Exploring student support services of a distance learning centre at a Namibian university

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Abstract: Effective student support services (SSS) are a vital means of enabling students to cope with the academic and personal pressures of distance education. This research explored the implementation of SSS at eight regional centres of the Namibia University of Science and Technology, in order to identify the challenges experienced and determine students’ needs. It adopted a mixed methods approach and used a questionnaire to collect data from 109 students and semi-structured interviews for textual data from eight regional coordinators (RCs). The findings indicate that most students opt for distance education because it allows them to work and study at the same time. However, many of them take longer to obtain qualifications due to high failure and repetition rates. This could be linked to a shortage of resources and their underutilization by students, lack of collaboration between marker-tutors and lecturers, and poor attendance of tutorial classes by students and lecturers/tutors. The research proposes a model for effective implementation of SSS in order to improve students’ academic experience and success rate.

Subjects: Higher Education; Open & Distance Education and eLearning; School Leadership, Management & Administration; Theory of Education; Continuing Professional Development

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT
Higher education institutions operate under increasing scrutiny from the public, students and various stakeholders who demand value for money and an assurance that they provide relevant quality education. This is particularly the case in open and distance learning (ODL) institutions as they offer education through unconventional methods. Therefore, it is crucial that ODL institutions should provide effective SSS that enhance students’ academic experience and success so that they can achieve their full potential. The aim of this research is to evaluate the implementation and effectiveness of SSS provided by the Namibia University of Science and Technology, Centre for Open and Lifelong Learning (NUST-COLL) to its distance learners, and propose strategies that can improve student success and throughput rates.
Keywords: distance education; dropout rates; student support services; regional centres

1. Introduction
The provision of effective SSS in higher education institutions (HEIs) is vital, particularly in the ever-changing landscape of distance education. This is significant because HEIs are becoming increasingly competitive, and to stay successful in the market, they should provide quality education. This can be achieved through the provision of effective support services to students (their customers), failing which they would move to other institutions. In order to survive in business, organizations and universities should provide quality services to customers, adopt a customer-led approach and not expect their “product” or service to sell itself (Tait, 2000; Herman et al., 2015; Jancey & Burns, 2013). This is vital since satisfaction influences customer loyalty, and therefore, organizations should strive to provide those services that are deemed most important by customers. Student satisfaction assists HEIs to attract new students and retain current ones, improve their overall performance, and increase students’ progression rates and employability (Jancey & Burns, 2013). Therefore, HEIs, particularly the ODL institutions should provide effective support services that meet the unique needs of students, enhance their learning experience and academic success, and empower them to be self-directed lifelong learners (Sánchez-Elvira Paniagua & Simpson, 2018; Workman & Stenard, 1996).

In the light of the above contextualization, this research sought to explore the provision of SSS at NUST-COLL, which is a distance education arm of the university. Distance education is a unique method of study since instruction and learning take place in an environment where the instructor and student are geographically remote from each other most of the time (Burns, 2011; Keegan, 1980; Namibia University of Science and Technology [NUST], 2019a). Therefore, distance learners need continuous support since their academic journeys are shaped by many interrelated factors such as learner support systems and student involvement (University of South Africa [UNISA], 2010). The rationale for SSS is to ease the students’ adjustment to university and enhance their retention, success and throughput rates since many enter universities underprepared for the rigour of higher education studies. To alleviate this, ODL institutions should provide appropriate and effective learner support as it reduces the attrition rate and enhances the quality of education provision, students’ academic experience, motivation, retention and achievement (Mays, 2000; Pratt, 2015; Warrender et al., 2005). Ironically, part-time and distance learners receive considerably less support than full-time students (Warrender et al., 2005), which contributes to their low success rate.

Research on the preparedness of new students in colleges in the United States of America (USA), established that many of them graduated from high school not ready for academic college work (Wilmer, 2005), and to make up for this deficit in content knowledge, many of them register for postsecondary remedial and developmental classes (Mulvey, 2009). The USA Department of Education also noted that almost half of the students enrolled in community colleges for four-year degrees did not reach this goal within six years, particularly low-income and minority students who were more vulnerable to dropping out (Cooper, 2010). From the South African perspective, although the political situation has changed for the black majority, a large number of university students are underprepared and disadvantaged because of the poor quality of basic education they received, leading to alarmingly low completion rates, particularly in ODL institutions (Mays, 2000; Spaull, 2013). This is partly because the university culture and curriculum are built on western forms of knowledge and are at variance with the culture of the black students from under-resourced and dysfunctional high schools (Steyn et al., 2014).

Even though distance education has been widely adopted in many countries, there is “an elephant in the room of distance education” (Woodley & Simpson, 2014, p. 1), namely a high dropout rate. In order to tackle this problem, ODL institutions should provide effective support services to meet the needs of academically underprepared students, promote student persistence and optimize academic success. Ensuring that learners have access to education is not sufficient to promote equality of educational opportunities unless sound student support is provided,
particularly for students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Mays, 2000; Rakoma, 2018). Simpson (2013) noted that the UK Open University and other ODL institutions generally have lower entry requirements, and correspondingly, higher dropout and lower graduation rates than students who qualify to enter conventional universities. This is partly because distance education is difficult for most students, as they have to juggle many responsibilities within the family, work and community. This is compounded by isolation from fellow students and campus activities; hence, there is a need for the provision of effective and flexible support services to enhance learning.

Research by Möwes (2010) established that the SSS model used at NUST-COLL (formerly known as Polytechnic of Namibia [PoN]) is based on a broad definition of student support and fits an institution that views support as a holistic function to address students’ needs and provides the much-needed services for students to succeed. For Warrender et al. (2005), learner support involves the “strategies which empower learners to establish and fulfil their learning, career and personal potential” (p. 3). It entails all the interactive activities and services intended to support and facilitate learning, such as teaching and tutoring, counselling, advising and administrative activities (Brindley et al., 2004). Mays (2000) viewed it as an integral part of any well-functioning distance education or flexible learning programme.

NUST (2019a) acknowledges that it is aware of the difficult circumstances under which its COLL students study, and offers assistance that should enable them “to derive full benefit from their studies” (p. 7). This is vital for sustaining student motivation and persistence as distance learning is a daunting and lonely mode of study. Specifically, NUST (2019b) undertakes to render administrative and academic support to its students through student support officers and tutors, using different information and communications technology (ICT) tools like email and telephonic support. Administrative support may be in the form of funding, counselling, oversight, guidance, and removing any obstacles that may hinder the student’s effective distance learning by trained personnel in critical student support areas including instructional design and ICT (Meyer & Barefield, 2010). Academic support entails programmes and strategies such as tutoring intended to provide motivational support, individual attention and tutorial classes in order to improve student achievement, particularly for students at risk of failure or dropout (Fluke et al., 2014). Arguably, COLL regional centres would have effective SSS if they were designed from the perspective of students and RCs. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that they are largely designed in a manner that suits the operational requirements of administrators (Shikulo, 2018).

Brindley et al. (2004) observed that new technologies have an enormous impact on the way learner support is implemented. They contended that, in particular, the internet makes it possible for learners to be in touch with other learners and institutional staff such as librarians, registration and administrative staff and lecturers. For new technologies to be effective in learner support, the institutional staff should be competent in using them optimally for the benefit of students. However, the practice in some ODL institutions indicates that they have not embraced the changes and benefits offered by the digital revolution since their offerings and services are still defined and limited by geography (Tait, 2014). Tait advocated the adoption of a third generation distance education typified by the integration of student support with teaching facilitated by ICT. This includes the use of video embedded in course materials accommodating different learning styles, virtual learning, and the creation of social media such as blogs, wikis, podcasts and videos.

2. Statement of the problem

Although the NUST-COLL regional centres offer academic and non-academic support to distance students to enhance learning, success and completion rates, there is still a very low success rate and a high dropout rate among distance students. According to Tyobeka (2012), the success rate at PoN dropped from 68% in 2006 to 59% in 2010, which signals that there could be some systemic weaknesses within the institution. Many students fail their courses, drop out or take longer than the prescribed times to complete their study programmes. Most distance students register for the same number of courses per semester as the fulltime students at NUST, with the expectation that these two
groups would complete their study programmes and graduate at the same time. However, in most cases, this is not the case due to the distance students’ high failure rate, amongst other factors. Distance education students, like any other students, need support as they embark upon life experiences especially when they face a big challenge, such as attending university (Qakisa-Makoe, 2005); hence, the implementation of SSS is vital for the enhanced academic experience and success of students at the NUST-COLL regional centres. Attending a university is a challenge for most distance education students, as they need to strike a balance between their studies and other responsibilities, such as family, work and community commitments.

If the NUST-COLL regional centres are to achieve their mission of providing appropriate, flexible and effective learning and teaching media and SSS, then they should evaluate the implementation of support services to guide the improvement of both process and outcomes. This would help the institution meet its goals and make judgements about which support services best support student needs. The evaluation of academic and non-academic support services should be a continuous exercise that provides valuable feedback on which SSS should be improved to solve the prevailing problems. In short, this research sought to answer the following main research question: How effective are student support services at the NUST-COLL regional centres?

3. Conceptual framework and literature review
This research is underpinned by Simpson’s distance student support model, which groups the skills and qualities that distance education students need to succeed in their studies into three areas: cognitive, emotional and organizational (Simpson, 2016). Cognitive or academic support has to do with developing students’ learning and cognitive skills and qualities. It also involves teaching and assisting students to develop learning, assessment and feedback skills, which are key to successful learning. These competencies are critical and they could assist COLL in its endeavours to facilitate student learning, bridge the lecturer-student separation and balance out the deficiencies imposed by a lack of face-to-face contact with lecturers.

Teaching involves explaining the course content and concepts, demonstrating and monitoring students’ progress (Simpson, 2016). NUST (2019a) asserts that the main medium of instruction at COLL is the printed material supplemented by multimedia and e-learning. In practice, instruction is offered during contact sessions or through multimedia platforms such as podcasts, Facebook, WhatsApp and Skype. These social networks can enhance support for self-regulated and collaborative learning processes, facilitate learning, increase interactions with other students and lecturers, and provide notifications about studies (Dalsgaard, 2006; Irwin et al., 2012). With reference to COLL, Shikulo (2018) contended that assessment can be both formal and informal, and requires students to reflect on their strengths and weaknesses. Timely feedback from tutors helps to ensure effective learning and sustain student motivation. In distance education, timely and effective feedback is an essential teaching practice, as it scaffolds learning, establishes a connection between the instructor and the student, and ameliorates the problems of lack of face-to-face interaction (Uribe & Vaughan, 2017).

Organizational and emotional support are together referred to as non-academic support (Simpson, 2016). Organizational support involves helping students manage their studies effectively. This requires them to: (a) manage their time effectively; (b) keep up with the pace of the course; and (c) find time to prioritize work, family life and other responsibilities. Emotional support involves helping students to cope with the emotional side of learning (Simpson, 2016). It includes helping students to: (a) develop learning motivation; (b) develop self-confidence in themselves as students; and (c) find ways to manage the stress of learning, especially assessment stress. Thus, it is important that the academic and non-academic staff of the university should be ready to provide emotional, social and academic support to students on an ongoing basis to enhance their prospects of academic success. In particular, NUST-COLL has a counselling unit dedicated to providing support and counselling to
students experiencing personal, emotional and academic challenges to help them cope. If not handled properly, these challenges may affect students negatively in their studies.

Akin to the Simpson’s (2016) model explained above, Tait (2000) identified the following three-fold functions of student support in ODL: cognitive, affective and systemic. For him, the cognitive function is concerned with supporting learning through the standard and uniform elements of course materials and learning resources for all students. This involves effective tutoring and assessment of students in order to improve student success. As Mays (2000) observed, it is not enough to enrol students in the course; rather, higher education institutions should offer them “support which could change access into success” (p. 1). The affective function is about creating an environment that supports students, encourages commitment and promotes students’ self-esteem. The systemic function involves setting up administrative and information management systems that are efficient and student-friendly. Building the capacity of an institution in this regard is critical since efficient administrative and information management support influences student satisfaction and loyalty to an institution (Tait, 2000). Tait sums up that student support largely has to do with administrative processes ensuring that there is systemic efficiency.

Distance students need considerable support since they do not attend classes on a daily basis like fulltime students. However, one significant challenge facing distance institutions is the provision of convenient and effective support services for isolated students (Brindley & Paul, 2004). Simpson (2002) viewed the activities and services provided to distance students as geared towards overcoming barriers to learning and promoting the student success rate. To address the challenges faced by distance students, NUST-COLL regional centres offer SSS in the following key areas:

- library services and computer laboratory services;
- e-learning services;
- administration (registration, payments, processing requests and liaising with colleagues on the main campus);
- face-to-face tutorials/Saturday tutorials;
- academic advice/counselling for course/programme selection;
- accessing the internet (to email tutors, access online journals, or to submit assignments online);
- issuing study materials to students and orientation;
- examination and test administration; and
- listening to CDs/DVDs using head phones and webcams.

3.1. The establishment of Namibia University of science and technology

In Namibia, higher education started around 1979/80 (Ministry of Higher Education, Vocational Training, Science and Technology [MHEVTST], 1998; NUST, 2019a) following the promulgation of the Academy for Tertiary Education Act 13 of 1980. Five years later, the Academy was reconfigured into a university component (the present University of Namibia), a technikon or technical branch and a college for out-of-school training through the Academy Act 9 of 1985, (Polytechnic of Namibia [PoN], 2014). Shortly after independence in 1990, the three components were reorganized into two independent HEIs, namely the UNAM and the PoN. The polytechnic was established to contribute to the country’s development by providing technological, career-oriented tertiary education at internationally recognized standards (MHEVTST, 1998). To keep pace with the changing global dynamics and development needs of the country, in 2015, the PoN was renamed the Namibia University of Science and Technology (NUST) through Act 7 of 2015.

In 1998, COLL was set up within the PoN to accommodate students who could not attend fulltime and part-time classes at the PoN main campus in Windhoek (Möwes, 2010). COLL was then tasked to design and offer distance education programmes that encouraged meaningful learning
Accordingly, COLL designs study guides and other academic activities such as assignments to facilitate learning in different courses. Currently there are three modes of study that NUST students can register for, namely fulltime, part-time and distance learning (NUST, 2017). Fulltime and part-time modes cater for students in Windhoek, the capital, while the distance mode caters for students in the regional centres across the country. NUST recognizes the equal importance of the open and lifelong learning programmes and the more conventional programmes of full-time on-campus studies and research (Möwes, 2005).

To maintain academic standards and ensure that fulltime and distance education students receive identical qualifications, the course content is developed by the same lecturers. As part of the strategy to standardize content delivery between the two groups, where feasible, COLL employs some fulltime lecturers from NUST main campus to teach part-time students as well as tutors with the required qualifications and industry experience to support students at the regional centres (Shikulo, 2018). However, the challenge is that most of these tutors lack training and experience required to facilitate distance learning and do not communicate with the lecturers at the main campus. This dual arrangement allows students to move between study modes at their convenience and encourages them to migrate to COLL regional centres if they find employment far from the Windhoek main campus. This flexibility in learning methods and assessment criteria is the hallmark of ODL as it promotes open access to courses and the concept of lifelong learning (Sonnekus et al., 2006). However, failure to put in place sound supportive systems and administrative services may lower the quality of distance education (Mays & Aluko, 2019).

One of the challenges of COLL is that a significant number of regional distance students are admitted through the mature age entry scheme and they need sound SSS to cope with the academic and social demands of their programmes. The majority of regional distance students work fulltime and need academic and administrative support to succeed in their studies. Daniel et al. (2009) stated that ODL is an effective way of reaching out to a large number of students; hence, NUST-COLL established nine regional centres to cater for the high demand for distance education. These centres are headed by the RCs with extensive educational management and distance education experience. They manage and ensure the implementation of SSS and contract suitably qualified tutors to facilitate learning. Currently, NUST-COLL regional centres cater for students in a number of programmes at different levels, that is, four honours degrees, thirteen bachelor’s degrees, three Bachelor of Technology degrees and four National Diplomas. NUST-COLL students at the main campus in Windhoek and regional centres are supposed to receive similar academic and administrative support services since they write the same assignments and examination papers in their respective programmes. Indubitably, the provision of adequate quality student support at the regional centres would put the performance of distance students on par with that of fulltime students.

4. Research methodology
This research sought to assess whether SSS offered by NUST-COLL regional centres are effective, and to do this, a mixed methods research approach was used. A mixed methods approach enhances accuracy and compares the findings from multiple methods (Descombe, 2010). It also enhances the validity of the findings, and enables the researcher to gain a better understanding of the connections and contradictions between quantitative and qualitative data (Shorten & Smith, 2017). The research largely followed a QUAL + quan approach categorized as an exploratory design by Morse (2017). The methodologies complement each other in order to gain a complete understanding and a vivid picture of the phenomenon from both perspectives using thick descriptions and statistical analysis. A concurrent triangulation design, which involved the concurrent collection of quantitative and qualitative data from senior students and RCs through questionnaires and interviews was used.

The sampling frame for this research was 860 senior students (second to final year) and nine RCs from the NUST-COLL regional centres across Namibia. However, due to the constraints of time and accessibility, a more manageable sample of 300 senior students was targeted. Stratified random
sampling was used to select the number of students per centre based on the total enrolment of each centre, gender, race, age and location type, namely rural, semi-urban and urban areas. In other words, the sample was selected in a manner that ensured that all the identified groups and characteristics of students were proportionally represented. Out of these, 109 (36.3%) students completed the questionnaires and eight (89%) RCs were interviewed. The regional coordinators were coded RC1 to RC8 for ease of reference and to maintain their anonymity. The RCs were purposively selected as they were considered information-rich due to their vast experience in SSS implementation.

Data was collected through the questionnaire distributed to students at their respective centres and collected during the second semester. The questionnaire had both closed and open-ended questions to determine whether students’ needs and expectations were being met, and whether they were satisfied with the current provision of SSS at the NUST-COLL regional centres. The open-ended questions were intended to give students an opportunity to describe what they experienced in their own words, and the resultant qualitative data was quantitized or converted into numerical data and analyzed quantitatively (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). Quantitative data collected from COLL regional students was analyzed primarily by calculating the frequencies of responses to each question to determine their views about variables of interest. Even though analysis was at a simple level, rational and critical thinking was applied and the findings are reported in an objective and balanced manner.

The RCs were interviewed by means of semi-structured interviews to share their experiences in implementing SSS at the regional level. They were interviewed face-to-face during quarterly meetings at the main campus in Windhoek. Qualitative data were analyzed by reading participants’ responses several times to see patterns, transcribing and coding them, and categorizing them into themes (Lacey & Luff, 2009). This made it easy to see the most common responses and the general distribution of responses. A narrative analysis was used to analyze data from the semi-structured interviews with the RCs, which involved using stories from participants to answer the research questions.

After obtaining ethical clearance from UNISA, written permission to collect data from students was obtained from the Director of NUST-COLL. Subsequently, students were notified through the RCs’ offices about the purpose of the research, and they were informed that their participation was voluntary. The purpose of the research was explained to all the RCs and the interviews were conducted at the main campus in Windhoek in the afternoons after the workshop sessions held each day, over three days. With the consent of the participants, a voice recorder was used to record the interviews.

5. Research findings
In line with the mixed methods approach adopted in this research, the findings are organized according to data generated from both quantitative and qualitative approaches. To maintain coherence in the organization of themes and development of arguments, the presentation of findings is followed by some discussion in some cases. In essence, the findings attempt to answer the following main research question from different perspectives: How effective are student support services at the NUST-COLL regional centres?

5.1. Quantitative findings
Data analysis revealed that 90% of the students were aware of the different support services available at the COLL regional centres; however, their usage based on quality, accessibility and suitability was evaluated differently because 82.6% of the respondents were employed fulltime. It was established that 34.9% of the respondents had been studying at NUST for more than three years without passing an academic year. It is likely that most of these students did not attend the orientation programme designed to support new students as they start their academic journeys and address their anxieties and questions so that they could cope with their studies.
The implementation of different support services was evaluated positively by 80% of the respondents who agreed that it was done well. However, 33% of them felt that NUST-COLL regional staff did not facilitate and assist them to form study groups. Furthermore, 35.8% of the students indicated that they did not attend the orientation programme, while 44% responded that they did not attend face-to-face tutorials, as their classes were not offered due to the unavailability of qualified tutors or having fewer than five students registered for a course, the threshold for qualifying for the appointment of tutors.

Furthermore, 51.3% indicated that tutors did not use a variety of facilitation methods needed to handle distance education students. While 99.1% rated the assignments as the most valuable teaching tool, disturbingly, 67.9% indicated that the turnaround time for marked assignments feedback was very long. Feedback on the assignments is an important component of instruction, and students need it in time so that they can work through their mistakes and improve their performance. Most of the students who had been studying at the institution for many years without completing a qualification disagreed with the statement that marker-tutors were available for consultations after marking the assignments. Besides effective feedback on assignments, marker-tutors should engage students using different technologies to clarify academic issues, provide solutions to difficult concepts and promote dialogue in their courses.

Most respondents, 78 (71.6%), expressed their satisfaction with the SSS offered at the regional centres. However, they singled out some services that needed attention if they were to fully serve the students effectively. In this regard, 68 (62.4%) viewed the library and computer centre as important educational resources but found them to be inadequate and proposed that they should be expanded. Thirty-eight (34.9%) respondents indicated that face-to-face tutorials should be offered for all the courses including those with fewer students than the threshold of five. Forty-four (40.4%) respondents lamented the fact that support services were not available on Saturdays, Sundays and late evenings. This could be attributed to understaffing at the regional centres as echoed by the RCs.

While the COLL regional centres are equipped with computers with the internet and libraries stocked with books, including prescribed books, the enrolments have increased over the years, and this has added pressure to the demand for services. Unsurprisingly, 45 (41.3%) respondents complained that the centres had a few, old and malfunctioning computers, unreliable wireless connectivity for students using their own portable computers, and few books that could be borrowed for only four days, according to 66.1% of the respondents. As stated above, the availability of support services at the centres should service the demand while ensuring that the quality of education is not compromised. To underscore the importance of SSS, 106 (97.2%) respondents indicated that they could not succeed in their studies without making use of them and stated that these services helped students to attain the set academic goals.

5.2. Qualitative findings
Qualitative data was generated from interviews with the RCs using open-ended questions to explore the implementation of SSS at the regional centres. In responding to questions, the RCs used real-life experiences of SSS implementation in their regions. With respect to the usage of SSS, six of the eight participating RCs indicated that students did not fully utilize the services for various reasons. In particular, RC4 expressed this sentiment thus:

Not all students make use of the available student support services, but I believe [that] factors such as distance to the centre, transport to the centre and work commitments can determine the frequency of using the student support services. I can say the majority of students at our centre are not using SSS on a regular basis.

SSS and educational resources are critical for enhancing student learning, particularly in a distance education context. Thus, their underutilization is counterproductive and defeats the purpose for which they are provided.
In the excerpts below, the RCs mentioned the challenges, which they said negatively affected the implementation of SSS. In this respect, RC5 disclosed that:

Face-to-face tutorial classes are poorly attended by both students and tutors. In many instances, we have tutors forgetting that they have classes. The two-hour face-to-face sessions are insufficient seeing that most of our students were admitted via mature age entry test, with poor Grade 12 results. Secondly, the four days' loan period for the library books is not enough for students that are at sea, working at the mines (shifts) or staying very far from the COLL centre.

In the same vein, RC1 expressed some disappointment about lack of adequate and continuous support as follows:

The much-needed support from the main campus is not always available and it disappoints our students, which affects our administrative work. Another challenge is that students want to use the library in the evening till 22:00 during examinations, but due to understaffing, we cannot provide such a service to students. The library usage is very high during the examination period, but the few library books available cannot serve all the students.

RC8 further identified the following three challenges as hurdles to the implementation of SSS at his regional centre.

- Lack of adequate computers at the COLL regional centre;
- Malfunctioning computers at the centres due to age;
- Unavailability of video conferencing facilities.

Student enrolments at the nine COLL satellite campuses have been growing, and it is, therefore, imperative that the RCs should be granted more authority and decision-making powers in critical administrative and academic aspects to minimize confusion and referrals, especially during registration periods. In this regard, RC2 proposed that the RCs should be trained on the administrative functions of faculty officers and current curriculum changes so that they could become more effective in their work and provide relevant, up-to-date information to students. In order to improve student success and throughput rates, the implementation model in Figure 1 outlining how to plan for effective SSS at the regional centres is proposed.

The model is comprised of six elements, namely increasing staff members, student empowerment, improvement of regional centres' infrastructure, quality improvement, provision of formative feedback and enhancing collaboration. First, the model proposes that staff at the regional centres should be increased in key areas such as libraries, ICT and student counselling to keep up with the increasing student numbers. Second, since most distance students were admitted through mature age exemption, it is advisable that NUST-COLL should introduce a short compulsory bridging programme to prepare them for university education, particularly in programmes with high failure rates. COLL should also distribute study materials to students in time and assist them to acquire laptops and notebooks together with an internet connection at reasonable prices. Third, NUST should provide essential resources that have been reported to be inadequate such as computers and other ICT tools. It should also organize intensive training on their utilization to ensure that they yield maximum benefit for students. Fourth, the model also proposes the involvement of students in the planning, delivery and evaluation of SSS to ensure that they are efficient and student-centred. Fifth, feedback should be timely and comprehensive with clear guidance on how students can improve their learning and performance. Finally, since most of the RCs are not trained teachers or ODL facilitators, the model proposes that they should receive thorough training on ODL, student support and coordination of regional centres. They should forge strong collaboration between lecturers at the main campus and tutors at the regional centres and organize workshops on the courses they teach.
6. Discussion

The quantitative results reveal that most students were aware of the support services available at the NUST-COLL regional centres; however, they did not access and utilize them optimally because of personal, family and work-related responsibilities. From the qualitative findings, the RCs corroborated that the majority of distance education students did not use the services available at the centres for various reasons such as work commitments, long distances to the centres and lack of money for transport. Tait (2000) noted that in some audiences, particularly in developing countries, new technologies tend to have limited impact on the delivery of ODL, as they are underutilized. In many African universities, the underutilization of electronic resources can be attributed to a shortage of computers, low levels of computer and information literacy, and students' lack of access to the internet, as many of them are accustomed to print resources (Mawindo & Hoskins, 2008; Reju, 2016). The underutilization of regional centres' facilities and services reported in this research is counterproductive, defeats COLL's academic goals and aspirations and leads to a low return on investment.

Figure 1. Model for the implementation of SSS at NUST-COLL regional centres.

Face-to-face tutorial classes were also reported to be poorly attended by both students and tutors. The students' low participation rate resonates with Tinto's model of institutional departure which stipulates that when students are less integrated into the academic and social communities of the institution, they are likely to depart or drop out, and that when they are sufficiently integrated, they are likely to persist (Ludwig-Hardman & Dunlap, 2003; Tinto, 1997). These authors clarify that academic integration emanates from academic performance, self-esteem and identity as a student, while social integration relates to personal integration and connection to the academic community. To ensure successful academic integration of students, the ODL institutions could formulate strategies that seek to improve their achievement and confidence levels, and provide opportunities that would facilitate their integration into the university community.

Moreover, a large number of students indicated that they did not attend the orientation programme when they first enrolled at the university, yet this is important, particularly in distance learning as it orientates students to various administrative and academic services provided by the

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**Figure 1. Model for the implementation of SSS at NUST-COLL regional centres.**
university and its satellite campuses. An orientation programme is intended to ease students’ transition from high school to the university environment, set the tone for their expectations and integrate them into the campus culture (Davis, 2018; Robinson et al., 1996). A successful integration of students into the academic and social fabric of the institution can enhance their retention and success rates (Benavides & Keyes, 2016; Tinto, 1997).

It was also reported that there were no tutorial classes for some modules due to lack of qualified tutors, or a small number of students registered for the module, which was below the stipulated threshold for a tutor. These two scenarios indicate that COLL is still steeped in the dual-mode of face-to-face and part-time studies and does not harness the benefits of e-learning, which could cater for such students by linking them to lecturers at the main campus in Windhoek via online teaching. Tait (2000) observed that there has been a shift in many ODL institutions from print-based educational resources and teaching to virtual learning carried out through the internet and other computer-mediated communication tools that can improve student support regardless of time and place. Asynchronous learning by means of recorded video lessons and podcasts could assist students who cannot have face-to-face instruction with the tutors.

Just like other ODL institutions, NUST-COLL seems to have a challenge of a low progression rate of students since as much as 35 percent were reported to have been studying for more than three years without passing a year, which constitutes a high attrition rate. In general, the dropout and attrition rates have been reported to be higher for students enrolled in distance learning or online programmes than their counterparts in traditional on-campus programmes, who are typically younger (Ludwig-Hardman & Dunlap, 2003; Moore & Greenland, 2017). This could also be linked to the distance education admission requirements that are normally less stringent than for conventional universities. Lack of adequate, relevant and up-to-date books at the regional centre libraries and malfunctioning computers identified in this research could be some of the factors contributing to the low progression rate. Similarly, Reju (2016) identified unreliable and limited internet connectivity and a shortage of textbooks and relevant course materials as major challenges facing two ODL institutions in Nigeria. Unsurprisingly, students called for up-to-date books, technologies and stable internet access to improve learning. Finally, it also emerged that the support from the main campus in Windhoek was not forthcoming which frustrated students and staff considerably.

7. Conclusion and recommendations
The primary aim of this research was to evaluate the provision of SSS at the NUST-COLL regional centres across Namibia and make proposals that can strengthen the current support services. As a dedicated distance education branch of NUST, COLL caters for distance learners separated from the lecturers and the institution by place, time and other transactions. The research established that there were high rates of repetition, dropout and attrition among distance learners mainly due to the student-lecturer separation, which is typical of an ODL institution. This is compounded by the minimal usage of modern teaching techniques and technologies such as video, CD-ROMs, interactive multimedia, internet-based access to electronic resources, and smart phones for teaching and communicating with students (Burns, 2011). Distance education techniques require students to be independent and self-directed, which is problematic as it is an abrupt transition from face-to-face high school teaching. The underutilization of COLL resources and services was identified as a challenge as most of the students were adults employed fulltime and had to juggle studies with family, work and personal responsibilities (Shikulo, 2018). Accordingly, students had limited contact sessions with lecturers/tutors, which was exacerbated by poor attendance of lectures by both groups.

It was further established that technology plays a central role in bridging the transactional distance between the student and the lecturer/tutor, and effective SSS enhance student success and
throughput rates. However, from the experience of UNISA, Ferreira and Venter (2011) noted that the challenge in most African countries is that many students do not have access to electronic devices that could facilitate online communication and study, and that those who have them do not know how to use them optimally. Similarly, Rakoma (2018) identified lack of basic computer skills and inadequate usage of online learning systems such as e-tutoring by UNISA students as the challenges that undermine the university’s efforts to enhance students’ academic experience, learning and success.

Based on the research findings, it is recommended that NUST should appoint two counsellors for the regional centres stationed on the main campus in Windhoek in order to improve support services for distance students. However, these counsellors should periodically visit the centres for group and one-on-one consultations with students and use technology to deliver counselling services where necessary to obviate the problems imposed by distance. Moreover, face-to-face tutors and marker-tutors should be trained on distance education, course delivery strategies and facilitation skills in order to improve students’ success rate. This could equip them with effective student support skills and interactive teaching approaches that foster independent learning and critical thinking in students. Facilitators should also be trained on the effective use of appropriate ICTs to bridge the transactional distance that poses a challenge in distance learning. NUST should also optimize the utilization of multimedia and social media to promote dialogue with students, particularly those in the rural areas. In the same vein, it should seek ways to provide student support that is personal, individual and customized to the unique needs of students (Tait, 2004).

It would also be ideal to organize workshops for lecturers based on the main campus in Windhoek and face-to-face tutors at the regional centres to explore topics on content knowledge and materials, course objectives, instructional strategies for distance learners, and assessment criteria and skills. Formative feedback forms a crucial part of learning; hence, it should be immediate, and give students clear, specific guidance on how to improve their learning and outcomes. The RCs and students should also be involved in the design of student-focused support services, as they know the actual challenges of distance education and can come up with practical solutions. Lastly, since most COLL students were admitted through mature age concession, they should be afforded some enrichment programmes to prepare them for tertiary education.

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