

# **Leveraging Learner Support Systems To Enhance Participation In Distance Learning: A Case Study Of University Of Nairobi, Kenya**

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## **Abstract**

*In the rapidly evolving landscape of distance learning, learner support systems have emerged as pivotal components in shaping learner engagement and participation. This mixed-methods study focuses on the relationship between learner support systems and learner participation within the context of the University of Nairobi's Faculty of Education during the 2022/2023 academic year. The research design integrated quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of the impact of learner support systems on distance learning participation. The target population for this study comprised 916 learners enrolled in the bachelor of education programs. A sample size of 180 students was selected, ensuring a representative cross-section of the population. Data collection was facilitated through a structured survey questionnaire, designed to capture learners' perceptions of orientation, feedback mechanisms, and records management systems, and their influence on participation. Open-ended questions in the survey further enriched the data by gathering qualitative insights. Quantitative data analysis employed descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics provided an overview of learners' perceptions, while multiple regression analysis and correlation coefficients were utilized to establish relationships between learner support system components and participation. Qualitative data were analyzed thematically, allowing for the identification of recurring patterns and themes within learners' qualitative responses. Data analysis revealed an explanatory power of learner support systems of R Square 0.669 and Adjusted R Square 0.667, which was statistically significant at  $p > 0.05$ . This shows that learner support systems have a significant influence on learner participation in distance learning in Kenya. The study findings underscore the crucial role of learner support systems in fostering active engagement, participation, and overall success in the realm of online education.*

**Key Words:** *Learner Support Systems, Distance Learning, Learner Participation, Online Education*

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## **I. Introduction**

A major trend in all levels of education in recent years has been the advent of distance learning. Since society realizes the fact that combining work and family responsibilities and study requirements are demanding, it is already possible to acquire higher qualifications in many fields of study through distance learning. Balci and Soran (2019) expressed the opinion that distance learning has extended possibilities for learners and enabled them to become more accessible to education and teaching, because now they are able to study at home, while fulfilling their numerous family obligations. The advent of digital technology has transformed the landscape of education, offering learners unprecedented access to knowledge and learning opportunities through distance education (Haleem, Javaid, Qadri & Suman, 2022). Learner participation, a key indicator of the success of distance learning programs, hinges on the effective utilization of learner support systems. This paper explores the intricate relationship between learner support systems and learner participation in distance learning, with a particular focus on the Kenyan context (Kisimbii, Gakuu & Kidombo, 2019). The study reported in this paper sought to uncover the mechanisms through which learner support systems contribute to increased engagement, motivation, and active involvement of students in their distance learning journey.

Distance learning, facilitated by networked computers and individualistic interfaces, has transformed education, offering learners unprecedented access to knowledge and learning opportunities. However, this mode of learning also brings forth unique challenges, as students often find themselves working in isolation, lacking immediate access to peers and instructors (Basar, Mansor, Jamaludin & Alias, 2021). The need for effective learner support systems in distance learning has emerged from the recognition that these challenges go beyond the support systems available in traditional education settings. Many researchers and practitioners have

highlighted that successful learner engagement and learning outcomes in distance learning settings can be achieved only through appropriate learner support systems (Hijazi & Naqvi, 2009; George & Merriam, 2012).

### **Statement of the Problem**

In the context of distance learning, the important role of learner support systems in fostering active and engaged learner participation is increasingly acknowledged. Learner support systems encompass a range of services and resources aimed at assisting learners in overcoming challenges inherent to the distance learning environment. These systems encompass orientation programs, feedback mechanisms, and records management, among others. However, despite their recognized importance, there remains a gap in understanding the relationship between learner support systems and learner participation, particularly in the Kenyan higher education landscape. While various studies have emphasized the significance of learner support systems, there exists a scarcity of research that holistically examines how these systems specifically impact learner participation within the Kenyan context. Although anecdotal evidence suggests that effective learner support systems can enhance learner engagement, the specific mechanisms through which these systems influence participation remain unclear. Furthermore, the potential challenges or limitations of these systems in promoting learner participation in the Kenyan distance learning setting require further exploration. This study aims to address these gaps by investigating the extent to which learner support systems influence learner participation in the Kenyan higher education environment. By conducting an examination of the components of learner support systems, including orientation, feedback mechanisms, and records management, this research seeks to provide valuable insights into the ways these systems contribute to learner engagement. Such insights are essential for institutions of higher learning to refine and tailor their learner support strategies to effectively meet the unique challenges and needs of distance learners.

### **Purpose of the Study**

This paper is based on a study that sought to establish the influence of learner support systems on learner participation in distance learning in Kenya, focusing on students pursuing undergraduate Programs at the University of Nairobi.

## **II. Literature Review**

Learner support systems are the structures, services, and resources implemented by the university to provide assistance, guidance, and support to students throughout their learning journey (Rotar, 2022). Learner support systems encompass various components and strategies aimed at addressing the diverse needs of learners in the online or remote learning environment. Learner support systems may include the following elements: academic support services, technical support, online learning resources: communication and collaboration tools, and other personalized support (Ozoglu, 2010; Shikulo & Leketho, 2020).

In the Kenyan context, the demand for tailored learner support systems becomes more pronounced as educational institutions transition to digital learning environments (Kibuku, Ochieng & Wausi, 2020). Learners embarking on distance education encounter distinct obstacles that require innovative solutions. Therefore, understanding the components of learner support systems and their impact on participation is crucial. This study delved into the significance of learner support systems in enhancing learner participation in distance learning in Kenya, with a particular focus on the components of orientation, feedback mechanisms, and records management systems.

Orientation emerges as a pivotal component of learner support systems in distance learning. Garrison and Vaughan (2008) emphasize the role of orientation programs in acclimating learners to the demands of academic settings, helping them cultivate habits conducive to participation in distance learning. These programs are instrumental in facilitating academic and social interactions, nurturing a sense of belonging within the learning community. Inadequate orientation has been linked to learners' disengagement and attrition in distance learning programs (Aderinoye, 2016), highlighting the critical role of orientation in shaping learner participation.

Feedback mechanisms represent another vital element of learner support systems. Providing timely and constructive feedback throughout the learning journey has been shown to positively influence learner engagement and outcomes (Tao et al., 2015). Kuh's (2011) research underscores the impact of feedback on learners' participation and performance in distance learning. Effective feedback should be authentic, consistent, and delivered promptly, contributing to learners' confidence and motivation. Conversely, insufficient or untimely feedback may deter learners and hinder their active participation (Musingafi et al., 2015).

The final component studied in learner support systems is records management. This system ensures the systematic control and monitoring of records throughout their lifecycle, from creation to disposal. University records, vital assets for effective governance and accountability, play a pivotal role in achieving institutional goals (Akube, 2011). Poor records management practices can lead to challenges in decision-making and service delivery

(Obi, 2015). A well-managed records management system not only facilitates administrative processes but also empowers learners to monitor their educational progress (Weggant, 2015).

### **III. Methodology**

This study employed a mixed methods research design to comprehensively explore the influence of learner support systems on learner participation in distance learning within the context of the University of Nairobi's Faculty of Education during the 2022/2023 academic year. The research design allowed for the integration of quantitative and qualitative data to provide a well-rounded understanding of the research objective.

#### **Population and Sample**

The target population for this study consisted of 916 learners enrolled in the bachelor of education programs within the Faculty of Education at the University of Nairobi. To ensure a manageable scope for data collection and analysis, a sample size of 180 students was selected. This sample size was chosen to represent a diverse cross-section of the population while maintaining statistical rigor.

#### **Data Collection**

Data for this study was collected through a structured survey questionnaire. The questionnaire was designed to capture quantitative data regarding learners' perceptions of various aspects of learner support systems and their impact on participation. Additionally, qualitative insights were collected through open-ended questions in the survey to gather deeper understanding and context.

#### **Quantitative Data Analysis**

Descriptive statistics were employed to summarize the quantitative data, providing a clear overview of learners' perceptions and responses. To establish relationships between learner support system components and learner participation, inferential statistics were utilized. Multiple regression analysis was employed to assess the extent to which orientation, feedback mechanisms, and records management systems collectively influence learner participation. Furthermore, correlation coefficients were calculated to quantify the strength and direction of the relationships between learner support system components and participation.

#### **Qualitative Data Analysis**

The qualitative data collected through open-ended questions in the survey were analyzed thematically. Thematic analysis enabled the identification and exploration of recurring patterns, themes, and insights within the qualitative responses. By coding and categorizing the qualitative data, the researchers gained deeper insights into the nuances of learners' experiences and perspectives related to learner support systems and their influence on participation.

### **IV. Results**

The results of the study, as shown in Table 1, indicated that, the items that obtained the highest mean scores on the learner support systems scale were: my transition into the university life began with an orientation (3.74), Orientation helped me to access and navigate course websites (3.67), and I was provided with information about the university (3.24). On the other hand, the items that received the lowest mean scores included the following: there is prompt feedback mechanism on the progress of my learning (2.94), the orientation helped me manage studies-related stress (2.98), and the orientation helped me to adapt to the online learning environment (3.01). These findings suggest that the students found the orientation program at the university helpful in facilitating their transition into the university environment. Orientation programs provide students with important information about the institution, its resources, and its expectations, helping them acclimate to the university setting. The students perceived the orientation program as beneficial in familiarizing them with the course websites and platforms used for online learning. The orientation likely provided guidance on accessing and navigating these websites, which are essential for students to engage with their course materials. The students also felt that they received adequate information about the university as part of the learner support systems. Providing comprehensive information about the university, its resources, and support services helps students better understand the institution and its courses.

However the students perceived a lack of prompt feedback on their learning progress. Timely feedback is crucial for students to assess their understanding, identify areas for improvement, and stay motivated in their studies. The students further felt that the orientation program did not effectively address or support them in managing stress related to their studies. Managing stress is essential for students to maintain their well-being and academic performance. It was also established that students perceived the orientation program as less effective in helping them adapt to the online learning environment. Adapting to the online learning environment requires specific skills and strategies, and students may have felt that the orientation program did not sufficiently address

these needs. These findings suggest that while students found certain aspects of the learner support systems beneficial, there were areas of concern related to prompt feedback, stress management support, and adapting to the online learning environment.

**Table 1: Learner Support Systems**

Learner Support Systems	Mean	Std. D
My transition into the university life began with an orientation	3.74	1.027
Orientation helped me to access and navigate course websites	3.67	1.049
I was provided with information about the university	3.24	.904
The orientation was face to face	3.16	.895
The orientation was on line	3.13	.928
The orientation was both face to face and on line	3.08	1.007
Feedback is an important part of the Participation in distance learning	3.04	1.013
Orientation helped me to adapt to the on line learning environment	3.01	1.002
Orientation helped me manage studies related stress	2.98	.972
Feedback mechanism on the progress of my learning promptly	2.94	1.058

These findings point to the need for the university to identify strategies for enhancing feedback mechanisms, providing additional stress management resources, and offering more targeted support for adapting to the online learning environment. By addressing these concerns, the university can enhance student participation, engagement, and overall success in distance education programs. Regression analysis results revealed an explanatory power of learner support systems of R Square 0.669 and Adjusted R Square 0.667, which was statistically significant at  $p > 0.05$ . This shows that learner support systems have a significant influence on learner participation in distance learning in Kenya. The study findings depicted that there was a positive significant relationship between learner support systems and learner participation in distance learning in Kenya ( $\beta_1 = 0.818$  and  $p \text{ value} < 0.043$ ). Therefore, a unit increase in learner support systems led to an increase in learner participation in distance learning in Kenya by 0.818. This indicates a strong positive relationship between the two variables. Learner support systems encompass various forms of support, including academic advising, orientation programmes, counselling services, technical support, and feedback mechanisms, which aim to assist students in navigating the challenges of distance learning and address their individual needs and concerns.

Several studies have highlighted the importance of learner support systems in promoting learner participation in distance learning. For example, a study by Rotar (2022) examined the impact of learner support on student outcomes in online courses and found that students who received adequate support reported higher levels of participation and engagement. Similarly, a study conducted by Mariano (2012) emphasized the role of learner support in fostering student engagement and promoting active learning in online environments. Mariano further found that most students were found to be passive in their interaction with online discussion boards. While some of the self-motivated learners were found to enthusiastically take advantage of online communication channels, most students required a structured, cohesive framework with systematic support.

Effective learner support systems can positively influence learner participation in several ways. For instance, academic advising and orientation programmes provide students with guidance and resources to navigate the online learning environment, which can increase their confidence and motivation to actively participate in their studies (Karp, Ackerson & Cheng, 2021). Secondly, counseling services can address personal and academic challenges that students may face, enhancing their overall well-being and encouraging their continued engagement in the learning process (Okafor, Onwuadi & Imo, 2021). Finally, prompt and constructive feedback mechanisms facilitate communication between students and instructors, providing students with valuable guidance and support, and motivating them to actively contribute to discussions and assignments (Attiogbe, Oheneba-Sakyi, Kwabong & Boateng, 2023). Based on the strong positive relationship between learner support systems and learner participation in distance learning, it follows that investing in comprehensive and effective support systems can significantly enhance student engagement, retention, and overall success in online education.

## V. Conclusion and Recommendations

From the findings of the study, it emerges that learner support systems play an important role in fostering learner participation in distance learning. Learner support systems, which comprise academic advising, orientation programs, counselling services, and technical support, emerged as a significant predictor of student engagement and active involvement in the online learning process. The positive relationship between learner support systems and learner participation underscores the importance of providing comprehensive and tailored support to distance learners, enabling them to navigate challenges and fully engage with their educational journey. Effective learner support systems contribute to students' sense of belonging and readiness to succeed in the online learning

environment. Academic advising and orientation programmes provide students with guidance on course selection, academic planning, and strategies for online learning success. These support services play a crucial role in helping learners adapt to the demands of distance education and stay on track with their academic goals. Additionally, counselling services offer students emotional and academic support, assisting them in managing stress and enhancing their overall well-being, which in turn positively influences their active participation in the learning process. The study findings have implications for distance learning programmes and institutions. Adopting a learner-centered approach to providing support services is essential in recognizing and addressing the diverse needs of distance learners. By understanding learners' unique challenges and preferences, educational institutions can design support systems that foster a positive and inclusive learning environment. Furthermore, the integration of technical support ensures that students have smooth access to online platforms and resources, reducing barriers that may hinder learner participation. Universities in Kenya should thus prioritize the development and enhancement of learner support systems. This involves providing comprehensive academic advising, orientation programmes, counselling services, and timely feedback to learners. Academic advisors should be readily available to guide students in their course selection, academic planning, and navigating the online learning environment. Offering counselling services can help address students' emotional and academic needs, promoting a positive and supportive learning experience. By strengthening learner support systems, institutions can foster a sense of belonging and empower students to actively engage in their distance learning journey.

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