

## 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. 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 to 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

**Conference Title :** ICERI 2018 : International Conference on Education, Research and Innovation

**Conference Location :** Prague, Czechia

**Conference Dates :** March 22-23, 2018