



Institutional Support Services, Learners' Retention, and Completion in Open-Distance Learning Institutions in South-West, Nigeria

Services D'appui Institutionnel, Rétention et Achèvement, des Apprenants dans les Établissements D'apprentissage Ouvert et à Distance au Sud-Ouest du Nigéria

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Abstract

This study investigated the role of institutional support services in OpenDistance Learning (ODL) programmes, particularly their impact on learner retention and completion in the Southwestern states of Nigeria. Adopting a descriptive survey research design, the study focused on final-year learners within seven approved ODL institutions in the zone. The research employed a multi-stage sampling method and validated instruments for data collection. Findings indicated a significant positive relationship between predictor variables and learner retention and completion in ODL institutions. Consequently, the study recommended the enhancement of institutional support services and the formulation of ODL policies in Nigeria to foster learner-centred approaches, ultimately improving the effectiveness of ODL programmes. The importance of these findings underscores the critical role of institutional support in ODL and its potential to enhance educational outcomes for learners in the zone.

Keywords: Institutional services, Retention, Completion, Open-Distance, Learners

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Résumé

Cette étude s'est penchée sur le rôle des services de soutien institutionnel dans les programmes d'apprentissage à distance ouvert (ODL), en particulier leur impact sur la rétention et l'achèvement des apprenants dans les États du sud-ouest du Nigeria. Adoptée dans le cadre d'une enquête descriptive, l'étude s'est concentrée sur les apprenants de dernière année au sein de sept établissements ODL approuvés dans la zone. La recherche a utilisé une méthode d'échantillonnage à plusieurs degrés et des instruments validés pour la collecte de données. Les résultats ont indiqué une relation positive significative entre les variables prédictives et la rétention et l'achèvement des apprenants dans les établissements d'apprentissage à distance. Par conséquent, l'étude a recommandé l'amélioration des services de soutien institutionnel et la formulation de politiques d'apprentissage et de déformation à la vie quotidienne au Nigéria afin de favoriser des approches centrées sur l'apprenant, améliorant ainsi l'efficacité des programmes d'apprentissage et de déformation. L'importance de ces résultats souligne le rôle essentiel du soutien institutionnel dans l'apprentissage à distance et son potentiel à améliorer les résultats scolaires des apprenants de la zone.

Mots-clés: Services institutionnels, Rétention, Achèvement, ouvert et à distance, Apprenants

Background to the Study

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) has become an essential strategy in addressing the challenges of access to education globally. This is particularly significant in Nigeria, where the conventional education system, especially in higher education, struggles to meet the increasing demand for admission. The rising number of applicants has put a financial strain on the government to expand the capacity of existing institutions, resulting in fierce competition for admission among students and their parents (FGN, 2016). In response to this issue, the National Universities Commission (NUC) has licensed numerous private universities between 2001 and 2018. However, even with these additional institutions, there remains a persistent

problem of limited absorption capacity, where the number of students seeking admission surpasses the rate of capacity expansion.

To illustrate the extent of the access challenge in Nigerian higher education, consider the data presented in Table 1.1, which shows the number of Unified Tertiary Matriculation Examination (UTME) applicants and the corresponding admission figures for various States in Nigeria in 2016.

The table below shows the debt of access to higher education in Nigeria.

Table 1: Number of UTME applicants to the universities and the numbers that gained admission in 2016, according to state

S/N	State	No. of applicants to University by State	Number of Students Who Gained Admission to University by State	Percentages of Students Admitted to University by State
1.	Abia	51,209	13,383	26.13
2.	Adamawa	15,205	6,566	43.18
3.	Akwa Ibom	58,135	14,766	25.49
4.	Anambra	77,239	20,663	26.75
5.	Bauchi	15,420	6,423	41.65
6.	Bayelsa	21,130	5,633	26.65
7.	Benue	59,395	17,558	29.56
8.	Borno	14,243	5,850	41.07
9.	Cross River	29,059	9,781	33.65
10.	Delta	78,126	19,576	25.05
11.	Ebonyi	31,852	9,252	29.04
12.	Edo	65,513	17,772	27.12
13.	Ekiti	33,909	11,871	35.00
14.	Enugu	68,904	16,080	23.33
15.	Gombe	18,201	7,143	39.24
16.	Imo	103,724	11,778	11.35
17.	Jigawa	12,071	5,351	44.32
18.	Kaduna	48,611	16,135	33.19
19.	Kano	47,454	17,321	36.50
20.	Katsina	22,133	7,663	34.62

S/N	State	No. of applicants to University by State	Number of Students Who Gained Admission to University by State	Percentages of Students Admitted to University by State
21.	Kebbi	8,772	3,354	38.23
22.	Kogi	56,673	16,282	28.72
23.	Kwara	52,436	13,626	25.98
24.	Lagos	23,833	6,938	29.11
25.	Nasarawa	29,049	7,669	26.40
26.	Niger	17,599	6,132	34.84
27.	Ogun	59,824	18,948	31.67
28.	Ondo	53,572	16,490	30.78
29.	Osun	68,479	9,339	13.63
30.	Oyo	70,382	17,196	24.43
31.	Plateau	32,893	7,107	21.60
32.	Rivers	40,482	11,385	28.12
33.	Sokoto	9,982	2,229	22.33
34.	Taraba	14,720	5,106	34.68
35.	Yobe	7,827	5,226	66.76
36.	Zamfara	5,222	1,303	24.95
37.	FCT Abuja	3,830	1,507	39.34
	Total	1,427,108	390,402	27.35

Source: National Bureau of Statistics/Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board, 2019

The table highlights the disparity between the number of applicants and the limited admission opportunities available, underscoring the urgent need to find alternative educational pathways. In response to this need, ODL has emerged as a viable solution, leveraging technology for instructional delivery and offering flexible learning opportunities to individuals who face time, resource, and geographical constraints (Aderinoye and Ojokheta, 2004). ODL aims to overcome barriers of time and place, providing education and training opportunities to a broader population (Okebukola, 2009). The Federal Ministry of Education in Nigeria, through its National Policy on Education (2014), recognises the value of open and distance

learning in achieving lifelong education goals and ensuring equitable access to quality education.

The establishment and growth of ODL in Nigeria and globally have revolutionised educational development. Unlike the traditional education system, which faces inherent limitations regarding expansion, access, equity, and cost-effectiveness, ODL offers flexible and inclusive learning options (Jegede, 2016). This mode of education caters for a diverse population, including those who were previously excluded from formal education due to space limitations. Distance learning universities can accommodate hundreds of thousands of students, making education accessible to those who were previously denied admission due to capacity constraints (Awe, 2013).

However, despite the expanding growth and benefits of ODL, there is a persistent challenge of low retention and completion rates among learners. This concern has long been acknowledged by stakeholders in the education sector (Chiwanza & Shupikai, 2015; Akande, Oyelami & Ojo, 2021). Learners who lack motivation or struggle with self-directed learning may become easily discouraged and discontinue their education. Effective learner support services are crucial in providing the necessary motivation, quality interactions, and feedback to foster student achievement and minimise dropout rates.

Tables 2, 3, and 4 below provide empirical evidence of the ongoing challenges related to learner retention and completion within Open-Distance Learning (ODL) institutions in Nigeria. By highlighting the substantial attrition rates, the table underscores the need for effective institutional support services to address these issues. The data illustrate the gap between initial enrollment and eventual completion, reinforcing the importance of this study's focus.

Table 2: Enrolment, Completion, and Attrition Rate in National Open University of Nigeria between 2013/2004 and 2017/18 Academic Sessions

S\n	All Programmes	Enrolment in 2013/2014 Academic Session	Completion Rate in 2017/2018 session	Attrition Rate
Total	38	85,031	12,666	0.85

Source: (NOUN, MIS 2019)**Table 3: Learners' Admission and Retention Rate in Distance Learning Centre (DLC), University of Ibadan (Dual-Mode)**

S/no	Programme	No. of Students Admitted in 2013\2014	No. that progressed to the Final Session 2018/2019
1	Adult Education	-	-
2	Special Education	--	-
3	Education Management	-	-
4	Guidance and Counselling	-	-
5	Human Kinetic and Health Education	-	-
6	Library Archival and Information Studies	-	-
7	Social Work	1,204	23
8	Teacher Education	-	-
9	Communication and Language Arts	-	-
10	Linguistics	-	-
11	English	313	7
12	French	-	-
13	Philosophy and Public Affairs	331	10
14	Psychology	1,722	126
15	Economics	1,575	51
16	Political Science	1,298	184
17	Agriculture Science	-	-
	Total	6,443	401

Source: Distance Learning Centre (DLC), University of Ibadan

Table 4: Students' Admission and Retention Rate in Centre for Distance Learning (CDL), Obafemi Awolowo University (Dual mode)

Programmes	2015-2016 Session Total No. of Students Admitted	Total No. who Progressed to the Final Session 2019/2020
All ODL programmes	328	32

Source: Centre for Distance Learning (CDL), Obafemi Awolowo University

Institutional support services encompass a broad spectrum of interactions between institutional personnel and learners, including both prospective and registered students. These services are designed to assist learners in achieving their educational goals, beginning from their initial inquiry through to graduation and beyond (Tai, 2021). Key examples of learner support services include orientation programmes, counselling services, feedback mechanisms, registration procedures, monitoring, and mentorship.

The support systems provided by distance education institutions may vary, but their primary goal remains consistent: to address the unique needs of distance learners, who often face isolation and come from diverse backgrounds (Smith & Johnson, 2018; Brown et al., 2020). The range of activities offered as part of learner support typically includes access to learning materials, teaching and tutoring support, administrative assistance, guidance and counselling services, and learning centres equipped with library facilities and examination services (Jones et al., 2019; White & Martinez, 2021).

There are several compelling reasons for the provision of robust learner support services in ODL institutions. First, most students seek support and interaction with others, although time and geographical constraints may limit their ability to engage in face-to-face interactions (Robinson & Williams, 2017). Second, support services such as guidance and counselling, tutoring, effective information dissemination, and administrative assistance are critical in enhancing students' confidence and reducing dropout rates (Anderson & Smith, 2016; Brown et al., 2020). Moreover, the learning process itself,

which involves tutoring, group work, and timely feedback on assignments, plays a vital role in facilitating student learning and success (Davis et al., 2018; Johnson & Martinez, 2019).

Research Objectives

This study seeks to explore the influence of institutional support programmes on learner retention and completion rates in open-distance learning institutions in the southwest, Nigeria. Specifically, the study aims to:

1. Determine the level of availability and usability of institutional support programmes in open-distance learning institutions in Southwest Nigeria.
2. Examine the extent to which institutional support programmes - such as orientation, counselling, feedback mechanisms, registration procedures, and monitoring/mentorship, facilitate retention and completion in these institutions.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. To what extent are institutional support services available in open-distance learning institutions in Southwest Nigeria?
2. To what extent are institutional support services utilised in open-distance learning institutions in Southwest Nigeria?

Research Hypotheses

The study is based on the following hypotheses:

1. There is no significant composite contribution of institutional services (orientation, feedback, administrative support, counselling services, and monitoring) to the retention and completion of learners' programmes in open and distance learning institutions.
2. There is no significant relative contribution of institutional services (orientation, feedback, administrative support, counselling services, and monitoring) to the retention and

completion of learners' programmes in open and distance learning institutions.

Research Methodology

This study adopted a descriptive survey research design of the ex post facto type. The target population consisted of final-year learners enrolled in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institutions in Southwestern Nigeria. There are seven (7) NUC-approved ODL institutions in this region.

A multi-stage sampling procedure was employed to determine the sample size for the study. First, a purposive sampling technique was used to select four (4) states - Oyo, Lagos, Ondo, and Osun - out of the six (6) Southwestern states. The criteria for selecting these states included the presence of NUC-approved ODL institutions that had a significant number of final-year students and had been operational for at least five years. These criteria ensured that the selected institutions had sufficient experience and established support services to provide meaningful insights into the study's objectives.

In the second stage, within each selected state, a purposive sampling method was applied to choose one (1) dual-mode university that is government-owned and has admitted and graduated learners for at least five years. This ensured that the universities selected had well-established ODL programmes and could provide reliable data on institutional support services. Additionally, in Ondo State, a study centre of the single-mode open and distance institution was selected based on its accessibility and the availability of a significant number of final-year students.

In the third stage, a snowball sampling method was used to contact all final-year learners in the selected institutions, totalling 1,374 students. However, only 840 students responded, completed, and returned the research instruments. The calculated response rate was approximately 61.1%. The snowball sampling method was chosen due to the dispersed nature of the student population across different institutions and locations, which made it challenging to reach all potential

participants directly. However, it is important to note that the use of snowball sampling may have implications for the generalisability of the findings, as this method relies on referrals from initial respondents, which could limit the diversity of the sample.

The choice of final-year students was deemed most appropriate for this study because they had interacted with all institutional support services throughout their time at these institutions. This provided a comprehensive view of the support services' availability, usability, and impact on retention and completion rates.

A structured questionnaire was used to collect information from the respondents. The questionnaire, titled '*Institutional Support Services, Retention/Completion Scale (ISSRCS)*', was designed to assess the availability and influence of institutional support services on learners' retention and completion of courses. The questionnaire was divided into two sections: Section 1 and Section 2. The first section comprised three parts: Part A focused on gathering respondents' biodata, including details such as age, sex, religious affiliation, and course of study. Part B featured items with a YES or NO response format, designed to assess the availability of institutional support programmes within the respondents' institutions. Part C employed a modified four-point Likert scale, with options ranging from "Every time" to "Never," to evaluate how frequently these support programmes were utilised by the students.

The second section of the questionnaire explored the impact of institutional support services on learners' retention and completion rates in ODL programmes. This section aimed to capture the respondents' perceptions of how these services influenced their ability to continue and complete their studies.

This methodological approach was carefully designed to ensure that the data collected was both comprehensive and reliable, providing critical insights into the effectiveness of institutional support services in enhancing retention and completion rates within ODL institutions in Southwest Nigeria.

Results of Findings

Research Question One: What is the level of availability of institutional services in open-distance learning institutions?

In answering this question, the data obtained were subjected to frequency count and percentages conducted through the Statistical Package for Social Science version 25. However, for easy interpretation of the availability of institutional programmes, the level of “high or low” was based on the number of counts that indicated Yes or No to each of the items. Table 5 presents the frequency count statistics as follows:

Table 5: Frequency Count showing Level of Availability of Institutional Services

S/N	Availability of the Instructional Programme	Yes Freq (%)	No Freq (%)	Level
1	Orientation	560 (66.7)	280 (33.3)	High
2	Feedback	354 (42.2)	486 (57.8)	Low
3	Administrative Support	543 (64.7)	297 (35.4)	High
4	Counselling Services	403 (48)	437 (52)	Low
5	Monitoring	659 (78.4)	181 (21.6)	Low

Table 5 remarked that 560 (66.7%) of the respondents claimed that orientation was available, while 280 (33.3%) of them claimed that it was not available. A considerable number of respondents, 354 (42.2%), indicated that feedback was available, while 486 (57.8%) of them showed that there was no feedback. Also, 543 (64.7%) of the respondents argued that administrative support was available, while 297 (35.4%) of them said administrative support was not available. Few of them 403 (48%) submitted that counselling services are available, while 437 (52%) of the respondents claimed the counselling services were not available, while 659 (78.4%) of the respondents showed that monitoring was available while 181 (21.6%) of the respondents claimed it was not available. This implies that orientation and administrative support were mainly available. However, other indicators of institutional programme, such as feedback, counselling, and monitoring, were not very evident in the ODL.

Research Question Two: What is the level of usability of institutional services in open-distance learning institutions?

To answer this question, descriptive statistics conducted through the Statistical Package for Social Science version 25 for all the items were computed. Four-point Likert response scale of never (1) at one end and every time (4) at the other end was used to measure all the items. The descriptive statistics (frequency counts, percentages, mean and standard deviation) for each of the items were computed. The table presents the descriptive statistics for the usage of institutional programmes. Thus, for easy interpretation, each item's mean was compared with the weighted average of 2.50. An item means less than 2.5 indicates low usage of institutional programmes, whereas an item mean greater than or equal to 2.5 indicates high usage of learner institutional programmes.

Table 6: Statistics Showing the Usability of Institutional Services

S/N	Frequency of Usage of Instructional Techniques	Every time Freq (%)	Occasionally Freq (%)	Rarely Freq (%)	Never Freq (%)	Mean	Std. Dev.
1	Orientation	412 (49)	320 (38.1)	66 (7.9)	42 (5)	3.50	0.59
2	Feedback	206 (24.5)	90 (10.7)	156 (18.6)	388 (46.2)	2.09	0.55
3	Administrative Support	284 (33.8)	354 (42.1)	156 (18.6)	46 (5.5)	3.10	0.58
4	Counselling Services	231 (27.5)	181 (21.6)	107 (12.7)	321 (38.2)	2.01	0.41
5	Monitoring	156 (18.6)	92 (10.9)	238 (28.3)	354 (42.2)	2.15	0.46

***Weighted Average = 2.50**

The table shows that 412 (49%) of the respondents indicated that orientation is used every time, 320 (38.1%) of them indicate that orientation is used occasionally, 66 (7.9%) of them indicate that orientation is rarely used, and 42 (5%) of them have never used orientation, and overall, the item has (\bar{X} = 3.50, SD = 0.59). Also, it was shown that 206 (24.5%) of the respondents used feedback every time, 90 (10.7%) of the respondents used feedback occasionally, 156 (18.6%) of the respondents rarely used feedback and 388 (46.2%) of the respondents have never used feedback and overall, the item has

(\bar{X} = 2.09, SD=0.55). It was indicated that 284 (33.8%) of the respondents used administrative support every time, 354 (42.1%) of them used it occasionally, 156 (18.6%) of the respondents rarely used administrative support, while 46 (5.5%) of the respondents have never used administrative support, and overall, the item has (\bar{X} = 3.10, SD=0.58). Furthermore, it was remarked that 231 (27.5%) of the learners used counselling services every time, 181 (21.6%) of the respondents used it occasionally, 107 (12.7%) of the respondents rarely used counselling services, while 321 (38.2%) of the respondents have never used the counselling services, and overall, the item has (\bar{X} = 2.01, SD=0.41). While 156 (18.6%) of the learners used monitoring every time, 92 (10.9%) of the respondents used monitoring occasionally, 238 (28.3%) of them rarely used monitoring, while 354 (42.2%) of the respondents have never used it, and overall, the item has (\bar{X} = 2.15, SD=0.46). The result implies that items 1 and 3 were adequately used in completing the programme, while other institutional programmes were rarely used. This might trigger attrition among the learners.

Test of Hypotheses

Hypothesis One: *There is no significant composite contribution of institutional services (Orientation, Feedback, Administrative Support, Counselling Services and Monitoring) on the retention of learners in open and distance learning institutions.*

Table 6: Regression Summary Showing the composite contribution of institutional programmes on the retention/completion of learners of programmes in open and distance learning institutions

R = 0.355					
R square = 0.126					
Adjusted R square =0.110					
Model	Sum of squares	Df	Means square	F	Sig.
Regression	2151.755	5	268.969	7.957	0.001
Residual	14906.176	834	33.801		
Total	17057.931	839			

Table 6 shows that the multiple regression correlation coefficient indicating the relationship between the predictor variables (Orientation, Feedback, Administrative Support, Counselling Services, and Monitoring) and the retention/completion of learners in open and distance learning institutions is 0.355. The adjusted R square is 0.110, which means that the predictor variables accounted for 11.0% variation in the retention and completion of learners in open and distance learning institutions. Also, it has been further ascertained using multiple regression and ANOVA $F_{(5,834)} = 7.957$; $P < 0.05$. This indicated there is a significant linear relationship between the predictor variables and retention and completion of learners in open and distance learning institutions. However, it is important to acknowledge that the students surveyed were from different institutions with varying programme durations, qualities, and resources. These institutional differences could affect the availability and effectiveness of the institutional services examined.

Hypothesis Two: *There is no significant relative contribution of institutional services (Orientation, Feedback, Administrative Support, Counselling Services, and Monitoring) on the retention/completion of learners in open and distance learning institutions.*

Table 7: Coefficient of relative contribution of institutional services on retaining/completion of learners in open and distance learning institutions

Model	Unstandardised Coefficients		Standardised Coefficients	T	Sig.	Collinearity Statistics	
	B	Std. Error	Beta			Tolerance	VIF
(Constant)	51.074	2.925		17.46	0.000		
Orientation	0.094	0.02	0.163	4.680	0.000	0.988	1.012
Monitoring	0.180	0.212	0.069	0.848	0.397	0.904	1.048
Counselling Services	0.050	0.058	0.030	0.859	0.391	0.950	1.053
Feedback	0.278	0.802	0.016	0.347	0.729	0.875	1.042
Administrative Support	1.298	0.060	0.767	5.569	0.000	0.946	1.057

Dependent: Retaining/completion of programmes

Table 7 shows that among the predictor variables, only orientation ($\beta = 0.163, t(835) = 4.680; p < 0.05$) and administrative support ($\beta = 0.767, t(835) = 5.569; p < 0.05$) were found to have significant relative contribution towards retention and completion of learners in open and distance learning institutions. It is crucial to note that while Orientation and Administrative Support emerged as significant predictors, the analysis did not fully account for the potential variability in the quality and availability of these services across different institutions and programmes. Additionally, the study focused on specific institutional services, but did not consider other factors which could influence retention and completion rates.

Discussion of Findings

The results of hypothesis one showed a relationship between the predictor variables (Orientation, Feedback, Administrative Support, Counselling Services, and Monitoring) and the retention/completion of learners in open and distance learning institutions. The adjusted R square is 0.110 and which means that the predictor variables accounted for 11.0% variation in the retention and completion of learners in open and distance learning institutions. This indicates there is a significant linear relationship between the predictor variables and retention and completion of learners in open and distance learning institutions. However, it is important to note that while a relationship exists, it is a correlational, not a direct causal link between the services and retention/completion. Kamau (2007) emphasises that, without effective institutional support services that provide on-site face-to-face, timely feedback on student performance, counselling services, and access to library services, student achievement will be undermined, and dropout rates and procrastination will increase in the ODL programme.

The findings also show that among the predictor variables, only orientation ($\beta = 0.163, t(835) = 4.680; p < 0.05$) and administrative support ($\beta = 0.767, t(835) = 5.569; p < 0.05$) were found to have significant relative contribution towards retention and completion of learners in open and distance learning institutions. This implies that these two institutional programmes are the most potent variables that

influence and translate to the retention and completion of learners' various programmes. Furthermore, multicollinearity was examined using tolerance and the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF). These are the two collinearity diagnostics factors that can help in identifying multicollinearity in the variables of the study. Based on the above result, there is no VIF value for determining the presence of multicollinearity. Values of VIF that exceed 5 (that is $VIF > 5$) are often regarded as indicating multicollinearity. Consequently, none of the VIF values was greater than or equal to 5. Thus, the case of multicollinearity was not evident in this study. The finding was supported by Brownell & Swaner (2010); Mayhew, Stipeck, & Dorow (2011) that orientation programmes are essential in helping students persist and increase retention (Engle & Schutt, 2013). They are also the bridge between the last stages of student recruitment and the first stage of retention (Shupp, 2014).

Conclusion

The study, 'Institutional Support Services, Learners' Retention and Completion in Open-Distance Learning Institutions in South-West, Nigeria' offers insightful findings on the critical role of institutional support services in enhancing learner retention and completion rates in ODL institutions. The results emphasise the significant relationship between the availability and utilisation of support services and the successful progression of learners in ODL environments.

The research highlights that while orientation and administrative support are relatively well-provided and utilised, other services such as feedback, counselling, and monitoring are less available and underutilised. This disparity suggests that although some foundational support structures are in place, there is a pressing need to enhance the comprehensiveness and accessibility of all support services to foster better learner outcomes. The high attrition rates evident from the study underscore the importance of a robust and holistic support system that addresses the diverse needs of distance learners.

The regression analysis indicates that the predictor variables, including orientation, feedback, administrative support, counselling

services, and monitoring, collectively account for 11.0% of the variation in retention and completion rates. This finding is statistically significant, suggesting a tangible impact of these services on learner success. However, the relative contribution analysis reveals that only orientation and administrative support have a significant positive influence on retention and completion, highlighting areas where focused improvements could yield substantial benefits.

These findings corroborate existing literature, which asserts that effective institutional support services are pivotal in mitigating the challenges faced by ODL learners, such as isolation and lack of motivation. Enhanced support services, including timely feedback, comprehensive counselling, and active monitoring, can significantly boost learner confidence, engagement, and perseverance.

Finally, the study underscores the necessity for ODL institutions in Southwest Nigeria to invest in and prioritise comprehensive support services. By addressing gaps in feedback, counselling, and monitoring, these institutions can improve retention and completion rates, thereby fulfilling their mandate to provide equitable and accessible education. Future research should explore innovative strategies to implement and sustain these support services, ensuring they meet the evolving needs of distance learners.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made to improve learners' retention and completion in Open-Distance Learning (ODL) institutions in South-West, Nigeria:

1. Availability of institutional support services should be a criterion for approval for the running of the ODL programme by various institutions in Nigeria. This should be made critical in NUC approval guidelines.
2. A special intervention fund should be made available for all ODL institutions for the provision and running of inclusive learner support services.

3. **Enhance Orientation Programmes:** Orientation programmes have shown significant positive contributions to learners' retention and completion rates. Therefore, ODL institutions should prioritise the enhancement of these programmes. This can be achieved by making orientation sessions more comprehensive and interactive, covering crucial aspects of the learning journey and institutional support services.
4. **Strengthen Administrative Support:** Administrative support is another critical factor influencing retention and completion rates. Institutions should invest in improving administrative processes to ensure they are efficient, student-friendly, and accessible. This includes streamlining registration procedures, ensuring timely responses to student inquiries, and providing clear and accessible information on academic and administrative policies.
5. **Implement Effective Feedback Mechanisms:** The study indicates low usage of feedback mechanisms, which are vital for student progress and motivation. ODL Institutions should develop and implement effective feedback systems that provide timely and constructive feedback on students' assignments and performance. Regular and structured feedback can help students understand their strengths and areas for improvement, thereby fostering a sense of progress and achievement.
6. **Expand Counselling Services:** Institutions should expand their counselling services to be more readily available and accessible to students. This includes hiring more counsellors, offering both academic and personal counselling, and providing virtual counselling options to cater to the diverse needs of distance learners. Effective counselling services can help students navigate challenges and stay motivated to complete their programmes.
7. **Increase Monitoring and Mentorship Programmes:** Monitoring and mentorship programmes have been underutilised, according to the study. ODL institutions should establish robust monitoring systems to track students' progress and identify those at risk of dropping out.

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