Learner Support Practices in Open and Distance Learning Institutions in Gaborone, Botswana

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Abstract
The Government of Botswana has embraced open and distance learning (ODL) as a strategic approach to achieve universal access to quality education. However, a notable discrepancy between enrollment and completion rates in ODL institutions threatens the fulfillment of Sustainable Development Goal 4 and the establishment of a skilled workforce. This study investigates the importance of robust learner support systems in bridging this gap. Employing a qualitative multiple-case study design, data were collected from 42 ODL practitioners using open-ended questionnaires and individual interviews. Although this design provided in-depth insights into learner support, findings are limited in generalizability and reflect the perspectives of ODL practitioners in a specific context only. The findings reveal that effective learner support—comprising online technical assistance, improved Internet accessibility, virtual learning evaluation, and fostering learner communities—is essential for enhancing completion rates. This study emphasizes the need for ODL institutions to invest in technological infrastructure and implement comprehensive learning management systems to effectively support learners. Although these findings are similar to those of studies conducted in developing countries, they provide valuable guidance for improving learner support practices in ODL programs, particularly in the context of Botswana's educational landscape.

Keywords: Learner support, open and distance learning, technological infrastructure, Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), Botswana, qualitative research

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The Government of Botswana (GoB) has adopted Open and Distance Learning (ODL) to achieve universal access, inclusion, and equity in quality education (Seeletso & Morolong, 2025). Globally, ODL institutions face a mismatch between enrollment and completion rates (Maritim & Getuno, 2018). In Botswana, researchers are concerned about low ODL learner completion rates, particularly in teacher-training colleges that offer primary or secondary education diplomas (Kamau, 2012; Sikwibele & Mungo, 2009). Students enrolled at these colleges struggle to complete their studies (Magetse et al., 2024). Failure to resolve this problem could negatively impact the government's efforts to increase access to education and improve the skill base of the population. This is a global challenge that remains under-researched (Bawa, 2016).

Decades of ODL research from the developed world, primarily from the United States of America, Canada, and Europe, inform current understanding of learner support services, operational frameworks and pedagogical strategies often viewed as international best practices. However, the applicability and integration of these established online learning strategies are still in the nascent stages in the developing world, including Botswana. This research aims to transpose these methodologies to Botswana and critically examine their effectiveness, adaptability, and sustainability given distinct educational, technological, and socio-economic landscapes. By focusing on Botswana, this study contributes to understanding how established ODL practices can be adapted and potentially transformed to meet the specific needs of learners in developing nations, thereby extending the global dialogue on educational equity and access to ODL.

ODL is becoming a crucial way to deliver higher education, with the potential to broaden access to various education levels cost-effectively in Botswana and other African countries. It promotes student engagement, access to information, and content sharing (Mathew & Iloanya, 2016). To maximize ODL's impact in Botswana, institutions must invest more resources, enhance parity with face-to-face provision, and integrate e-learning strategies (Nage-Sibande & Morolong, 2018; Tladi & Nleya, 2019). However, ODL programs, particularly in Africa, often have low success rates, due to inadequate institutional and national regulatory policy frameworks (Kihwelo, 2014). The Government of Botswana (GoB) has, among other policies, the Education and Training Sector Strategic Plan (ETSSP) 2015-2020, which aligns with Sustainable Developmental Goal 4 and Vision 2036 (Musekiwa & Mandiyanike, 2017). The ETSSP was created to improve access, inclusion, equity, accountability, and governance in the education system (Republic of Botswana, 2015). Under the guidance of the ETSSP, initiatives such as the Back-to-School Program, which offers young people (below 35 years) a second chance to obtain the skills necessary for the workforce, have been implemented through the ODL (Republic of Botswana, 2015). Additionally, National Literacy Programme (NLP) was introduced in 1981; as a result the adult literacy rate has improved significantly (Gumbo & Oats, 2025). According to UNESCO (2014), the quality and relevance of education still need special attention if sustainable development is to be achieved. Despite these advancements, Botswana's ODL institutions face ongoing challenges, including limited resources, planning issues, e-learning integration challenges and negative perceptions of dual-mode universities (Sibande, 2011; Tladi & Nleya, 2019;). Despite these hurdles, ODL remains vital for expanding access to higher education in Botswana (Giannini-Gachago & Seleka, 2005). Nevertheless, ODL's success depends on clear policies, a strong vision, leadership support, and an understanding of its systemic nature (Uys, 2003).

Theoretical Framework

Transactional Distance Theory (TDT) served as the theoretical framework for this study, investigating the unique dynamics of teaching and learning in distance education (Moore, 2018). TDT provides a theoretical lens that helps assess learner-instructor interactions, ODL program structure and learner empowerment encompassing synchronous and asynchronous communication methods such as live discussions, emails, discussion forums, and personalized assignment feedback. A TDT-based pedagogy promotes dialogue and individualized learning experiences by accommodating individual learner needs. In Botswana's higher education ODL context, this approach provides insights into instructional material creation, technological support, and learning community development. Flexible content, open schedules, and feedback mechanisms are crucial structures for effective ODL course delivery. TDT can also assess how institutions design flexible curricula, support learners through various communication channels, and encourage self-directed learning.

Furthermore, TDT can facilitate ODL programs' effectiveness. This theory aids in understanding and addressing unique distance education challenges, such as maintaining engagement and supporting learners without regular face-to-face interactions. Applying TDT principles, ODL can improve learner outcomes, increase satisfaction, and create a more inclusive and accessible educational environment. Bolliger and Halupa (2018) and Blayone (2019) demonstrated that reducing transactional distance through structured interactions and meaningful dialogue significantly enhanced student satisfaction and learning outcomes. This emphasizes the importance of active participation and instructor presence, particularly relevant for ODL in Botswana, where engagement and support are crucial. Zozie and Chawinga (2018) highlighted ODL's potential to increase access to higher education in remote areas, a key goal for Botswana; however, they highlighted the need for adequate infrastructure to support these initiatives. Similarly, Şenocak et al. (2021), emphasized robust technological support and responsive instructional design to mitigate isolation and enhance student engagement. Collectively, these findings show TDT could provide a comprehensive framework for designing and implementing ODL programs that balance the structure, interaction, and learner autonomy, making it a well-suited theoretical foundation for research within Botswana's educational landscape.

Literature Review

Learner Support and Completion Rate in ODL Institutions

Learner support is critical for ODL institutions, promoting educational access (Rakoma, 2018) and improving student success, retention, and satisfaction (Ouma, 2019; Wani et al., 2023). Key factors for student success depends on continuous professional development for staff (Modise, 2020), effective strategies for delivering support (Shikulo & Lekhetho, 2020), and inclusive provisions support for students with disabilities (Ntombela, 2021). Undoubtedly, institutions encourage information and communication technologies (ICTs) to enhance support services (Tseng & Inman, 2024). Open universities in developing countries, such as Sri Lanka and Indonesia, have demonstrated the importance of tailored support strategies, encompassing instructional design, learning engagement, and quality assurance (Zuhairi, et al., 2019). Therefore, comprehensive, accessible, and adaptable learner support systems are vital for successful outcomes in distance learning environments (Angelino et al., 2007). Ramdass and Nemavhola (2018) suggest that an ODL learner support framework should include motivation, building learner confidence, support for under-

prepared learners, preparing learners to study independently, and developing a sense of belonging to the institution.

Establishing a robust social learning community is crucial for effective learner support (Shea et al., 2005). These communities promote trust, shared identities, and collaborative relationships, which are essential for effective learning and problem-solving in the ODL. Furthermore, social learning communities have the potential to facilitate collective action and knowledge sharing (Shea & Bidjerano, 2019) and scaffold students to overcome socio-ecological vulnerabilities through participatory approaches (de Souza et al., 2020). Overall, these studies emphasize the importance of social learning communities (Angelino, et al., 2007), in promoting networking and collaboration to provide learners with a sense of belonging, which motivate and engage students in information flow (Maritim & Getuno, 2018).

Learner support through orientation also plays a critical role in retaining learners (Martin, et al., 2023). Similarly, Maritim and Getumo (2018), suggest that early contact with learners through pre-entry counselling sessions and the provision of prerequisite information can increase learners' success and completion rates. Additionally, mentoring is important for students' continued learning (Paniagua & Simpson, 2018; Youp, 2018). Support services, such as career guidance and identifying at-risk students, should be mandatory and continuous for a more effective impact on completion rates (Bawa, 2016; Paniagua & Simpson, 2018). The application of tracking mechanisms is critical for identifying at-risk learners (Kamau 2012; Paniagua & Simpson 2018). These authors also indicate that students with a clear understanding of their enrolled program reduce chances of withdrawing. Gordon (2019) advises that mentoring can help learners clarify their goals.

Online Learner Support

The need to employ online support as a strategy to improve learners' accessibility to learning resources and services in ODL cannot be overemphasized. Online learning delivery is supported by learning management systems (LMS), online technical support, open educational resources (OER), Internet services, and technological devices. Studies (Angelino et al., 2007; Mathew & Iloanya, 2016) highlight the potential of modern technology to improve accessibility and enhance ODL programs delivery, thereby increasing completion rates. Technologies such as LMS, chats, and visual and audio files are essential for online delivery (Maritim & Getuno, 2018).

Information, including academic advising, consultations, program requirements and policies and feedback, can be made available online for learners (Meyer et al., 2022). In addition, online technical support systems should be readily available to troubleshoot challenges and provide prompt responses (Eunice & Cosmas, 2019). In the USA, most institutions support learners by facilitating access OER or loaning out devices such as laptops and offering wi-fi hotspots to those in need (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). For ODL learners to succeed, computer literacy is essential (Maritim & Getuno, 2018).

Motivation and Engagement of Learners in Open and Distance Learning

Motivation is an indispensable aspect of learner support and plays a crucial role in ensuring learner engagement in ODL programmes (Zuhairi, 2019). ODL learner motivation must be at the forefront of the delivery process (Lucey, 2018). Boton and Gregory (2015) identified successful motivating strategies to help institutions improve online learning processes and improve learner completion rates. Their study revealed that lecturers or tutors

can support learners by actively participating in discussion forums and sending reminder emails. Lucey (2018) suggests that instructors need to constantly interact with their learners online and provide regular constructive feedback. Another motivating approach is integrating relevant and employment-applicable content into the curriculum (Boton & Gregory, 2021; Lucey, 2018). Additionally, flexible course design allows learners to complete studies and assignments at their own time, pace, and place also increases motivation (Lyyra et al., 2024).

Purpose of the Study

This study aimed to gain insight into the implementation process of ODL programs and establish effective support practices that could improve learner completion rates. The overarching research question is: How can learner support be improved to help increase learner completion rates in ODL institutions in Botswana?

Methods

Research Design

This study is part of a master's dissertation by the first author, investigating the management of course delivery quality in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institutions in Gaborone. A qualitative multiple-case study design was employed, which enabled the researchers to compare and contrast the cases to gain deeper insights. Three universities, each forming a unique case, were selected to collect data, offering diverse perspectives on the research problem (Cresswell, 2014). Although a qualitative multiple-case study provided in-depth contextual insights into learner support mechanisms from the perspectives of practitioners, it has inherent limitations, particularly regarding generalizability and potential biases. Nonetheless, the findings offer valuable information about the challenges experienced by ODL practitioners in Botswana and may serve as a useful reference for practitioners in other countries with limited resources.

Research Site

This research was conducted at three universities in Gaborone, Botswana, one private institution, and two government-funded institutions. The research sites were purposively sampled based on their distinct and varied approaches to ODL service delivery and support structures, providing a comprehensive landscape of ODL practices. These sites were chosen for their unique characteristics, including modes of delivery and technological infrastructure, as detailed in Table 2. These factors are critical in providing a comprehensive understanding of management practices in diverse ODL settings.

Participants

The study involved key informants, including teaching staff and managers of ODL programs, who provided relevant data. Participants were purposively selected based on the following criteria: a) employment at the institution for more than one year, either part-time or full-time; b) willingness to voluntarily participate in the study; and c) training in teaching distance learners either formally or in-house. Purposive sampling has inherent limitations; however, this strategy was deemed most suitable because our objective was to gain rich, detailed insights from "key informants" within the specific rather than to generalize findings. This approach allowed us to recruit participants with sufficient experience and knowledge to understand this complex phenomenon deeply. The study included participants from both blended residential and fully online modes of distance learning (see Table 1). A total of 42 participants participated in the study, comprising 29 males and 13 females aged between 25 and 60 years. The participants were from diverse backgrounds and held different academic

positions, which contributed to a comprehensive understanding of the various perspectives within the ODL programs.

Table 1

Personal Professional Background of the Participants Who Responded to Survey

		Research Sites			
		Univ.1	Univ.2	Univ.3	Total
Gender	Male	19	4	6	29
	Female	7	2	4	13
Highest Qualification	Masters	18	6	6	30
	Doctorate	7	3	2	9
Experience	0-1 Years	4	1	1	6
	2-5 Years	13	4	5	22
	6-9 Years	3	1	1	5
	10+ Years	5	3	1	9
Subjects	Computing	4	0	1	5
	Graduate studies	2	0	0	2
	Business and Accounting	12	3	4	19
	Tourism and Hospitality	1	0	0	1
	Education	7	2	3	12
	Science	0	0	2	2
	Economics	0	0	1	1
Programmes Taught	Diploma	2	0	0	2
	Bachelor	16	7	8	29
	Master	7	0	1	8
	Doctorate	1	0	0	1
Positions	Tutor	3	2	2	7
	Lecturer	20	4	5	29
	Associate Professor	1	0	0	1
	Supervisor/ Manager	2	0	3	5
Full time / Parttime	Full time	16	4	7	27
	Part time	8	2	3	13

Research Instruments

Two data-collection instruments were specifically designed for this research: a) a web-based open-ended questionnaire and b) a semi-structured interview guide. The instruments were developed based on comprehensive literature review on ODL and learner support (Bawa, 2016; Kamau, 2012; Maritim & Getuno 2018; Ouma, 2019; Shea et al., 2005; Sikwibele & Mungo, 2009). To ensure its appropriateness and clarity, instruments were reviewed by three experienced ODL facilitators from higher education institutions and research experts. This review focused on instructional strategies, learner communities, management skills, and learner motivation to help establish content validity. Additionally, a semi-structured interview guide aimed at gathering detailed information about effective instructional delivery methods, learner support, and motivation. This guide was then systematically applied during interviews with the ODL facilitators to explore these themes in depth. Sample questions from the interview included: “What strategies do you use to

motivate distance learners?" and "How do you manage learner communities in an ODL setting?" The complete web-based questionnaire and interview guide are provided in Appendix A and Appendix B, respectively.

Data Collection Procedure

The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of University of Botswana and a research permit from the Ministry of Tertiary and Skills Development, Botswana. Informed consent was obtained from both institutions and individual participants. Data were collected via web-based questionnaires sent through Google Forms and accompanied by an informed consent form. Sixty-four participants were invited to participate, and 42 of them responded to the questionnaire. All 42 participants were then requested to participate in a follow-up telephonic interview, but only ten agreed. Subsequently, ten semi-structured telephonic interviews were conducted; all the interviews were conducted in English and recorded using a voice recorder to ensure accuracy. To overcome the inherent limitations of a qualitative multiple-case study research design, the first author employed reflexivity through a detailed journal and engaged in discussions with the other researchers. This approach helped maintain focus on the research and capture the authentic voices of participants. Trustworthiness was significantly enhanced by triangulating data from multiple collection methods (web-based questionnaire and telephonic individual interviews) and diverse participants. After transcribing the interviews, a member check exercise was carried out. We provided participants with the transcribed information to comment on whether they felt these transcribed data accurately represented their own opinions and experiences. Participants were also asked to add any additional information. All participants subsequently agreed with their respective transcription and confirmed that the information accurately reflected their contributions to the investigation, thereby enhancing the accuracy and trustworthiness of our data, as well as the credibility and depth of the findings.

Data Analysis

Data were coded and analyzed using a thematic analysis procedure following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework. This involved coding the data, identifying themes, and aligning them with the research objectives. Data were independently coded by each researcher and subsequently jointly reviewed and discussed to achieve consensus on the codes and emerging themes. This collaborative approach significantly enhanced the credibility of the findings and mitigated potential researcher bias in the coding process. Data from multiple sources were triangulated and compared across cases to gain a comprehensive understanding of the ODL management practices. For example, responses regarding instructional strategies were grouped under themes such as "learner engagement" and "technological challenges" to provide a nuanced understanding of the issues faced by ODL practitioners.

Findings

Description of the Cases

Case 1: University 1: Private University

It offers business, accounting and finance, computing, education, health information management, and tourism and hospitality courses. The main mode of service is technology-enhanced blended and distance learning (BDL).

Case 2: University 2: Government-Funded

The Education faculty consists of 13 staff members. It offers courses in primary education, integrated early childhood development, special and inclusive education, educational leadership, distance education practitioners, and quality assurance. The institution uses technology-enhanced open- and distance-learning approaches.

Case 3: University 3: Government-Funded

This institution offers accounting, finance, management, marketing, and adult education and management courses. The predominant mode of delivery is face-to-face in a residential distance learning system.

Learner Support in Botswana's ODL Context

This multiple-case study illustrates ODL practices. Table 2 provides the mode of delivery, technology use and infrastructure, mode of assessment, level of courses offered, support services, clientele and quality standards. The analysis of Sites 1 and 2 clearly indicates that private universities have better technology and infrastructural support than government institutions. Private institutions provide multiple modes of teaching and learning that are fully online and blended, whereas government institutions use only technology-enhanced face-to-face delivery. This study, along with previous studies such as Mathew & Iloanya (2016), and Kamau (2012), reported that there remains a significant gap in ODL service delivery. The quality of learner support and the level of use of technology in the delivery process seem inadequate in the government compared with private institutions.

Table 2

Characteristics of the Research Sites

Institution	Types of Univ.	Mode of Delivery	Mode of Assessment	Main Technology infrastructure	Faculty Support	Learner Support Services	Courses/ Clientele	Quality Standards
Univ.1	Private	Both-fully online and blended Blackboard & LMS used for online delivery, recorded videos & PowerPoint slides used, Discussion forums, WhatsApp groups, learner centered methods, micro-content delivery method, Virtual labs available	Online assessment-Graded discussion forum participation, peer-reviews, internet tests, use of safe assign and Turnitin Anti-plagiarism software, Online grading system, adaptive relief mechanism to fix submission dates.	Blackboard learning management system, adaptive relief mechanism, Virtual laboratories, Zero-rated Blackboard LMS, Offline mobile application, GLPI technology	E-teacher training, Workshops in partnership with blackboard LMS facilitators/capacity building through short courses in area of specialization and customer care, technical support for staff (provision of home internet connectivity, laptops), physical and e-library	Offline mobile application, Collaboration with internet service providers to provide free /cheaper internet, Online tracking mechanism, career counselling services, Alumni association, student manuals for technological tools, help line, GLPI ticketing system, virtual learner orientation, orientation packs, e- library facility, virtual student-staff consultative meetings, OER / free modules	Certificate, Diploma, Bachelor and Post graduate courses (Masters). International and local students, mostly working mature students.	ISO certified (BOS ISO 90001:201, Program accredited by BQA, GLPI ticketing system report, visual learning evaluation checklist / reports, internal service level agreement, continuous program reviews, Industrial reference forums, Academic integrity policy

Univ.2	Govt. Funded	Blended learning (Face-face and online activities) with plan to go fully online, Moodle portal to deliver tutorials, assignments, discussion forums, WhatsApp groups, PowerPoints	Face-to-face / Timed online tests. Anti- plagiarism software	Moodle Portal, Center for instructional technology, google meet. Smart classrooms, audio files, video recordings special boards, Both physical and e-library	Tutor induction and training, Commonwealth training program partnership, involvement of academic staff in decision-making.	Institutional collaboration with local internet providers to provide learners with free bundles. Learner support with tablets/ help desk, online/ face-face. Learner induction, e-library facility, trained counselors, online boot camp	Certificate, diploma, bachelor's and master's degree. Back -to-school both young and working adult learners, Local students.	Research ethics policy, Academic integrity policy
Univ.3	Govt. Funded	Residential mode of distance education. Residential tutorials and assessment sessions, Video conferencing tutorials, WhatsApp groups, learner-centered, Independent study, face-face and video conferencing tutorials.	Face-to-face, tests & examinations. Couriered/emailed assignments.	Video Conferencing, Print media and audio-visual modes of learning.		Face-to-face, orientation	Diploma and degree programs Mature working adults	Process of Developing

ODL is not just about technology infrastructure; it is argued that addressing learners' support practices, promoting learner motivation, using technology in instructional delivery, quality standards, and capacity building of faculty (staff) members has the potential to provide quality services and improve completion rates in ODL institutions.

The following sections present a detailed thematic analysis of participants' perceptions regarding instructional strategies in Open and Distance Learning (ODL). Participants' perceptions across the three research sites were analyzed thematically, and three predominant themes emerged. They are (a) instructional support, (b) technological support, and (c) creating learning communities.

Instructional Support

Effective instructional support in open and distance learning (ODL) is paramount for promoting effective learning experiences in such unique environments. It involves designing courses and materials that can be easily adapted to accommodate students' learning needs and styles without sacrificing the quality or effectiveness of instructional delivery. Furthermore, faculty perspectives on pedagogical considerations helped us understand instructional strategies that met the specific needs of both instructors and learners. A multifaceted approach to instructional design is crucial, and combining diverse strategies that are engaging, accessible, and impactful provides rich learning experiences for students. The findings were categorized into three sub-themes: a) flexibility in the course structure, b) relevance of content, and c) providing feedback.

Flexibility in the Course Structure

It also emerged from the findings that—to successfully support learners t—there is a need to ensure flexibility in the course structure. It is important to highlight that most ODL students are adult learners with multiple commitments. Therefore, learners must be given room to maneuver in the event that they are unable to meet set deadlines. For instance, if a learner is unable to submit an assignment on the due date, an extension is provided to complete the task. However, learners should be informed and oriented regarding their flexibility. In addition, it is important for course instructors to continue their professional development to address program delivery. A participant in a managerial position from a private university [Univ.1] was of the view that:

> Because most distance learning students are adults who are mostly working and have many obligations, we need to be flexible enough to accommodate their diverse schedules and responsibilities so that they can complete their program. We orient students about the program, course content, mode of delivery and availability of support services. We regularly organize professional development program for course instructors.

Flexibility is crucial for accommodating diverse student needs and for improving learning outcomes. It extends beyond e-learning to include elective courses, reduced teaching hours, and exam distributions. Additionally, the content of the program should be relevant.

Relevance of Course Content

The findings of this research suggest the need for distance learners to find the content of the course relevant to their occupation, addressing unemployment, skill development, and socio-economic challenges. ODL is seen as a flexible alternative to traditional education that is capable of reaching a wider audience and providing relevant skills for the job market. One of the course instructors from a private institution [Univ.1] believed the following:

> Students will be retained if they are motivated to learn… they will only be retained if they see the value of what they are learning. When students find material relevant and meaningful, they are more likely to continue their education. Therefore, it is important to create a curriculum that is both engaging and applicable to their lives.

The opinions of the participants from government institutions were not very different, as one of them said:

> Motivation is necessary…they need to like what they are doing and aim to complete whatever they study.

ODL can play a significant role in transforming and empowering the vibrant adult population into productive human resources by providing need-based training and equipping it with need-based skills.

Providing Feedback

Providing learners with valuable feedback and adequately addressing their questions can motivate them. Effective feedback is important; such feedback must be

clear, personalized, detailed, and balanced. It serves to highlight learners' strengths and areas for improvement, driving change, and enhancing their learning experience. The findings of this study indicate that faculty members use feedback strategies, including written, audio, video, and automated methods. Participants of this research were of the opinion that the way lecturers give feedback to learners affects the retention of ODL students. One of the participants from a government university [Univ.3] suggested:

> Student retention issues are quality related because students must see that they are getting value for their money. If learners receive feedback and do not see it as feedback, they lose interest in the system. How one handles students' voices matters a lot and goes a long way to improve student retention.

Feedback is important. It promotes positive interaction between instructors and students and makes ODL a better learning option for mature learners. Participants further described how student-centered strategies—such as flipped classrooms, microcontent delivery, and the use of recorded videos enabled learners to take ownership of their learning and revisit content as needed. For example, one respondent noted:

> Posting recorded videos on the learning platform could be said to be an effective approach of delivering instructions in ODL as it allows for asynchronous delivery of content where learners can access the work in their own time and from anywhere. Students can also revisit the videos for further understanding and getting clarity of the content.

Faculty also emphasized the importance of tailoring instruction to individuals who need extra support by promoting self-directed learning, which they believed could help motivate students to persist in their studies.

Technological Support

Technological support is crucial for ODL students; therefore, institutions that offer courses in ODL mode must provide comprehensive technological support. Such support plays a central role in addressing student queries and improving response quality. ODL students value flexibility and require information for enrollment, reliable teacher support, and prompt responses. Analysis of the participants' perceptions emerged into four sub-themes, and they are a) online technical support, b) virtual learning monitoring, c) internet accessibilities and d) online visibility of faculty

Online Technical Support

Participants believed that learners could be supported by technology when delivering their instructions. Almost 90% of the participants themselves suggested that academic staff in ODL need to acquire technological expertise to improve their delivery methods. Participants reported using video conferencing such as Teams and Zoom, as well as learning management systems (LMS) such as Moodle and Blackboard; they found such tools effective and kept the learners connected. Regarding issues related to LMS, participants believed that students could access learning resources as well as interact with their lecturers, tutors, and peers. The following responses emerged.

> Our learning materials are placed on the LMS via Blackboard, which is also available to the students as a mobile application. Students had access to the

> materials they used in their classes. We have a portal for them, which includes PowerPoint slides, audio files, and video recordings.

The findings also indicate that distance learners can be supported through the use of a helpdesk that provides technology support to students. Open-source I.T. asset management systems, such as GLPI have the potential to provide efficient support to students by connecting them to the relevant departments and getting immediate assistance. One respondent explained:

> We have our e-learning department, which we call the center of the instructional technology. They had a help desk and email. Students are told that whatever problems they have, they will be assisted by sending the helpdesk an email.

Virtual Learning Monitoring

The participants of the study indicated that although LMS is integrated with a tracking system to identify inactive students and monitor their learning activities, it should be started early to prevent dropouts. To explain the process of monitoring learners, one participant from a government institution [Univ.2] explained,

> There is something called learning analytics that shows what is going on with respect to student and tutor activities on the platform. Therefore, you can see the profiles of the students.

It was also found that the learners in ODL were encouraged to access open online educational resources (OER) and libraries, where they could access e-journals, e-books, modules, and other resources. During the interview, one of the respondents raised this issue at a government university [Univ.2] and suggested:

> There are many modules provided by international platforms, such as open educational resources, that are fully free for both staff and students.

Internet Accessibility

Participants emphasized the need for uninterrupted internet connectivity to access their education. The study revealed that ODL learners were provided with free internet connectivity by signing agreements with institutions and internet service providers. The study also revealed an offline mobile application on the Blackboard LMS. Elaborating on this issue, one participant said,

> The school also collaborates with telephone internet service providers (ISPs) for students at a very low cost. Therefore, the internet should not be a barrier to technology use.

One of the participants from the university said,

> We have made arrangements with different service providers to help zero-rate our board. In addition, within Blackboard, there is a mobile app with an offline feature where the student can download all the content and use it without the need for the Internet.

However, there was general contention over the cost of internet data, inadequate internet accessibility by learners, and one participant further expressed concern over existing inequalities among students. He said:

> In rural and even urban areas, some students particularly those from lower socioeconomically backgrounds are unable to access internet connectivity and do not have equipment such as laptops or smartphones. Others have all of these facilities.

In addition, participants reported that learners were given tablets to access resource materials. One participant said,

> One thing we do as an institution is to give our online program tablets so that they have a gadget to complete their assignments.

Online Visibility of Faculty

Participants suggested that learner support through lecturers or tutors was visible online, so that learners could feel their presence. About 81% of the participants agreed that tutors' online presence was key to engaging and retaining learners in the course. Different ways of showing visibility online emerged from the interviews, including communicating with students through class WhatsApp groups and emails, monitoring learner participation through tracking mechanisms, making follow-ups for inactive students, and posting recorded videos. One of the participants claimed that:

> Currently, it is easy to monitor class activities on an online platform. Tutors should check so that they can see the history of who is using the system. Once you locate those who are not, you need to communicate with them and follow up by writing an email.

These findings demonstrate that, while technological tools are widely adopted for ODL, technical challenges related to internet access and device availability remain significant obstacles for many learners, particularly those from the lower socioeconomic background directly impacting their participation and engagement in distance education.

Building Learning Community

The study found that building communities among distance learners is another essential component that could improve learner support and increase the completion rate. Building a successful learning community depends on a) learner orientation and b) mentor-learner relationships.

Learner Orientation

Learner orientation introduces the learner to the expectations of the institution and the systems or practices in place. During orientation, learners are induced on technology infrastructure, the Learning Management System, and the use of the latest technologies to access online learning. One of the participants highlighted this:

> We also took them through Blackboard LMS, which is the platform where learning takes place. They have to know how to navigate the system, where to find the learning resource, which is the teaching content, the assessment, discussions, and grades, and how to communicate with each other within

> Blackboard and with the lecturer, where they share ideas and conduct peer reviews, and how to go through the e-library to find journals, e-books, and to download or borrow online.

Echoing this sentiment, another participant reported

> A prerequisite communicated to learners at registration is that they must be I.T. literate and need to have either a laptop, desktop, or any mobile device. They need to have minimum internet infrastructure to be able to undertake online learning.

Mentors-Student and Student-Student Relationship

The ODL students are supported by program mentors who continuously provide the necessary information about the program and monitor their progress. Participants included the use of discussion forums on the LMS and WhatsApp groups; such activities could cultivate trust, collaboration, and knowledge-sharing. Eighty percent of respondents indicated that establishing a relationship with students could have a positive impact on the learner completion rate. During the interviews, it emerged that establishing discussion forums on Blackboard LMS or Moodle and WhatsApp groups plays an important role in facilitating interactions among learners and supports collaborative learning. The participants shared the following sentiments:

> On Blackboard, there is a feature for discussion forums where the lecturer can post a topic for the students to discuss, and then there will be a thread of discussions on that topic. The discussion forum builds trust and knowledge-sharing.

The other participants said:

> Students interacted with each other through WhatsApp and other modes or tools. Students are expected to comment on other students' work posted in discussion forums, assess and grade their work, and learn together.

The mentor also suggested intervention measures to assist the learner with any challenges and support the learners by providing both academic and social guidance from the start to the end of the program. One of the respondents stated the following:

> We also have program mentors. Their mandate is to engage learners from day one, when the learner is enrolled in the program. The mentor welcomes the student and introduces the program and module, telling the students of the expected modalities, how the program is studied, checking the performance of the learners, and their participation in the discussion forum. When they are not participating, the mentor checks the students about what is happening.

The participants of this study also indicated the importance of learner motivation and linked it with learner completion rates. The participants agreed that learner motivation is essential for ODL delivery. Eighty percent of respondents highlighted the importance of learners' motivation as an essential element in ODL success. This finding suggests the need for motivation as a learner-support practice in ODL programs. Against this backdrop, the interview participants elaborated in-depth and suggested ways of motivating learners to complete their ODL courses, including assisting in setting goals and providing constructive feedback.

The findings of the study established that ODL learners could be motivated by ensuring that they set goals from the beginning of the course and need to be self-driven and disciplined to complete their programs. One participant lamented,

> People believe that learning online is easy. In reality, learning in class is easier because you learn from what you have been told by somebody else. However, in DL, it is the responsibility to learn.

Discussion

This study aimed to explore strategies and good practices in the ODL to improve learning outcomes and learner completion rates in selected institutions in Gaborone, Botswana. Through qualitative research involving 42 ODL practitioners, the study identified critical elements impacting learner success. The findings suggest that implementing an effective learner support system is a critical strategy for enhancing and increasing completion rates. This aligns with previous research emphasizing comprehensive orientation, continuous professional development for staff, and diligent addressing of support delivery challenges (Maritim & Getumo 2018; Ouma 2019; Wani et al., 2023). Specifically, a robust support system contributes significantly to improve student success, retention and satisfaction of ODL settings (Ouma 2019; Wani et al., 2023).

This study highlights the potential of technology integration to strengthen support services and enhance instruction. Information and communication technologies are increasingly encouraged for this purpose. Findings indicate the effectiveness of helpdesk facilities and the GLPI ticketing system for addressing technical difficulties promptly, which decentralizes learner support services and promotes access and participation in ODL (Eunice & Cosmas, 2019; Kamau, 2012). Moreover, the use of virtual learning analytics emerged as a crucial practice to track and monitor student activities on the LMS. This enables early identification and intervention for at-risk learners, a strategy supported by Paniagua and Simpson (2018) for improving student retention. The literature consistently values technologies like the LMS for enhancing delivery and fostering social and academic interactions, thereby reducing isolation and improving completion rates (Boston & Gregory, 2015; Eunice & Cosmas, 2019; Maritim & Getumo, 2018). Instructors' active online presence and engagement are also vital for building rapport and facilitating learning, directly impacting learner success (Boton & Gregory, 2015). The integration of technology, such as the LMS, helpdesk facilities, and virtual learning analytics, provides opportunity to promote student engagement thus supporting the Transactional Distance Theory.

The findings of this research also highlight the importance of social learning communities for promoting trust, collaboration, and knowledge sharing, thereby enriching the ODL experiences and student success. Establishing a strong social learning community through discussion forums and WhatsApp groups could promote a sense of belonging and counteract feelings of isolation which are crucial for motivating distance learners to persist. These communities facilitate collective action and help students overcome socio-ecological vulnerabilities through participatory approaches (de Souza et al., 2020).

This study affirms the crucial role of early orientation and ongoing mentoring in ensuring learner retention and achievement within ODL programmes (Paniagua & Simpson, 2021). Specific orientation on learning resources, technology infrastructure interactions, and lecturer access is vital for ODL success (Maritim & Getuno, 2018). Program mentors play a critical role in providing continuous guidance and suggesting intervention measures to help learners clarify their goals. According to Gordon (2019), this support functions as a key element of the Dialogue component within Transactional Distance Theory.

Facilitating access to Open Education Resources (OER) and the library services support learners and widens participation in distance learning ((U.S. Department of Education, 2017; Zuhairi, 2018). Furthermore, providing free internet connectivity and loaning out devices like laptops are fundamental, as effective online learning depends on access to necessary digital devices (Eunice & Cosmas, 2019; U.S. Department of Education, 2017). This is consistent with the literature indicating that the practice of integrating OER into teaching and learning plays a critical role in Botswana and other developing countries. Studies have also emphasized the importance of tailored support strategies, such as instructional design, learning engagement, and quality assurance in ODL (Zuhairi et al., 2019).

Besides resources, learners' motivation emerged as a critical support component (Lucey, 2018). Findings suggest learners are motivated by setting goals and owning their learning process, highlighting the need for students to understand their enrollment to reduce withdrawals (Paniagua & Simpson, 2018). Content relevance, aligning with students' future aspiration, is also vital for persistence (Boton & Gregory, 2015; Lucey, 2018). Learners must be self-driven and take ownership of their learning process. This study suggests that the learning content should be in line with what students plan to do in the future so that they will be motivated to continue learning. This is consistent with many scholars who consider the relevance of content to be a necessity in helping learners persist. Literature also supports the need to provide learners with valuable and satisfactory feedback (Lucey, 2018). Flexible course design, content relevance, and fostering self-driven learning directly supports independent learning, and thus the reduction of transactional distance is emphasized in TDT.

Despite the extensive body of literature on learner support in ODL from developed countries, significant gaps remain in understanding the specific challenges and strategies that are most effective in different contexts, particularly in developing countries such as Botswana. This study sought to understand ODL practitioners' perspectives; participants identified critical elements such as online technical support, virtual learning evaluation, and the creation of learner communities as they significantly impact learner completion rates. This study contributes to the existing literature by offering new insights into the implementation process of ODL programs in Botswana. This highlights the necessity of investing in technology infrastructure and adopting the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) quality standards to effectively support learners. Furthermore, participants highlighted the importance of continuous professional development for ODL practitioners, and the need for flexible course structures to accommodate adult learners with multiple commitments. By focusing on the specific context of Botswana, this study provides valuable recommendations for ODL institutions in similar settings to bridge the gap between enrolment and completion rates. The findings of this research indicated that the helpdesk facility in place was an effective learner support practice that could help learners counter

technical difficulties by easily getting assistance. Participants reported that facilitating learners' access provided by established internet providers in the country was another way to offer quality learner support. Thus, it was believed that every learner is given a chance to participate effectively in the learning process and complete it. Furthermore, interestingly, the practice of providing technology devices to students as a support intervention has emerged, such as giving learners gadgets to help them access online learning. Participants of this study were of the opinion that to support distance learners, technology must be utilized to deliver instructions. Learning resources, including lecture videos, assessments, discussion questions, grades, and announcements can be uploaded online for easy access. To this effect, Eunice and Cosmas, (2019) suggested that effective online learning is only possible when students possess the required technological devices.

This qualitative multiple-case study, while offering in-depth insights into learner support, has several inherent limitations due to its methodological approach. Firstly, the qualitative nature of the study inherently limits its generalizability, as findings emerge from a purposively selected sample and reflect practitioner perspectives. We acknowledge this and have focused on enhancing trustworthiness through careful thematic analysis and researcher reflexivity. Secondly, the study's scope was confined to a very specific context: three institutions within Gaborone, Botswana. While this allowed for an in-depth exploration of local dynamics, it reduced the transferability of results to wider geographical or institutional settings. In addition, the use of telephone interviews for some participants, though practical, may also have limited the depth of interaction and the observation of non-verbal cues. Furthermore, this research did not explore the specific technical challenges learners face concerning digital infrastructure and devices. We also did not examine the long-term effects of technology use and support systems on student achievement and retention. The role of learners' socio-economic factors influencing access to and success in ODL were not explored in detail. While faculty anticipated that active, learner-centered approaches and technology integration would likely promote sustained engagement and reduce attrition, these expectations were not empirically tested within the study period. As such, the analysis of technology use and support systems was limited to faculty's immediate observations and perceptions, rather than documented long-term outcomes.

Future researchers may focus on these areas employing different methodologies or expanding the geographical scope for broader representativeness and generalizability. However, the insights we gained through this research offer valuable information about the challenges ODL practitioners face and could certainly be a useful reference for practitioners in other resource-limited countries. As ODL becomes an increasingly popular mode of accessing higher education, more research is needed in this area. Future research should expand the scope to include learner support, strategies for setting up online teams, and the processes of working together in a longitudinal timeframe. Such studies could broaden partitioners' understanding of effective strategies for implementing and facilitating online teamwork in tertiary education.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This study sought to establish effective learner-support practices to improve the learner completion rates in ODL institutions. Overall, the findings suggest that learner orientation, online technical support, virtual learning monitoring and evaluation, provision of e-learning resources, internet accessibility, mentoring, use of LMS

platforms, tutor online visibility, course flexibility, learner motivation, and building learning communities are effective distance learner support elements, among others. The findings of this study are in line with the findings of studies conducted in developed countries, which can significantly contribute to providing an ODL mode of delivery to promote universal access to education in Botswana and other developing countries. However, the study revealed the challenges of inequality among learners in accessing Internet connectivity and gadgets. To achieve universal access and equity in education, it is necessary for the government to close the gap in the digital divide by subsidizing the Internet to make it affordable for all learners.

The study also found that a difference in the level of technology use between government and private institutions negatively affects the ODL teaching and learning processes. To bridge this gap, participants felt that government institutions need to invest in technology infrastructure, such as LMS, in ODL institutions. Government-aided institutions should emulate private institutions in adopting quality standards such as BOS ISO 9001:2015 to support learner success.

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Appendix A

Web-based Interview Questions

1. Describe your most effective online teaching methods. What makes them successful for distance learners?
2. How do you adapt practical or hands-on activities for online delivery?
3. How do you manage and encourage interaction within learner communities in online courses? What strategies work best to build connection?
4. What key skills do you find most important for effectively managing an online course or program?
5. Describe a time you faced a significant challenge in online course management. How did you address it?
6. What specific strategies do you use to motivate distance learners?
7. In your opinion, what factors most influence a distance learner's motivation to complete a course?

Appendix B

Interview Guide: Online Learning Experiences

Thanks for your time. We're discussing online teaching and learning to understand what works well. Your answers are confidential.

1. What are the most effective ways you deliver learning materials in online courses?
   Probe: What tools do you use? And why?
2. How do you teach hands-on or practical subjects effectively online?
3. Do you think online and in-person teaching methods should be the same?
   Probe: Why or why not?
4. How do you manage learner communities and encourage interaction among students in an Open and Distance Learning (ODL) setting?
5. What kind of support (like tech help or advising) is available for online students from our institution?
   Probe: How well does it help them, especially with new technology or learning independently?
6. What strategies do you use to motivate distance learners to engage and complete their courses?
7. Does a student's motivation affect whether they finish their online course?
   Probe: What helps students stick with it?
8. How do you make sure your online materials are accessible for all students, including those with different needs?
9. What's one main thing our institution could do to better support online learners or teachers?
10. Do you have any other thoughts on online teaching and learning to share