Chapter 6:

Contextualising Student Support Services in Distance Education for Effectiveness: Guidelines for Producing Evidence

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Introduction

Despite the value that the distance education delivery mode adds to education, especially by opening opportunities for once-denied groups, the mode's deficit is a huge concern. According to Simpson (2013: 105), who first used the term 'distance education deficit' in 2013, the term refers to 'the problem of student retention and dropout' that creates a huge gap between the graduation rates of distance education and conventional institutions. Woodley and Simpson (2014: 459) refer to the deficit as 'an elephant in the room in distance education' and if it is not addressed, the value that distance education adds to teaching by increasing access will be eroded by the relative lack of success. To stem this tide, scholars (Simpson 2013; Peters, Crawley, and Brindley 2017; Sánchez-Elvira, Paniagua, and Simpson 2018) have recommended a change of attitude by institutions to student support matters. According to Lumadi (2021: 114), 'student support is a universal term that is applied to the variety of services that are established by institutions to assist their students in achieving their learning aims; to improve their knowledge to be successful and to complete their academic studies'. Simpson (2012: 13) asserts that the services include, 'all activities beyond the production and delivery of course materials that assist in the progress of students to succeed in their studies'. The need to focus on such services is as old as the mode itself (Zuhairi, Karthikeyan, and Priyadarshana 2020). Although practitioners are agreed that such services are important, and while many go to great lengths to support students (Tait 2015), there is scant evidence regarding the effectiveness of such services. However, literature (Richie and Fox 2014) show that tailor-made support services that suit students' context can go a long way to minimise the distance education deficit gap by making a huge difference in retention. However, according to Zuhairi et al. (2020),

despite technological advancement in the field the ideologies of support services have not changed: students are involved in learning and are encouraged to do so autonomously.

This chapter focuses on Alan Tait's (2015) 'overall student experience' framework, which the author proposed on student support. The purpose of the chapter is to discuss how the guidelines the author of this chapter has put together in an article (Aluko 2021) can be contextualised, especially in the developing context, to positively impact low throughput rates. The argument in this chapter is that for the distance education mode to be more effective and for a return on investment for all stakeholders, practitioners would need to contextualise their support services, especially in the developing context. According to Peters, Crawley, and Brindley (2017), providers in the mode need to purposefully invest in student support services, pay deliberate attention to students' challenges, and make an explicit effort towards assisting them. Student support services are central to student success (Sánchez-Elvira Paniagua and Simpson 2018) due to distance education, students' separation from the institution and other students, the negative impact that the lack of contact has on them and the institution's reputation, while scholars have even argued that the services are more essential in online education (Mirmoghtadaie and Mohammadimehr 2020). Institutions need to start asking themselves some tough questions on, for instance, why their students are not accessing such services where they are available (Arko-Achemfuor 2017; Lumadi 2021), the need to re-define their services (Tait 2014), and the value of the provision of appropriate services to their students and institutions. Providing distance education student support services is not just imperative; it is a matter of quality (Sanchez 2018). It is what makes the difference between a quality or a non-quality programme. It also goes a long way to determine the reputation of an institution.

Student support services in distance education

Distance education students by the nature of the mode have been known to be separated from their institutions. Therefore, the history of student support services is as old as the mode itself; however, the formal institutional and integrated support system according to Tait (2003) could be traced back to the Open University, UK in 1969. In Africa, Moja, Schreiber, and Luescher-Mamashela (2014) also traced back student support services to the provision of student affairs due to the exponential growth in higher education. According to Shabani and Maboe (2021), the term previously referred to the whole student life (personal, social, and academic). However, we need to think beyond support related to geographic separation alone.

There is also a need to close the transactional distance between students and their teachers (Tait 2003). Although focusing their work solely on online learning, one cannot but agree with Peters et al. (2017) that providing support for students in the distance mode is more crucial than for those on campus due to their diverse nature, more need for self-regulation, technical self-reliance, information competency, and isolation. Distance education students are mostly adults who are expected to be autonomous and self-managed; however, Bates (2014) is concerned for the group of students at the other end who are younger and often lack basic learning competencies, with a loss of confidence in learning and would therefore need more support to be successful. In addition to this group, there is another multitude in the middle. Oftentimes, registered distance education students face the problem of transiting from their face-to-face experience at high school to a mode that expects them to be independent and self-directed (Shikulo and Lekhetho 2020). Distance education students are required to possess special attributes and competencies for a reasonable chance of success (Rotar 2022).

Although the advent of technology has moved almost all student support services online, to Zuhairi et al. (2020) the ideologies remain the same: students registered for learning need to be motivated to learn and to access the available support.

When planning student support services, Sanchez (2018) encourages a holistic approach that combines both academic and non-academic services, which will assist institutions to detect early problems that students may have and the kind of support they will need. Haghighi and Tous (2014: 54) also encourage providers to focus on 'reducing the sense of learners' isolation, holding a number of workshops, allocating financial aids, providing learners with video and audio tools, and facilitating the interaction between the instructor and the learners'. Based on these findings, also supported by earlier studies (Tinto 1975; Simpson 2012), Sánchez-Elvira Paniagua and Simpson (2018) identified student support as the central area for student success. Early research shows that a majority of students want support, and that if the services are properly handled they yield benefits to the students and the institutions (Tait 2003). According to Shabani and Maboe (2021), the value of student support services has been widely researched. This includes its ability to give students a sense of belonging, satisfaction, and motivation, thereby leading to improved student performance and retention (Lehman and Conceição 2014), which Mirmoghtadaie and Mohammadimehr (2020) summarise as academic well-being. According to the authors, this determines students' attitude to their academic life, the academic staff, their peers, and the institution's organisational structure in general. Student support services make the difference between student success and failure (Raphael 2016; Munyaradzi and Addae 2019). Research clearly indicates that the lack of teaching presence has a negative impact on student performance and completion rates (Bates 2014).

What do student support services involve in distance education?

According to Shabani and Maboe (2021), student support services incorporate diverse aspects and a wide range of activities from initial academic inquiries to degree completion. These may include 'registration, counselling, learning support (academic), guidance, tutoring, learning advice, feedback on assignments, interaction with teaching and administrative staff, career services, provision of study centres and financial support when needed' (Nsamba and Makoe 2017). Lumadi (2021) describes other student support-related services as the administration of application and registration procedures, the distribution and receipt of study material, and feedback on assignments. Due to the advent of more interactive technologies, we can add 'interactive tutorials, workshops, teleconferencing or videoconferencing, interactive and specially designed materials, discussion forums, and tutor-graded assignments, chat rooms, podcasts, video clips, blogs and wikis" (Monyamane and Monyamane-LimkoKwing 2020: 35). The authors assert that these encourage communication between all tutors and students and vice versa, thereby enabling students to learn without inhibitions.

In providing information for students online (since more and more institutions in the developing context have adopted a hybrid mode), they could find the audit tool developed by The Centre for Transforming Student Services (CENTSS) useful (Crawley 2012: 193–198, cited in Peters et al. 2017: 5). The tool describes five generations which could serve as a guide for institutions to improve on their services. These are:

Generation 1: no information on student services evident
Generation 2: text-only information available
Generation 3: relevant information on student needs with easier navigation
Generation 4: personalised online student services with the opportunity to complete tasks, guide student information, and save information for later
Generation 5: this improves on 4.

Institutions can gradually plan to move their student support services up through the different levels.

In concluding this section, although a lot has been written about student support, authors

(Mirmoghtadaie and Mohammadimehr 2020; Shabani and Maboe 2021) lament the dearth of research on the skills needed to make such services available and what the dimensions and components of the concept of support in blended learning should be. In addition, Zuhairi et al. (2020: 15) raise further questions on 'the kinds of effective support to students, how they are designed to meet the needs of ODL students, and how student support is integrated with teaching and learning', among others. It is time for distance education institutions to start asking themselves why students are not accessing student support services they have spent so much money on, why it appears there is still no reduction in high attrition rates, and the continual low success rates (Arko-Achemfuor 2017; Lumadi 2021). Peters et al. (2017) wonder if this continual deficit has to do with a one-size-fits-all approach adopted by institutions regarding student support services. Therefore, Shabani and Makoe (2021: 25) have called for more research into the direct link between the efficacy and effectiveness of student support services and students' academic results.

Nonetheless, there appears to be a lack of focus on students' important role in being responsible for their own learning in the mode (Mpofu 2016). The author draws attention to the definition of student support of Heydenrych (2010: 7) as 'individuals' self-efficacy qualities that enhance learning opportunities in distance education' to 'ensure an optimal fit between the aspirations, resources and abilities of students'. This view purports that distance students also have a role to play in their own success, even when institutions make all resources available.

Lastly, lack of electricity, the cost of bandwidth, and data cost remain constant challenges to the provision of electronic support to distance education students in the developing context (Mayanja Tibaingana and Birevu 2019).

Minimising the elephant in the room

The distance education deficit has been referred to as the 'elephant in the room'. To minimise this deficit authors have called for diverse approaches. For instance, Mayanja, Tibaingana, and Birevu (2019) lament the attitude of institutions approaching student support services in the distance education mode as they would in face-to-face mode, with just a little tweak here and there. Institutions would need to start putting policies in place which are appropriate to the modality and being deliberate in their actions (Peters 2017).

In addition, Bates (2014) bemoans the lack of understanding by university and staff of the importance of student support services for the success of distance education students. The author

describes this attitude as 'It's my job to instruct and yours to learn', which will only increase the distance education deficit. To address this, Mayanja, Tibaingana, and Birevu (2019) call for the need to sensitise ODL stakeholders to their roles.

Closely related to this is the need for continual training af the staff involved in distance education delivery. In most cases, the full-time staff on the campus cannot adequately cater to distance education students due to their large number; therefore, quite a number of part-time staff is employed to assist. Both full-time and part-time staff need continuous training on andragogical matters and how to effectively deliver their services.

Shabani and Makoe (2021: 35) also call on institutions to first consider their 'technology infrastructure, scale, and geography... when designing and developing effective student support systems' because 'the type of technologies that students can use is critical'.

While admitting computer programs can assist institutions to provide student support online, Bates (2014) warns institutions to remember that 'high-level conceptual learning and skills development still need to be provided by an expert teacher or instructor in the subject area, whether present or at a distance, which may be labour intensive and difficult to scale up'. Institutions would need to build this into their planning, which most institutions lack (Raphael 2016).

Most times, students in the mode (especially depending on their age) would need to be trained on how to use the institution's LMS and other technical devices. Lack of adequate support, according to Bertrand (2010, cited in Raphael 2016) means lack of innovative practices whereby technical devices will be used to mirror on-campus practices.

Although it is a fact that malfunctioning computers are a reality at study centres in the developing context, this is worsened by lack of technical support for students and tutors, and lack of electricity and internet connectivity (Reju 2016; Shikulo and Lekhetho 2020). More needs to be done in these areas in collaboration with external service providers, some of whom could assist out of goodwill.

Sanchez (2018) also admonishes institutions to re-visit how long it takes them to attend to student queries and getting real-time feedback on the students' experience of the quality of teaching and learning. The author also raises the issue of proper monitoring of student success and drop-out rates —how the data is collected, evaluated, and used to improve the quality of students' total experience. Related to this is the need to involve students in a total quality management process. According to Nsamba and Makoe (2017), limiting the process to only the service providers gives a false impression of the state of the quality of the services which the institution renders. Unfortunately, there is paucity of research on the determinants of quality that can be used by distance education students (Nsamba and Makoe 2017).

One of the benefits that on-campus students enjoy is the provision of counselling services that are mostly absent in the distance education mode. Institutions need to critically investigate this aspect (Shikulo and Lekhetho 2020).

Similarly, Reju (2016) identified unreliable and limited internet connectivity and a shortage of textbooks and relevant course materials as major challenges facing ODL institutions in emerging economies. Unsurprisingly, students called for up-to-date books, technologies, and stable internet access to improve learning. Students and staff that took part in the study were also frustrated by lack of support for staff at study centres.

Alan Tait's student support services framework

As indicated earlier, the distance education deficit is a contentious issue due to the large disparity between contact and distance education throughput rates. To address this challenge, authors (Simpson 2012, 2015; Tait 2014) have identified student support as a panacea. The study that led to Alan Tait's (2015) framework of practice to support student success was initiated by the International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE) among its member countries in 2014. The purpose was the need 'to ascertain the level of engagement by institutions with best practices for encouraging and increasing student success rates' (Tait 2015: 1). Tait's (2015: 1) framework embodies 'student's whole experience of study' with the aim of establishing goals for student success, and means to monitor and improve it'. Students' whole experience as a good base for student support resonates with Subotzky and Prinsloo's (2011) earlier work on the 'student walk', which helps institutions not to treat student support in isolation and to recognise the changing needs of students as they progress through their studies.

In the report of his study, Tait identified the following key elements that support practice for student success:

- pre-study information, advice, guidance, and admission
- curriculum or programme design for student success
- intervention at key points and in response to student need
- assessment to support learning, as well as to judge achievement
- individualised and personalised systems of support to students

- information and logistical systems that communicate between all relevant participants in the system
- managing for student success

In the next section, the author of this chapter gives a description of the elements and discusses how distance education providers can contextualise them, especially in the developing context, thereby improving on their practices and initiating good practices that are not yet in place. Table 1 reflects the summary of the seven key elements of Alan Tait's (2015) framework and suggested indices by Aluko (2021).

Table 1: Guidelines on the Use of Tait's Framework

Key elements of Tait's framework	Suggested indices
Pre-study information, advice, guidance and admission	- Marketing strategies relevant to the context - Clear information regarding the programme to prospective students - Guidance on choice of programme - Clear line of communication (e.g., staff students could liaise with)
Curriculum or programme design for student success	- Programme aligned to institutional mission and vision - Programme aligned to national and student goals - Built-in student support - Technologies relevant to student context and the future plan of the institution (pull-and-push approach) - Training of staff and students regarding the use of technologies - Programme evaluation that involves all stakeholders

Intervention at key points and in response to student need (pre-study, in course, and through qualification)	- Pre-study a. Clear line of communication b. Review of readiness (Survey to measure student readiness and to know what to improve on and how to further support students) - In course a. Call centre b. Contact sessions/Tutoring (online/face-to-face depending on the context) c. Learner analytics on first assignment and mid-module d. Exam preparation: Contact sessions/Tutoring (online/face-to-face depending on the context) - Through qualification a. Guidance on next-module choice (as applicable) and qualification planning
Assessment to support learning and to judge achievement	- Relevant formative and summative assessment - Built into the programme design, not an after-thought - Training of staff (tutors) on effective feedback - Administrative and academic monitoring on timeous feedback
Individualised and personalised systems of support to students	- Call centre - Communication (e.g., tutor-student and student-student) - SMS - The use of social media (WhatsApp, Facebook, YouTube) - Quick response to student query - Funding - Students with disabilities

Information and logistical systems that communicate between all relevant participants in the system	- Management Information System (MIS) with diverse levels of accessibility - Learner analytics (information to improve practice)
Managing for student success	- Communication of mission and vision to all stakeholders (including academic and administrative staff members) - Communication of institution's stance on quality and how this relates to all staff - Management of key staff with clear line of responsibilities - Operational meetings with key staff members with timelines attached to actions - Periodic evaluation of all structures—short-term and long-term - Periodic institutional audit

Source: Aluko (2021)

Description of the key elements and how distance education providers can contextualise them

The dictionary.university (2022) defines *contextualise* as follows: the root word of *contextualisation* is 'to consider something in relation to the situation in which it happens or exists'. In this section, I have described Tait's seven elements and given suggestions (regarded as indices in Table 1) on how each of the elements can be contextualised by distance education providers. The motivation for this is guided by what research indicates about students in the mode not accessing the student support provision offered by their institutions and the unabating state of the distance education deficit (Arko-Achemfuor 2017; Shikulo and Lekhetho 2020).

Key element #1

Pre-study information, advice, guidance, and admission

According to Tait (2015), this element involves marketing the institution's programmes to potential students. The author advises institutions to avoid misleading statements and unrealistic goals. They should rather make clear the required admission requirements, time needed for study, number of years needed to complete the programme, as well as other necessary information. Advice and guidance should be provided, and if admitted, institutions should be transparent about the patterns of study, cost, and commitment.

Distance education providers, especially in the developing context, are confronted with a myriad of challenges, for instance, regarding marketing their programmes. This is because most of their students may be residing or working in semi-urban and rural areas. Therefore, they need to be innovative with their marketing strategies. The adopted strategies should be relevant to the prospective students' contexts. Institutions have sometimes contracted marketers that could do the groundwork by going to rural schools where teachers work—for example, in the case of upgrading teacher education programmes. The information should be presented in non-ambiguous language that the student's level of comprehension can relate to. In addition, the marketing staff should have been well trained to be able to provide guidance on choice of programmes. Sometimes a huge challenge arises when students have to get in touch with institutions and such institutions do not have a clear line of communication (e.g., staff whom students could liaise with). Research (Arko-Achemfuor 2017; Reju 2016; Shikulo and Lekhetho 2020) indicates that this leads to students being tossed here and there, which leads to discouragement. Although one may argue that such bad treatment could spread through word of mouth (another form of marketing strategy—Kundu and Sundara Rajan 2017), if the affected student eventually registers, the lack of or confusion pertaining to communication might lead to the student eventually dropping out of the programme. The registration point is also a key area of providing support to students. Institutions have sometimes been found to have platforms that are not user-friendly. One way of improving this area is to request prospective students to participate in a short online survey on how easily they have been able to navigate the platform and further suggestions for improvement (Butcher and Wilson-Strydom 2014).

Key element #2

Curriculum or programme design for student success

Effective learning design has been found to be key to student success due to its ability to encourage student engagement. Another important aspect to pay attention to here is curriculum relevance which should be in alignment with, for instance, the national, professional bodies, and labour market goals (Tait 2015). The information on this should also be transparent to students. Suggestions here include the need for built-in student support, technologies that are relevant to student context, and the plans of the institution for the future (Aluko 2021). In order to gradually bring students on par with the future the institution envisages for its ICT-in-education, the pull-push approach can be used. Although technology usage for teaching and learning in the developing context can be complex and may sometimes be out of the control of the institution (for example, bandwidth cost and irregular electricity supply), institutions can be innovative by using material that has been downloaded previously and allowing students a certain amount of material to be downloaded for free. Another possibility is zero-rating data for selected education websites (Manamela 2022). To further assist in this area, Reju (2016) and Shikulo and Lekhetho (2020) suggest institutions can collaborate with key providers.

Other aspects include the training of staff members and students regarding the use of institutional adopted technologies. According to Johnson et al. (2016), academic staff are ultimately responsible for the use of technology for teaching and learning, therefore, training should be ongoing. Research (Arko-Achemfuor 2017; Lumadi 2021) shows that sometimes there are no support staff to help students at regional centres of distance education students. In addition, many adult learners are not conversant and comfortable with the use of technology, which often leads to frustration (Arko-Achemfuor 2017). Research (Aluko 2020) indicates that a neglected area is programme evaluation (involving all stakeholders), which has been found to assist institutions with the improvement of their programmes. The ongoing challenge here is the need for institutions to close the feedback loop into improved practice.

Key element #3

Intervention at key points and in response to student need

- Tait (2015) identifies several key points of student experience where intervention is needed: the case may be that all students need support or that the institution has been alerted based on the measures that have been put in place. These key points are as follows:pre-study: post registration, and review of readiness to start
- in-course: early contact; first assignment; mid module; qualification progress check; preparing for examination
- through qualification: support for next module choice and qualification planning.

My suggested indices for each of the points raised by the author include the following:

- Pre-study
    a. Clear line of communication
    b. Review of readiness (Survey to measure student readiness and to know what to improve and how to support students further)
- In-course
    a. Call centre
    b. Contact sessions/tutoring (online/face-to-face depending on the context)
    c. Learner analytics on first assignment and mid-module
    d.Exam preparation: contact sessions/tutoring (online/face-to-face depending on the context)
- - Through qualification
    a. Guidance on next-module choice (as applicable) and qualification planning

Tait (2015: 7) cites the value of learning analytics, which 'makes intervention potentially much more immediate and powerful'. This assertion is also supported by Scanlon (2021) due to the opportunity to use these approaches to assist lecturers with the evaluation of their learning design choices and advance student success. However, Tait observed that although involved institutions in the ICDE project acknowledged the value of learning analytics, there was not much evidence that they used or maximised its potential, which reflects the failure to close the feedback loop. Nonetheless,

authors (Rienties and Jones 2019; Rienties et al. 2018; Ferguson and Clow 2017) have cautioned that despite its supposed possible value, there is not much evidence that institutions are ready to absorb it. There are ethical issues to be sorted out regarding its use as well, which has made scholars call for further research because it is gaining more popularity (Slaide and Tait 2019; Scanlon 2021).

Key element #4

Assessment to support learning, as well as to judge achievement

Tait identifies assessment as a core part of learning design and pedagogy, which supports students to success. Therefore, it should not be an add-on at a subsequent stage. Assessment strategies emanate from the learning objectives of the module and include both knowledge and skills. Advancement in technology now aids better formative and summative assessment, and both continuous and final assessment that can 'support student engagement and diagnose learning at shorter intervals' (Tait 2015: 8). Therefore, my suggested indices satisfy the need for the continuous training of both administrative and full- and part-time staff members in the design of authentic assessment activities, the interpretation of the students' responses, and in constructive ways of offering feedback. Part-time staff are always more in number than the full-time staff members due to the large enrolment of distance education students. Ensuring the quality of their services has therefore become a key management activity, and it starts with appropriate training and modelling. Such training should cover aspects such as relevant tools that match each form of assessment, the need and value of timeous and effective feedback to students, and the administrative and academic monitoring of the feedback. There is evidence in research that students sometimes receive feedback after examination has taken place (Aluko and Omidire 2020).

Key element #5

Individualised and personalised systems of support to students

Tait highlights the need for institutions to provide personalised support for students, which technology has made easier. In addition, he stresses the 'roles of tutor, counsellor, guidance

worker, and careers advisor, supported by information systems' (Tait 2015: 8). Unfortunately, research (Shikulo and Lekhetho 2020) shows that distance education providers do not normally make provision for these services like in the contact mode. Regarding this, Tait has cautioned institutions to effectively balance the cost of personalised support and learning material, which distance education institutions have been known to spend more money on. To assist institutions in this area my suggested indices are:

- the provision of a call centre
- enhanced communication (e.g., tutor-student and student-student)
- the use of SMS technology (which is the most prevalent in the developing context) and the use of social media (WhatsApp, Facebook, YouTube)
- quick response to student queries, which research has found to be imperative (Sánchez-Elvira, Paniagua, and Simpson 2018)
- the provision of funding—the assumption is that distance education students do not need funding, which is not true (Aluko 2021)
- support for students with disabilities—more students in this category are enrolling for distance education due to technology affordances (Kanwar 2017)

Key element #6

Information and logistical systems that communicate between all relevant participants in the system

Tait (2015: 9) stresses the need for a strong alignment between logistics and information systems, which is now made better by LMS and learner analytics that 'represents a significant priority in strategies for student success'. My suggestion from experience is that institutions should align their information and logistical systems to avoid unnecessary duplication of information and to avoid wasting staff's energy and time (Mays and Aluko 2019). There should also be diverse levels of accessibility provided to relevant stakeholders. As earlier indicated, learning analytics should also be maximised in this regard.

Key element #7

Managing for student success

For institutions to manage for student success, learners must be put at the heart of the system. This means the management of programmes in the mode should encompass all the elements identified by Tait. In addition, Aluko and Mampane (2022) advocate for transformational leadership that should embrace the philosophy of Ubuntu for total quality management. My suggestions (Aluko 2020) to enhance this key element are the following:

- the communication of mission and vision to all stakeholders (including academic and administrative staff members)
- the communication of institutions' stance on quality and how this relates to all staff
- the management of key staff should include a clear line of responsibilities
- operational meetings with key staff members with timelines attached to actions
- the periodic evaluation of all structures—short-term and long-term
- periodic institutional audit with line of actions on the feedback with responsible staff members and timelines attached

In concluding this section, one cannot but refer to the essence of effective quality assurance at every stage. As earlier indicated, student support is a matter of quality (Sánchez-Elvira, Paniagua, and Simpson 2018). It is what makes the difference between a quality programme and one that is of poor quality. However, students, who are at the receiving end of an institution's services, are important stakeholders to be involved in the process of quality assurance (Nsamba and Makoe 2017). The authors assert that without their (students) involvement, such feedback will likely be misleading and even false. Actions should also be taken on such feedback with attached timelines and the staff members responsible for them.

Conclusion

There is ample evidence in literature that if managed properly, student support has the potential to alleviate the distance education deficit (Simpson 2012, 2015; Tait 2014, 2015). The overall

idea behind student support services is that they must be receptive to students' changing needs (Shabani and Maboe 2021), which is apparent in the key elements identified by Tait (2015) and to which this chapter has responded. The author has done this by contextualising the elements through suggested indices which she has developed. However, it should be noted that the indices do not cover all the issues that providers need to respond to. Rather, they should serve as a guide to practice. As earlier indicated, it is disturbing to note that many students in the developing context studying in this mode are not accessing support services (as asserted by research) suggesting a possible mismatch between what is needed and what is availed. Because institutions go to a great length to provide these services, one hopes that institutions in the mode will start paying more attention to finding a balance between the student context and the support services they provide.

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