

Support Services in Open and Distance Education: An Integrated Model of Open Universities

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Abstract

Support services are very significant elements for all educational institutions in general; however, for distance learners, these services are more essential than traditional (face-to-face) counterparts. One of the most important reasons for this is that learners and instructors do not share the same physical environment and that distance learning settings generally require intrapersonal interactions rather than interpersonal ones. Some learners in distance learning programs feel isolated because of this geographical and transactional distance. Furthermore, some fail to feel a sense of belonging to the institution because of lack of self-management skills, lack of motivation levels, and the need of being socialized, so that they are more likely to fail or drop out of an online class. In order to overcome all these problems, support services have emerged as a critical element for an effective and sustainable distance education system.

Within the context of distance education support services, it is natural to include technology-based and web-based services and also the related materials. Moreover, institutions in education sector are expected to use information and communication technologies effectively in order to be successful in educational activities and programs. In terms of the sustainability of the system, an institution should provide distance education services through ICT enabled processes to support all stakeholders in the system, particularly distance learners.

In this study, it is envisaged to develop a model based on the current support services literature in the field of open and distance learning and the applications of the distance higher education institutions. Specifically, content analysis technique is used to evaluate the existing literature in the distance education support services, the information published on websites, and applications of distance higher education institutions across the world. A total of 60 institutions met the inclusion criteria which are language option (English) and availability of materials in the websites. The six field experts contributed in brainstorming process to develop and extract codes for the coding scheme. During the coding process, these preset and emergent codes are used to conduct analyses. Two coders independently reviewed and coded each assigned website to ensure that all coders are interpreting the data the same way and to establish inter-coder reliability. Once each web page is included in descriptive and relational analysis, a model of support services is developed by examining the generated codes and themes. It is believed that such a model would serve as a quality guide for future institutions, as well as the current ones.

Keywords: Support services; open education, distance learning; support model.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the context of education, support services are defined as the whole of the services provided for the formation of learning communities and the continuation of the communities created. In the open and distance education, the current literature on support services has been observed to focus on the learner support services. One reason for this is that the pairs of learner-learner, learner-instructor and learner-institution are separated by space and/or by time. Distance education is a model of education that takes learners to the center of the education and tries to enable interaction between individuals, resources and institution. As stated at the beginning, it is understandable that support services are concentrated on learning and learner mainly when the distance from the system is considered physically and/or temporally. For example, Wright (1991) describes learner support as an inevitable element in creating an effective learning experience for distance education. Similarly, Thorpe (1988) defines support as an element of an open learning system that can respond to a particular individual's learning needs and process. The learner support in both distance education research and practice is influenced by the change in information and communication technologies, but only from the individual learners or autonomous learners, to the social learning and interpersonal learning environment have become a cover. In other words, the interaction and the support services of the individual that we witnessed in the earlier years of distance education through educational materials and environments have turned into a form that supports both individual-oriented (interaction with the individual and his/her own learning systems) and intrapersonal interactions (learner-learner, learner-instructor, learner-content-material/interface, etc.).

In fact, support services are not only learner oriented, but all stakeholders of the system have an inclusive structure. These can be listed as faculty members or academic staff who are responsible for producing and delivering educational contents/materials; the administrative personnel in charge of administrative processes and technical personnel in charge of technical works in the system. In addition to studies focusing heavily on learning support in the literature, Padgett and Conceicao-Runlee (2000) pointed to the support of academic staff in the success of any distance education system. Similarly, Floyd and Powell (2004) reported that learning and instructional support create a positive interaction environment between learner and the whole staff. Researchers have stated that this positive integration can provide a successful model for effective teaching and learning. Therefore, all individuals and structural resources within the distance education system should be considered an integral part of the support services. In short, support services in distance education can be defined as the whole set of services provided to assist all stakeholders in the system (learners, instructors, administrative and technical staff, etc.) to use the resources of the institution effectively and thereby create quality learning.

Main Components of Open and Distance Education Support Services

Within the scope of the study, we also mentioned the basic elements that comprise the support services and the ways in which they are addressed in the research and practices. Support services in distance education have been categorized in different ways and what services should be concentrated in order to achieve this support. In fact, these classifications contain important concepts in terms of definition and inclusion of support services. The models of support services discussed in the literature are summarized in Table 1. Hui (1989) indicates learner support as individual learning materials, learning system, measurement and evaluation, practice.

Table 1. Support Services Models in Literature

Year	Researchers	Components of Support Services
1989	Hui	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual learning materials • Learning system • Measurement and evaluation
1992	Rowntree	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pre-program • During program • After program
1995	Berge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pedagogical support • Social support • Administrative support • Technical
1997	Keast	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academic support • Administrative support

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Technical support • Consultancy • Library support
2002	McLoughlin	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social support • Peer support • Task-related support
2002	Simpson	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academic support services • Non-Academic support services
2003	Keegan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information process • Guidance process • Registration process • Integration process • Final process • Accreditation process • The guidance process for post-program phases
2003	Tait	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academic support <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Cognitive support <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Teaching ▪ Development of learning skills ▪ Assessment • Non-academic support <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Emotional support ○ Corporate support
2003	Rekkedal & Qvist-Eriksen	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pre-program support services • Learning process support services • Support services for post-graduation

Rowentree (1992) has divided the support services into three phases, pre-program and post-program, focusing on the instructional process. Berge (1995) has grouped roles that must be undertaken for the successful execution of open and distance learning as pedagogical, social, administrative and technical support. This classification of Berge is a common model that is used by many institutions. Another comprehensive support model in distance education was proposed by Keast (1997). According to Keast's model, learning support is discussed in five sections including administrative support, instructional support, technical support, consultancy and library support.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study is used content analysis technique to analyze open and distance (ODL) higher education institutions' web pages in terms of their support services. Purposeful sampling process was applied to select institutions. The 60 institutions with the language option English or Turkish were determined. Research process is summarized in Fig. 1.

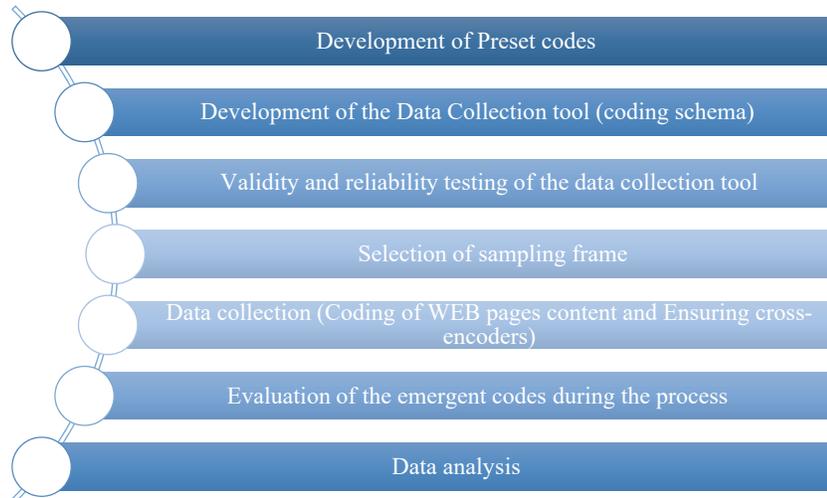


Fig. 1. Research Process of the Study

FINDINGS

Profiles of institutions

This section summarizes the general profile information of the 60 institution that was examined. More than half of the institutions ($n = 37$; 60%) are located in the Asian continent, as the geographical distributions of the institutions will be seen from Figure 2.

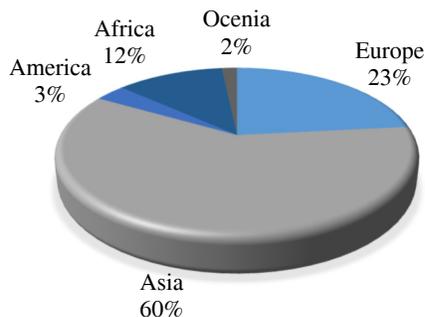


Fig. 2. Geographical distributions of open and distance higher education institutions

Following Asia, 11 countries in Europe represented other institutions in the sample. The study included institutions in Africa ($n = 7$), America ($n = 2$), and Oceania ($n = 1$). Accordingly, it can be said that open and distant education is concentrated mainly in Asia, Europe and Africa. One reason for this is closely related to the history of open education.

The distribution of higher education institutions in Asia which provides open education service is given in Figure 3. In Asia, China, India and Korea are among the most six institutions in the continent. These countries are followed by Philippines, Malaysia, Pakistan, Thailand and Vietnam with two institutions.

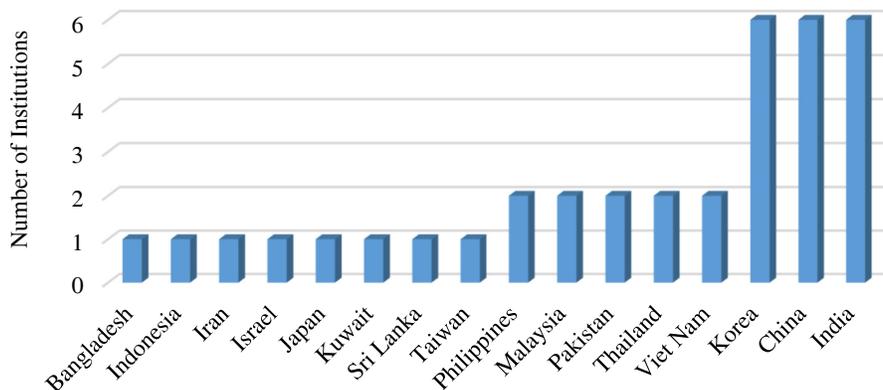


Fig. 3. Distribution of institutions in Asia by country

Figure 4 shows the distribution of open education institutions in Europe. There are also three open education colleges that provide higher education services in Turkey. These include Istanbul University, Atatürk University, and Anadolu University, which has been providing open education services in Turkey for more than 35 years. In Germany, the University of Fern and the Bavarian Virtual University are the institutions that provide open education services. There is only one open higher education institution in each of the other countries shown in the Fig. 4.

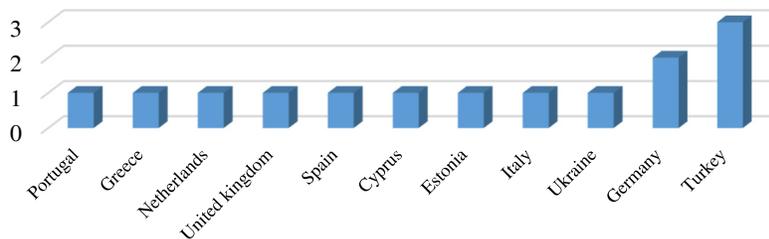


Fig. 4. Distribution of institutions in Europe according to countries

The number of countries and open education institutions located on other continents is shown in Table 2. Previously stated, among the 7 institutions, Africa is among the continents offering the most open higher education services.

Table 2. Distribution of open higher education institutions by continents

Continent	Country	Number of institutions
Oceania	Australia	1
America	Canada	1
	USA	1
Africa	Kenya	1
	Mauritius	1
	Nigeria	1
	Zimbabwe	1
	Sudan	1
	Tanzania	1
	Republic of South Africa	1
Total		10

In Figure 5, the founding years of the institutions were grouped with ten-year period. As the graph suggests, an increase in the number of institutions established over the years has been observed. The institutions established in 1969 and earlier constitute 8.3% of all institutions. In this period, 5 institutions are located on different continents. 1970-79 in this area, 9 institutions (15%) started to provide open education services. Again in 1980-89, a situation parallel to the previous 10-year period was observed and 10 institutions (16.7%) were founded in the period in question. In 1990 and later, 36 institutions (60%) in total are the educational institutions that serve in this area.

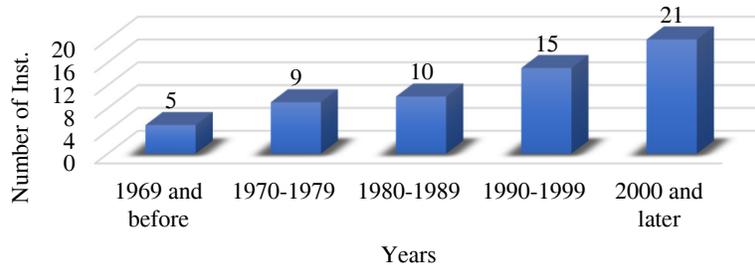


Fig. 5. Distribution of institutions' years of establishment ($n = 60$)

In the open and distance learning literature, institutions with more than 100,000 students are called as mega universities. Therefore, the student number of the institutions that provide open higher education services in this section are grouped in two parts (Fig. 6). Approximately 61% of the institutions show a change in the number of students under 100,000, while approximately 40% are in the group called mega university. Anadolu University is among these mega universities with the number of students over 1.5 million.

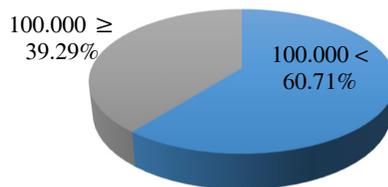


Fig. 6. Distribution of numbers of students ($n = 56$)

Finally, the structure of the programs given in these institutions has been examined and classified according to the teaching level (Fig. 7). It should be noted that there are at least one or more programs in each organization.

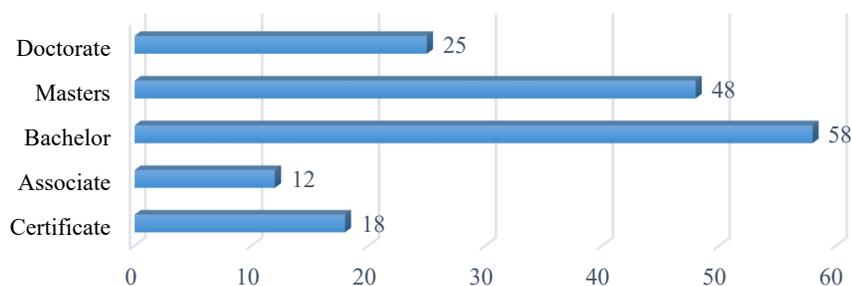


Fig. 7. Distribution of programs in institutions according to the program level ($n = 60$)

When this distribution is examined, undergraduate programs are given in the majority (97%), excluding two of the institutions. It is followed by Master's (80%) and PhD (42%) programs from postgraduate studies. 30% of the institutions have certificates and 12% of them have programs at the associate degree level. Massive open online courses (MOOCs), which have been popular in recent years, have begun to become widespread in some institutions

including Anadolu University. The following figure represents the integrated model of support services for open and distance education.

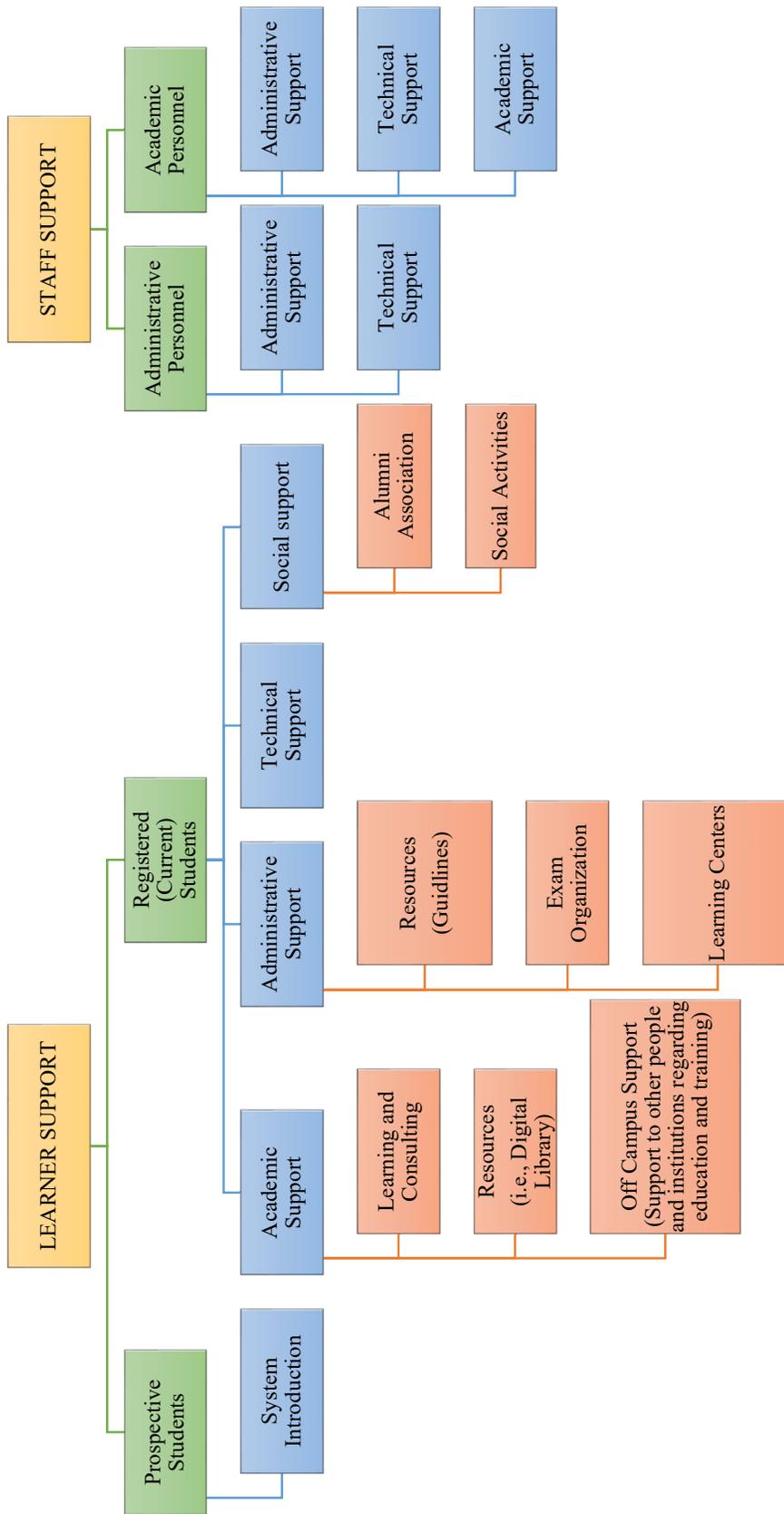


Fig. 8. An Integrated Model of Support Services for Distance Education

RESULTS AND SUGGESTIONS

Support services are an important mechanism for the sustainability of both formal and distance education institutions, but learners in open and distance education need more support than the traditional education system. Some of the most important reasons for this are the fact that learners are physically separated from each other, from the system, from instructors, and that they provide interaction with all these actors and resources through open and distance communication technologies. The aim of the study in this direction is to examine the support services of the higher education institutions operating in the field of ODL in the world and the diversity of services they offer. In particular, this study has been designed to develop an inclusive support service model on the literature of existing support services in the field of ODL and applications of distance education institutions.

The web-pages and current practices of the institutions were evaluated with content analysis technique. A total of 60 institutions have been included in the research. The coding scheme has been developed by six field specialists working in the field of open and distance education. When the descriptive and relational analysis for each web page is complete, a support services model is developed that includes the generated codes and themes. This model, presented in the findings section of the research, consists of two main sections, "learner" and "staff" support services.

The learner support includes the support services given to the students who are candidates for being students and also the registered (current) students in the institution. The learner support services are one of the most important components of all institutions that are observed without exception on their websites. In the majority of institutions, there are guidelines for prospective students including information about introduction of the system, terms of registration and application. In some of the institutions, the support services documents mention the key elements and parameters of distance learning such as what the distance learner is, distance learning methods and strategies. Learning and consulting services for current learners are called academic support. In this section, there are contact information for academic staff in some institutions where students can contact the department or course basis questions. In most institutions, learning management systems (blackboard, Moodle, etc.) are integrated and teaching and learning materials are shared through these systems. Students are also provided with digital libraries as well as resource support. There is also support for the current learners, such as registration, scholarship status, student affairs, academic calendar, examination organization and other administrative issues. In addition, technical helpdesks and call centers that allow learners to access 7/24 in distance learning environments where information communication technologies are predominantly employed are the other support components observed in these institutions. Finally, both registered learners and alumni have established social support mechanisms. For registered students, online discussion forums in both corporate-supported learning environments as well as non-institutional social media (Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, etc.) are the environments that make social interaction possible. In addition, some institutions organize social activities such as student clubs, community service practices, student seminars, workshops, and sport events. For graduates, structures such as alumni union are important for both career development and alumni relationship with the institution. The main objective here is to record the traces of the graduates in the business life and also to transfer their experiences as part of the system with different mechanisms (mentorship system, workshops, etc.) with existing students.

The personnel component is a structure that covers the organization's "administrative" and "academic" personnel.

Administrative and academic personnel are provided with "technical", and "administrative" support services, while academic support are also provided to the academic people in preparation, presentation, measurement and evaluation of educational materials. In addition, academic resources and research support are provided by the institutions in order to support academic research and professional contributions to the theory and practice in the field of ODL.

The data obtained as a result of the research and the developed an integrated support services model are thought to be a guideline for designing and presenting support services to individuals and institutions that provide ODL services. This model has an important reference feature for higher education institutions that differ in the context of student size, academic discipline and diversity of programs. The number of students, regional and cultural differences cause each institution to develop its own unique business model and support services system. However, institutions may reorganize the indicators of these services presented here, taking into consideration human resources and structural resources in the organization.

Support services should be considered as a separate unit/department in the organizational structure of the institutions that provide open and distance education. This unit, which is only to be positioned as support services, must be configured as an administrative unit that integrates with other relevant units in the organization.

In accordance with the results of this study, the following topics should be considered for support services research.

- Examining the variation of support services according to specific variables in the institutions. These variables;

- Learner profile (e.g., persons with disabilities, access to mobile devices, access to the Internet, etc.)
- Number of students
- Program level (undergraduate, graduate, certificate, etc.)
- Discipline (social sciences, natural science, etc.)
- Cultural structure
- Determining the satisfaction levels of learners about support services
- Determination of satisfaction levels of administrative and academic staff for support services
- Determination of measurable (quantifiable) indicators for each support services component

In addition, it is assumed that the integrated model will be guiding the process of national and international quality and accreditation especially for our own organization.

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