

Abstract

This study investigates the influence of learner support services and learner characteristics on academic performance of distance learners at the University of Nairobi. Learner support services are defined as the cognitive, affective and systemic support provided through tutoring, modern information communication technology (ICT), counselling and administrative support, while learner characteristics are defined as the personal circumstances of the learner that may affect his/her studies. Academic performance is also defined as the grades attained by a learner in university examinations consisting of course work and semester examinations. The problem of the study is that academic performance of External Degree students of the University of Nairobi continues to be poor in spite of the learner support services provided to the learners. The study investigates the influence of the learner support services and learner characteristics on academic performance of learners in course work and examinations. A selection of students in the Bachelor of Education (Arts) programme of the university of Nairobi's School of Continuing and Distance Education was done to represent distance learners and to serve as a basis for an analysis of its main characteristics and their contribution to academic performance of the learners. Two hundred and twelve students were randomly selected in a cross sectional Page 21 of 26 survey research design for the study. The distance learning programme was then studied in the light of five research questions that aimed at finding out the contribution of learner support services and learner characteristics to learners' academic performance in course work and semester examinations. Five major research questions were answered using correlation analysis, t-test and one-way ANOVA with post hoc tests. The findings were that most of the cognitive, affective and systemic learner support services did not contribute significantly to academic performance of the learners because the services were either not adequately provided or because learners lacked easy access to the services. However, learner characteristics consisting of part of study, age, family size, entry academic qualification and supplementary income were found to have a significant influence on academic performance of the learners. On the basis of the results, it was concluded that learner support services and learner characteristics have a considerable influence on academic performance of distance learners in the External Degree programme of the University of Nairobi. Their influence varies in form and strength but all point to the weaknesses in the provision of support services in the External Degree programme. Recommendations were, therefore, made to enhance the development of study skills, provision of learning resources,

establishment of modern ICT services at the regional centres and educational support fund, provision of guidance and counselling services and review of pre-university education policy. These interventions will enable the distance learners to realize the full benefits of learner support services and improve their academic performance.