influence of the familiar referencing styles used in other institutions earlier attended by the students explains their inability to make proper use of the faculty recommended Harvard referencing style. The extent to which the faculty had supported the students to learn and use the Harvard referencing style could not be ascertained. The implication for the DE practitioners especially the faculty is the need to incorporate useful academic writing skills in the training programme, inculcate a reading and writing culture, and assess the trainees' ability to apply and exhibit such knowledge and skills, respectively. It could also be a good practice for the faculty to conduct a writing skills needs assessment of the students in the initial stages of their courses to plan and mitigate the poor academic writing styles.

Communication is pivotal in effective learner support. Absence of timely information and feedback delivery distorts the quality of learner support in distance education (Murray, Hale, & Dozier, 2015; Trindade et al., 2000). Results showed that the university made efforts to communicate with the students using SMS, mobile telephony, postal services and emails, but several students did not get information in time. The inability of the students to get even telephony calls and SMS in time is explained by the lack of ready supply of electricity, and poor communication infrastructure in

many rural places (Mayende et al., 2014; Mutonyi & Norton, 2007). The students' irregular checking of their email inboxes sheds light on the challenge of untimely communication by the faculty. The implication for practice is that the role of communication cannot be underestimated in any DE learner support management and delivery. Both the student and the trainer have to communicate to solve academic-related problems of the students, network and build strong academic links. For efficiency, the application of ICTs in all forms of communication is a necessity for the staff and students (Busulwa & Bbuye, 2018; Douce, 2018; Nankanja & Bisaso, 2011). The results inform the policy makers to develop educational policies that leverage affordable communication involving the use of ICTs in DE for improved learner support. Uganda could borrow a leaf from other African and Asian countries that are using affordable mobile telephony in distance education learner support (Makoe, 2012; Motlik, 2008; Tagoe & Abakah, 2014; Valk et al., 2010).

Regarding the faculty field support, students who did not attend missed important communications from the university relating to policy and study programmes. Similarly, the students who reported late for the short residential workshops missed vital support offered by the faculty in their absence; a practice that deterred effective and quality learner support. These point at the inadequate study time for distance learners due to work and family engagements (Bbuye, 2006; Bunoti, 2010). However, missing such important learner support services could infer that there was limited student preparation for distance education. The implication for DE practitioners is that relying on off-line learner support services may not profit all the adult and working students. Blended learning should be carefully studied and implemented to ensure that off-line support is complemented by internet-based learner support. Though commentators of learner support (Hope & Guiton, 2006; Tait, 2014) would question the value of field visits and face-to-face programmes in the current digital age, it can be argued that not all countries and even institutions within the same country have the capability to adequately acquire and use such technologies especially in the developing countries.

During face-to-face residential workshops, the effectiveness of learner support delivery was curtailed by the so many activities planned to be accomplished in a short period. Considering the value attached to face-to-face learner support in ODL (Gravani & Karagiorgi, 2014; Olivier, 2016; Price, Richardson, & Jelfs, 2007), effective planning is needed for fruitful returns. In Uganda, planning should consider the effective use of the limited human and material resources for improved learner support. Though planning should consider integrating ICTs in both on-campus and off-campus learning, Price et al. (2007) caution that the success of on-line support leans much on the students and their lecturers' capacity and ability to communicate on-line. The implication is that DE practitioners should not only encourage, but have to deliberately enable the students and staff access ICTs.

Counselling and guidance to the students by the faculty was limited due to the limited time and poor counselling skills exhibited by the staff. The insufficient learner counselling support by the faculty breeds frustrations in learning hence reducing the completion rate among distance learners (Bbuye, 2006). The rationale for the practice and policy is that to maintain a sound counselling system and practices in DE, development of the counselling staff skills is critical. Given the necessity of counselling support for students in distance education, institutions that do not provide such support could be described as "living in a fool's paradise" (Tait, 1989). In India, Kishore (2014) posits that academic counsellors are got from higher institutions of learning with limited exposure to ODL system. While Kishore advocates for capacity building to equip the academic counsellors with the necessary knowledge and skills, Tait (1999) argues that computer-aided guidance and counselling can be pivotal in learner support delivery. The implication for practice and research is the need for universities to allocate some of the limited resources and invest in both human and ICT infrastructure for enhanced learner counselling support in distance education. A supportive quality staff is a necessity to nurture an effective faculty learner counselling culture.

The high supervisee: supervisor ratio limited research supervision effectiveness and led to unsatisfactory research work. This shows a direct correlation between the quality of research

supervision and quality of the students' research work. Elsewhere, in Zimbabwe, Mapolisa (2012) found distance learners being supported by supervisors who had limited research skills. To improve on research supervision, supervisors should have "a big heart" for the supervisees (Mapolisa, 2012). The "big heart" should be manifested in allocating sufficient time for supervision meetings, giving timely feedback on research scripts, continuous counselling, and motivating the students to take lead in their learning.

The lack of ICT skills was acute among students from the rural and hard-to-reach places who lacked the necessary computer facilities and knowledge. The students' limited ICT skills corroborate with the findings of earlier studies (Mayende et al., 2014; Mutonyi & Norton, 2007). The indication that some trainees preferred to hand-write their coursework is not a matter of preference, but a reflection of the limited ICT knowledge and skills. Likewise, students from rural areas could not access e-learning materials due to lack of ICT facilities. They had to move long distances to search for physical library resources. This explains the inadequacy and unevenly distributed library resources to benefit all the students.

Institutional dependence on students' tuition implies that the university's ability to provide learner support depended on the students' ability to pay. Though operating costs may be low, investment and fixed costs are high in distance education (Rumble, 2001) which necessitates a strong financial base. The faculty's inability to reach students in hard-to-reach places, and the limited use of multi-media hinged much on the limited funds allocated by the university management. For effectiveness in managing and delivering learner support, institutional management's support in terms of policy and funding to the faculty is pertinent.

The lack of "political space" implies limited involvement of distance learners in their representative bodies to agitate for a better learner support. However, this is a rare worldwide experience in educational institutions because by nature of their study programmes (studying at a distance), distance learners are often left out of the formal students' leadership structure. However, exploiting the possibility of using modern ICT facilities to incorporate distance learners' representation in their leadership could be a worthwhile venture to enhance learner support management and delivery.

Learner support (academic and non-academic) is the central focus of effective distance education provision and should be effectively provided to delight the focal clientele (students). Institutions that fail to overcome the challenges of learner support will attract fewer students than their competitors. Therefore, learner support challenges should be treated as "loose ends" in the university system that needs tightening. Incorporating views of the different stakeholders (beyond the staff), especially the students in learner support decision-making, and commitment to quality improvement in service delivery should be the norm for effective learner support transformation in distance education.

Author details
Richard Ouma
E-mail: rouma@umu.ac.ug
ORCID ID: http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4690-8423
Faculty of Education, Department of Educational Administration & Management, Uganda Martyrs University, Kampala, Uganda.

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