



## The influence of academic and technical support on ODEL students performance. A case of NAMCOL

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### Abstract

This research study explored the influence of academic and technical support services provided to the ODeL BAYCD students at the Namibian College of Open Learning (NAMCOL). The study aimed to determine whether academic and technical support services are effective among BAYCD students. This study used Moore's (1997) idea of transactional distance theory as the theoretical framework. The study belongs to the interpretive research paradigm. The population comprised 30 third-year BAYCD students. A structured interview guide was presented to 10 students and 2 distance Education Coordinators interviewed. The method used for the research is qualitative. Information was obtained via structured and semi-structured interview guides. A structured interview protocol with open-ended questions was administered to the BAYCD students, and individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with Distance Education Coordinators (DECs). Data were analysed and presented thematically. Numeric data were analysed and presented using tables. Key findings established that academic and technical support services influence the performance of the BAYCD Students. The findings also established that BAYCD students in employment on a full-time basis were challenged with accessing some support services, which impacted their studies. The study recommended that it is imperative that NAMCOL ensures availability, creates increased awareness about its support services and intensifies the use of the eLearning platform by providing training to academic and support staff.

**Keywords:** Academic performance, Academic support, Influence, Student Support Services, Technical Support

### Introduction

Providing academic and technical support services is essential, especially in the growing arena of open-distance e-learning in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). HEIs are often competitive by default, and to ensure that they stay in the market and succeed, quality education must be provided. The success of value education can be ensured via the delivery of successful support services to its students in a quest to prevent them from moving to other institutions. Quality services must be provided to students to ensure that they perform well academically (Tait, 2000; Herman *et al.* 2015; Jancey & Burns, 2013) <sup>[13, 14, 38]</sup>. Zuhairi *et al.* (2007) <sup>[42]</sup> assert that student support aims to promote the learning desires of students to empower them to carry on with their learning programme. According to Warrender (2005) <sup>[41]</sup>, student support includes the "strategies which enable students to institute and accomplish their learning, career and personal potential" (p. 3). Student support involves activities such as tutoring, counselling, guiding and clerical activities which are intended to facilitate learning. Support services are also seen to play an integral part in a flexible and well-functioning distance education environment (Warrender, 2005) <sup>[41]</sup>. ODeL providers, in their communications to students, ensure the delivery of support services such as technical, administrative, and academic support through course coordinators, student support staff and tutors/lecturers, using dissimilar information and communication technology (ICT) implements like electronic mail and over-the-phone support. ICTs play a significant role in the provision of quality education and efficient student support services in Namibia. Although this is the case, the nation is challenged by a lack of technology provision in most areas, especially in rural areas. Limited access to simple telecommunications

structure and connectivity in the country and at educational institutions remains a significant challenge in delivering and managing student support in open-distance and e-learning institutions, a situation observed in many African countries. Against this backdrop, this study investigated the influence of academic and technical support services provided to the Bachelor of Arts in Youth and Community Development students at NAMCOL.

### Problem Statement

The notable decrease in enrolments in the BAYCD programme since its inception in 2008 suggests that the support services delivered by the institution are ineffective; although the RPL was implemented to enhance access to formal education, differences in pass rates persist (Afunde, 2010; Geysler, 2001; Cretchley & Castle, 2001:29) <sup>[3] [8]</sup>. The language barrier also complicates matters and distance learners require special preparation (Afunde, 2010; Shikulo, 2018) <sup>[3]</sup>. Additionally, the academic and technical support provided by NAMCOL to distance learners may not be as effective when seen against the backdrop of the high dropout rates and the sharp decline in pass rates and certification (Shikulo, 2018). The degree to which distance students use the academic and other support services (Geysler, 2001:25) that the NAMCOL, as an institution, has put in place is limited.

Therefore, this study aimed to probe BAYCD students' perceptions and experiences concerning the accessibility, relevance, and possibility of academic and technical support services at NAMCOL. Ultimately, this study investigated strategies to improve support services and construct more meaningful ODeL experiences, consequently resulting in higher course completion rates.

## Research Questions

This study aims to determine whether academic and technical support services are effective among BAYCD students. The study was directed by the next set of questions as follows:

1. What are the perceptions of the BAYCD students about the influence of academic and technical support services they receive?
2. What are the perceptions of the BACYD students around the availability and appropriateness of academic and technical support services?
3. What improvements that students propose for academic and technical support services to meet their learning needs and outcomes?

## Literature Review

### Student Support – concept and practice

For students to access resources to carry out learning activities, institutions must offer student support services. In ODL, support involves various artificial and human resources to enable educational processes, including library facilities, media, software programmes, and community leaders. The teacher is the most significant form of support, assisting students in attaining their goals and controlling their educational progression through direction and guidance. Distance students need substantial support as they do not attend face-to-face sessions like full-time students. One major difficulty facing distance institutions is delivering efficient support services for remote students (Brindley & Paul, 2004).

### The roles of Student Support Services (LSS) in open and distance learning

The utmost important part of any Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institution is student support. According to Mills (2003), a range of educational activities revolves around Student Support Services (LSS). These services need to be reactive, accessible, and readily available to distance students. Support services must be supervised to ensure regular provision (Brindley, 1995). Simpson (2003) states that student support services include methods used by institutions to assist distance students, such as library facilities and face-to-face contact sessions, interactive media, audiovisual tools, broadcasting, electronic study materials, in-person counseling, tutorials, continuous assessment, and practical experiences (Zuhairi, 2019).

Tait (2000)<sup>[38]</sup> identifies three primary purposes of student support in ODL: cognitive, affective, and systemic. Cognitive support makes learning attainable through materials and study aids, providing a supportive atmosphere and frequent communication. Productive support offers counseling and guidance, not to solve issues but to give insight on dealing with them. Systemic support involves administrative procedures and Information Management Systems (MIS) that are functional and student-friendly (cited in Lynch, 2002). Enhancing student support services can be achieved through skills development, independent learning facilitation, study partnerships, online and in-person lessons, a network system for learning materials, and robust academic services (Zuhairi, 2007)<sup>[42]</sup>.

Lorenzi *et al.* (2004) identify four general support classifications: student-centered instructional design, lecturer/tutor support, peer support, and technical support. Library staff ensure distance students have access to information and help them become technologically

competent (Lee, 2003)<sup>[20]</sup>. Educational counselors or advisors assist students in gaining expertise and skills for productive study and self-judgment (Aluko & Hendrikz, 2012). Distance students need participatory lessons, workshops, video-conferencing, interactive materials, discussion boards, and tutor-marked assignments for successful study (Lee, 2003)<sup>[20]</sup>. Tutors act as facilitators, providing feedback, connecting students to resources, and offering adequate support (Sache & Mark, 2000).

### Students perception on the Influence of academic and technical support services

According to Hasan and Bao (2020)<sup>[12]</sup>, academic support services include resources and programs like tutoring, mentoring, and academic advising. Students view these services positively and recognize their contribution to academic performance. Research by Sun *et al.* (2018)<sup>[37]</sup> shows that students who use these services report higher self-confidence and academic progress. Additionally, these services foster a sense of belonging, especially among marginalized students (Osterman, 2023)<sup>[26]</sup>. Personalized resources and guidance promote inclusivity and equity in higher education. Technical support services are essential for navigating digital tools and online platforms, including access to online learning platforms, digital databases, IT support, and library resources. Selim (2007)<sup>[32]</sup> and Asare-Nuamah (2017)<sup>[1]</sup> highlight the importance of reliable technical support for academic success and overall educational satisfaction.

### Students perception about accessibility and suitability of academic and technical support services

The comfort with which students can access support services is referred to as accessibility. Hoyt (2023) points out that students highly value accessible support services, which address academic challenges and improve learning experiences. Paulsen and McComick (2020)<sup>[27]</sup> found that students who recognized academic support services as accessible reported higher levels of academic engagement and satisfaction. Shpigelman *et al.* (2022)<sup>[35]</sup> noted that accessibility is crucial for students with disabilities or disadvantaged backgrounds. Institutions show a commitment to inclusive education by extending operating hours and offering multiple communication channels. The suitability of support services denotes their relevance and effectiveness in addressing varied academic needs. Magableh *et al.* (2021) emphasize the importance of personalized support. Karp *et al.* (2021)<sup>[17]</sup> found that students preferred support services offering personalized tutoring and mentoring aligned with their academic goals.

### Improvements in academic and technical support services

Continuous improvement of academic and technical support services is essential for meeting students' evolving needs. This literature review examines strategies to enhance support services' effectiveness and accessibility, promoting student success. Integrating academic and technical support resources offers benefits, including streamlined access and a holistic approach to student needs (Yu & Sangiorgi, 2018). Institutions combining academic advising with technical assistance provide comprehensive support (Snow *et al.* 2018)<sup>[36]</sup>. Expanded online resources like virtual tutoring, online writing centers, and digital libraries enhance access to academic assistance (Quinn *et al.* 2019)<sup>[28]</sup>.

## Theoretical Framework

This research is rooted in Michael G. Moore's theory of transactional distance, established in 1970. Tait (2003) <sup>[39]</sup> states that significant transactional distance occurs when educational programs have more structure and fewer student-tutor communication channels. The BAYCD program's structured communication channel, divided into modules, affects communication by focusing on meeting assignment deadlines rather than increasing tutor-student and peer communication. This rigid structure makes it time-consuming for students to seek support, as they prioritize assignment completion. The structure also includes module duration and assessment sequences. Tait (2003) <sup>[39]</sup> suggested that ICT systems could enhance dialogue and minimize transactional distance, providing technical support services. Moore (1997) explained that program structure involves educational aims, objectives, teaching strategies, and evaluation methods. This theory is suitable for studying NAMCOL, an ODL institution displaying transactional distance components due to students' challenges in accessing support services. Appreciating transactional distance in NAMCOL's student support system and expanding its transactional presence to address student challenges can resolve gaps in its support initiatives. Moore also highlighted the role of technology in dialogue, stating that communication media influence the quality of tutor-student conversations. Synchronous communication channels, like live media sessions, are more effective in reducing transactional distance than asynchronous ones like recorded media (Duc, 2012).

## Methods

Namibian College of Open Learning (NAMCOL) on student performance, employing an interpretivist paradigm and a qualitative method. Data were collected using structured and semi-structured interview protocols from a population of third-year BAYCD students during the 2020 academic year. Purposeful sampling selected 30 students, and structured interview guides were sent to 10. Additionally, two Distance Education Coordinators (DECs) from Ongwediva and Windhoek were interviewed. Content analysis organized the data into categories, themes, and patterns, with triangulation validating the findings. Ethical considerations included obtaining permission from NAMCOL and student consent. Confidentiality was ensured through anonymized email responses. The researcher's primary responsibility was protecting respondents, and the study's intent was communicated clearly to all participants.

## Findings

### 1. Influence of academic and technical support services

Findings highlight the significant influence of academic and technical support services at NAMCOL. Students appreciate these services for enhancing their independent study and research activities. Student feedback underscores the accessibility of Distance Education Support staff through various channels, though awareness of some services among students needs improvement. Overall, students agree that these services are crucial for their academic performance. Technical services, like the eLearning portal, facilitate effective communication with tutors and peer learning. Library services support research efforts, while face-to-face sessions help students grasp course material and foster

student-tutor interaction. Distance Education Coordinators (DECs) play vital roles in academic support, managing platforms and facilitating workshops that enrich learning opportunities.

### 2. Accessibility and Suitability of support services

NAMCOL's Student Support Services were assessed by students for their effectiveness. Student 3 highlighted challenges in accessing library materials and advocated for regional offices with library facilities. Conversely, Student 2 praised the Moodle platform and student portal for providing access to academic records and financial statements. Overall, students expressed the need for improvements, with one student noting services were "not adequately suitable." Technical services like Moodle and the student portal were lauded for facilitating interaction with tutor-markers, timely feedback, peer learning, and sharing study-related links. Despite benefits, challenges persist, such as limited library access. Distance Education Coordinators use various channels to inform students about support services, including tutorial letters and Moodle. Student 1 emphasized these efforts, detailing platforms used to keep students informed throughout the academic year.

### 3. Available and accessible support services to distance students

Distance Education Coordinators proposed improvements to NAMCOL's support services, focusing on the Moodle platform and library services. They noted the underutilisation of online forums due to lack of tutor responses and suggested extending library hours from 17h00 to 20h00 on weekdays and opening on weekends to accommodate working students. They emphasized Moodle's potential for synchronous and asynchronous communication between students and tutors. Students acknowledged library access with a NAMCOL card but highlighted challenges for those in remote areas. Student 1 mentioned that remote students face difficulties accessing services compared to those in well-located areas. Student 2 cited poor internet connectivity and lack of technology as significant barriers. While support services are theoretically available, geographical and technological barriers hinder equal access. Extending library hours and improving internet connectivity in remote areas could enhance access for all students.

## Discussion

### 1. Influence of academic and technical support services

NAMCOL provides a variety of support services communicated through programme tutorial letters and orientation workshops at the beginning of each academic year. These face-to-face "Orientation workshops" support learning by exposing students to comprehensive programmes. Murangi (2017) <sup>[24]</sup> supports this, noting students' preference for human-centered learning experiences. Students highly value direct academic support services that impact their performance. NAMCOL delivers technical support through telecommunications like telephone, email, WhatsApp, Facebook, and Moodle. Library services are also available. According to SAIDE (2014) <sup>[30]</sup>, these support services are readily accessible to NAMCOL students. Participants confirmed that NAMCOL's support staff are consistently available when needed, ensuring students receive the necessary assistance.

## 2. Accessibility and Suitability of Support Services

Data suggest that participants regarded the provision of both academic and technical services to be beneficial and essential during their academic journeys. Participants also indicated that there is a need for NAMCOL to create awareness around the different support services available to them. DEC's suggest that information about such services is included in the tutorial letters of the different programmes offered and also during the workshops, especially those that are held at the beginning of the academic year. Murangi (2016) in a study titled "Effectiveness of Student Support Services at the Namibian College of Open Learning" NAMCOL provides a wide range of support services to students all over its four regions. Significant among these services are the following: Study guides, Tutor-marked comments on assignments, Face-to-face lessons, telephone communications with tutors, tutorial feedback letters, orientation workshops, academic counselling and Study groups. Murangi (2016) further pointed out that NAMCOL is making a concert to include technology in the delivery of student support services. He further reported that support services such as the use of email, network access to search for materials which include Open Education Resources (OERs), the use of the NAMCOL website, and video recorded information are also extended to its student population.

## 3. Available and accessible support services to distance students

Participants noted that support services significantly influence students' academic performance at NAMCOL. They highlighted the motivational role of these services in creating a conducive academic environment through accessibility and availability. However, technical and academic support via the eLearning platform was identified for improvement due to inadequate tutor engagement. Distance Education Coordinators (DECs) also emphasized the provision of administrative and psycho-social support, crucial for the seamless operation of academic activities. Simpson (2013) <sup>[34]</sup> reinforced these findings by illustrating how support services aid students in timely completion of their studies. Despite overall suitability reported by students, some felt the services could be better tailored for distance learners. DEC perspectives align, emphasizing the accessibility and utilization of these services by students. Shikulo (2018) underscored the importance of Learning Support Services (LSS) and educational resources in enhancing student learning outcomes in distance education. The findings collectively highlight the pivotal role of support services in student success, advocating for their effective utilization to maximize educational benefits.

## Conclusions

The study stresses the significant influence of academic and technical support services provided by NAMCOL. Students applaud the availability of support services for improving their independent study and research activities. Even though there is common praise for the support, there is a need to devise strategies for improved awareness regarding the available services. On the other hand, students consistently recognised the role support services play in their academic performance. This role is related to clarifying study matters and assisting in meeting assignment due dates. The study also points to the crucial role of Distance Education

Coordinators play in coordinating student support services which are in offering and coordinating student support services, which are believed to be important for academic success.

The study revealed mixed perceptions around NAMCOLS support services regarding their accessibility and suitability. The usefulness of some technical support services such as the student portal and Moodle platform were appreciated by students, however, challenges such as limited access to library materials were highlighted. There is a consensus among students on the need for improvements to ensure that support services adequately meet their diverse needs.

DECs support for improved support services, mainly concentrating on improving the use of platforms like Moodle and extended library operating hours to accommodate working students. Theoretically, library services are accessible to all students, but challenges related to geographical location and technological access persist, posing barriers to equal accessibility. Addressing these challenges through measures such as extending library hours and improving internet connectivity in remote areas could contribute to ensuring equitable access to support services for all NAMCOL students.

## Recommendations

The resulting recommendations have been made centred on the findings of the study:

The findings uncovered that full-time employed students are unable to fully access and use the Student Support Services made available to them. The College must consider recording lessons presented during the orientation and examination preparation workshop. These can be shared with students on various platforms to provide for the student population that is incapable of attending face-to-face contact sessions.

It was revealed that some students are not aware of some LSS offered by the college. The College should consider running an awareness campaign on all available support services and how they can be accessed by the student. Awareness campaigns about available academic and technical support services should be done using the media, which includes running adverts in the local newspapers, on the NAMCOL website and Facebook page.

According to the findings, some students are unable to make use of NAMCOL'S resource centres because they are employed on a full-time basis and because these centres only operate during office hours. NAMCOL should consider extending the operating days and hours of all resource centres to cater for students registered with the College who are in employment on a full-time basis.

The findings uncovered that tutor-markers are not fully utilizing the eLearning platform by engaging in active interaction and communication with their students. Instead, students may post questions or concerns, but never receive feedback from the tutor-markers. NAMCOL should consider intensifying the use of the eLearning platform, by ensuring that all tutor-markers are provided with the required skills to enable them to interact with the student regularly on the platform. Tutor markers should also be obligated to spend at least 1 hour per day on the platform to address all queries posted by students and to participate in online activities.

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