

ODL Learner Support Issues and Challenges – Students and Tutors perspective (Solomon Islands National University)

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Abstract

The paper will present a case study on ODL delivery at the Solomon Islands National University with its certificate in teaching primary program that was offered to uncertified teachers in Solomon Islands 2011 to 2015. The study focused on “Learner Support challenges and issues – Students and staff Perspective”. The main attention is centred on logistics and academic support of ODL in a society that is yet to accept ODL as another option to gain educational knowledge and skills for personal academic gains.

Interaction with meaningful engagement with student candidates is known as one of the main features of students’ success for many years. This has to be accompanied with various academic supports. The present logistics of delivering an ODL program in a geographically scattered Solomon Islands by SINU is still academically ineffective, expensive and time consuming strategy.

As it is, the ODL system consist of individuals, course materials and resources whose roles and responsibility is to maintain a day to day contact and support clients with their study. However this is yet to be done efficiently for a rewarding academic result and it is still a challenge for the Learner support services (LSS) of SINU.

In the case of the Certificate in Teaching Primary (CTP) program the LSS stands as a great challenge for SINU to solve in terms of supporting the learners with the most reliable and relevant medium of learner support for counselling, study guidance and academic remedial support .

This paper reports the finding of a case study of the Learner support model design

to support the Teachers in Training (TIT) in their study through Distance mode. This study was purposely carried out to gaze the effectiveness of the different LSS models use in supporting the learners with their study and relating it to their academic achievement.

Abbreviations

- **SINU** – SOLOMON ISLANDS NATIONAL UNIVERSITY
- **LSS** – LEARNER SUPPORT SERVICES
- **DFL** – DISTANCE FLEXIBLE LEARNING CENTRE
- **MEHRD**- MINISTRY OF EDUCATION AND HUMAN RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT
- **TIT** – TECAHERS IN TRANING
- **EA** – EDUCATION AUTHORITY
- **MT**– MASTER TEACHERS (CLUSTER TEACHERS)
- **HT** – HEAD TEACHERS

Introduction

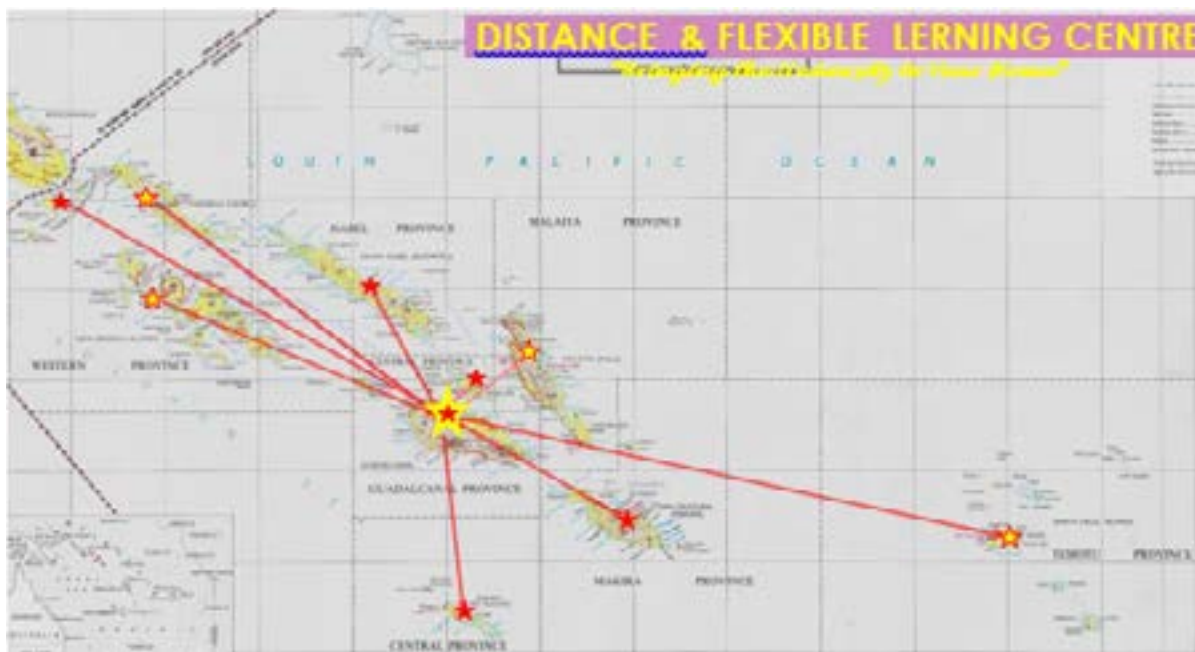
Distance education in its organised form is, one of the path breaking innovations in the field of education all around the world (The International Scene – 1, 2001). However, Open Distance Learning is yet to be seen as a way forward to learn and gain educational qualifications to most Solomon islanders. The majority of ordinary people of this country

Open Distance Learning is not new to Solomon Islanders who have studied with USP but it is in the Solomon Islands National University though it was introduced and started in the early 1980 when Solomon Islands College of Higher Education (SICHE) offered the Adult Education Proficiency Award Distance (AEPAD) program. With the establishment of the SICHE DFL Centre in 2011 for this program, the Learner support services at SICHE then, now SINU only consists of certain individuals, materials and resources whose roles and responsibility is to maintain daily contact and support learners

in their learning through Distance. The learner support comes in a form of the course materials, cell phones, school mentors. It is consisting of SINU DFL staff, TTD Officers, the master teacher and the school head teacher.

This paper reports the findings of a case study of the three Learner Support Service models used to support the Teachers in Training (TIT) in their study through Distance. This study was purposely carried out to gaze the effectiveness of the different LSS models use in supporting the learners with their study, relating it to their academic achievement.

This is a map of the Solomon Islands and the arrows show where our students are studying from the Centre in Honiara indicated by the biggest star on Guadalcanal Island.



The selected population for this study is from the two biggest provinces in the country, Guadalcanal and Malaita as shown in the maps below.



Guadalcanal Province with 458 Distance students across the island as indicated



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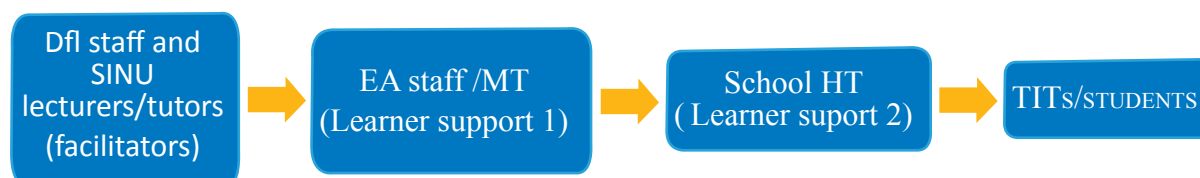
Methods

The population for this study was made up of distance education students from Guadalcanal and Malaita province, which have enrolled for the Certificate in Teaching Primary course through the Distance and Flexible Learning at Solomon Islands National University (SINU) for two years. Both Female and male first and second year students were included in the study. The nature of the study did not permit the use of all schools in both provinces since not all students were at reach, due to the geographical locations and transport

challenges.

This first set of data was collected from the feedback forms (questionnaire) of ten learners of the CTP program as they were followed through their studies with the first two models of Learner support services from the SINU DFL Centre; and (2) the second set of data was collected from feedback forms from another ten students to evaluate the third Learner Support Services model with their collective experience of distance learning under the third LSS model in comparison to the previous models.

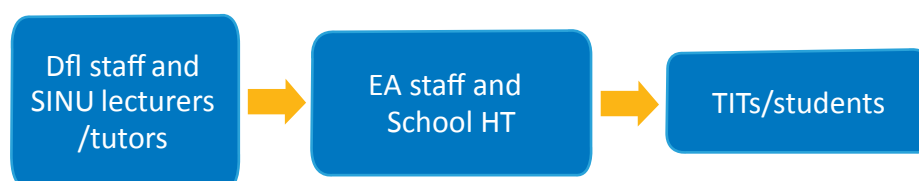
SINU Distance Flexible Learning LSS Models LSS Model 1: Year 2012 - 2013



The dissemination of learner support from the DFL learner support desk follows a process as shown in the diagram above. It begins with the lectures and tutors as facilitators inducting the education authority staff and master teachers with the unit content and expected learner support service to be provided at

their level. The EA staff and Master teachers will then travel to cluster schools to induct the Head Teachers with the unit content. The Head teachers who are with the students all term round supposed to provide the final form of support to the students as and when needs arise.

LSS model 2: year 2014 – 2015



In the next model the process is one step shorter. This has eventuated after a brief review of model 1. The dissemination of course/unit content and other help from the DFL learner support desk still begins with the lectures and tutors as facilitators inducting the education authority staff and the head

teachers. A brief review of the previous model proved that master teachers prolong the LSS line of communication and failed to provide the expected learner support service to the students. The inclusion of the Master teachers increases the expenses to effectively operate under this model.

LSS model 3: year 2016 – to date

The final model is more informative than the previous ones. This again has been eventuated after a brief review of model 2. The lectures and tutors actually present the unit content to the students during a very intensive residential week. Here the students receive the support concerning their learning from

the horse's mouth. They do have responsive dialogue with and receiving support from the course writers and the distance learner support officer on the spot as and when they call or turn up in the office with their study challenges and grievance.

Questionnaire question

There were six questions asked in the questionnaire feedback form as shown below.

- Are you satisfied with the Learner support model you get from SINU DFLLSS
- What challenges do you face with this particular LSSModel?
- What are the issues you face with study after you have been supported this way
- How do you want to receive this support services?
- What are the academic effects of this particular support model on you and your study?
- If you want to rate the effectiveness of this LSS model, what scale would you give?

FINDINGS**1. Summary of TIT feedback forms.**

- **Satisfaction with the LSS model.**

In the questionnaire, respondents were asked to rate the model related to their satisfaction of the model use to support their learning in a scale format as shown in table 2. Students' experience with learning support from the facilitators and the centre were not so positive. They were not satisfied with the first two models and most have expressed some degree of dissatisfaction with comments as "the model does not work well for me, as support is not fort coming from LSS SINU and Education authority offices down the line".

Table 1: Responses on individual related to satisfaction of the LSS model
(Source: Primary data)

Model	Fully satisfied		Average		Less than Average		No. very disappointed with LSS model	
	Findings	%	Findings	%	Findings	%	Findings	%
One (2011-2012)	0	0	1	10	4	40	5	50
Two (2013 -2015)	0	0	6	60	3	30	0	0
Three (2016-)	9	90	1	10	0	0	0	0

Most respondents (90%) stated that they were not satisfied with model one and 10% were on the average scale, basically on how they were supported in 2011 to 2012. Most of these students missed out on a lot of support from LSS and tutors when support is facilitated through LSS model one. As a result most of the 2011 and 2012 students were not successful with their studies and

didn't graduated at the end of the program. It's a whole new story when it comes to 2016. Most respondents (90%) showed that they are now satisfied with the latest model with the changed approach to support their learning. Although there are few administrative issues that needs to be addressed, most respondents are satisfied with the latest model of support.

Table 2: Challenges faced by students when supported by the LSS models

Model	Delay with distribution of course materials		Scheduling and using time efficiently		To get help before, during and after study. (instructional)		Management of course work (assignment turnaround time)		Quality academic guidance and counselling	
	Findings	%	Findings	%	Findings	%	Findings	%	Findings	%
One	8	80	8	80	7	70	90	90	8	80
Two	9	90	9	90	9	90	9	90	9	90
Three	2	20	1	10	2	20	3	30	0	0

Professional advice is critical in helping students meet their academic objectives, and students must be placed in correct study levels if they are to succeed academically. This was not the case with the initial LSS models. The model's key support services as academic advising, instructional support, and networking was weak. As a result, students have expressed challenges faced as hindrance to their study. Students were dissatisfied with LSS model one and two. 80% of the respondents agreed that instructional related

challenges affected them. 70% thought that delayed or ineffective feedback was a challenge; unhelpful course information and lack of direction and poor assessment design were also at a range of 70% to 90%. These challenges were eased when the LSS mode was improved to the later. Respondents expressed that communicating directly with the tutors and the LSS officers makes study life much healthier and academically satisfactory.

Issues faced by students when supported by LSS models

Model	Study techniques and learning difficulties		Expensive in terms of communication, time and travel.		No access to libraries, additional readings/ resources		Conflicting demands on their time of fulltime employment		Family commitment and study requirements	
	Findings	%	Findings	%	Findings	%	Findings	%	Findings	%
One	10	100	10	100	10	100	9	90	9	90
Two	8	80	8	80	10	100	8	80	10	100
Three	6	60	8	80	7	70	6	60	8	80

The result shows that most respondents (100%) have experience a lot of study related issues with all LSS models. They indicated they were not supported with relevant study techniques and had faced learning difficulties during their study program. 80 % of learners indicated this for mode 2 and 60% for model 3. When one considers the expense against

time and travel, 80 to 100 percent of learners indicated that this is an issue across all 3 forms of LSS models. And 80 to 100 percent learner indicates that library and additional readings are of great challenge to their study for all 3 models so as the conflict of time and family commitment demands.

- **How students want to receive this support service**

Model	One to one Face to face/telephone counselling from Tutors to learners		Group counselling with students nearby students		Teleconferencing with students and staff		Counselling through letters & text messaging		Handbooks and information desk at provincial centres.	
	Findings	%	Findings	%	Findings	%	Findings	%	Findings	%
One	10	100	7	70	1	10	6	60	8	80
Two	10	100	7	70	1	10	6	60	7	70
Three	10	100	5	70	1	10	4	60	8	80

The result shows that the students have study difficulties arising from his/her personal circumstances and one very obvious cause here is the mode in which learners received their support. Thus the provision of guidance and counselling and the mode of delivering this support is an issue for learners. 70 to 100

percent learners indicate a desire for face to face or direct communication with facilitators regarding study. Teleconferencing is new to most students and if even they know about it they hardly use this mode of support because its non- existence in most rural villages and schools.

- **What are the academic effects of the LSS models on student's learning?**

Model	Misunderstand course/ units content and assessment requirements		obstruction to continue on with Distance study		Discouraging; off-putting		Improved learning process and study habits		Build up confidence to study through Distance.	
	Findings	%	Findings	%	Findings	%	Findings	%	Findings	%
One	8	80	9	90	9	90	0	0	0	0
Two	7	70	8	80	5	50	6	60	7	70
Three	0	0	0	0	0	0	7	70	9	90

Results had shown that 80 to 90 percent of the learners interviewed on model one and two indicated that they had a lot more difficulties in understanding their unit contents and assessment requirements; the flow of information for each model has more negative impact on them and their studies

compared to the flow of information in model 3. 50 to 90 percent stated they were discouraged and wanting to quit study and thus their performance declines while 70 to 90 percent of learners for model 3 indicated they have improved their study habits and build up their confidence in distance learning.

• **If you want to rate the effectiveness of LSS model, what scale would you give?**

Model	Very ineffective 1		Ineffective 3		Neutral 5		Effective 7		Very effective 10	
	Findings	%	Findings	%	Findings	%	Findings	%	Findings	%
One	8	80	2	20	0	0	0	0	0	0
Two	0	0	2	20	0	0	3	30	5	30
Three	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	40	6	60

The learners were asked to rank the LSS models on a scale from 1 to 10, 1 for very ineffective and 10 for very effective. The study found that 80% gave a score for 1 for model 1 and 20% learners gave the score of 3; Model 2: 20% learners gave score for 3, 30% gave a score for 7 and 50% learners gave a score for 10; Model 3: 40% learners gave a score for 7 and 60% learners gave a score for 10. No learner gave rank for 0.

• **Interviews with Tutors**

There were 10 tutors from the school of Education engaged in the delivery of the distance unit content to the students. Below is what they have to share.

• **Activities:**

The activities done during the presentation was done according to the contents of the presentation. Examples are given at the same time similar activities to enhance learning is given and done by the participants in groups and individually. On the other hand most activities are not covered due to time factor

• **Presentation**

The process of preparation and planning was the core part of the presentation. It was presented in a logical manner, firstly; multiple intelligence, secondly; unpacking process, thirdly; unit planner, and lastly lesson plan

and the components of the lesson where the focus is planning for a mathematics lesson. Presentation was done using PowerPoint presentation along with discussions, activities, collaboration and participation.

Assessment components were clearly stated and precisely explained that participants know exactly what is expected from the TIT in their schools.

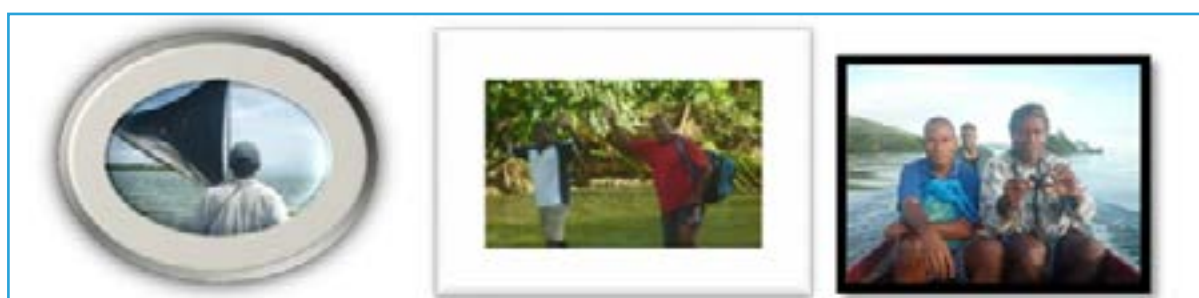
• **Resources**

Resources used for the presentation and during the presentation were adequate and timely to support flow of the presentation. The use of IT equipments such as: camera, laptops, mobile phones, flash drives and memory cards are very handy to make the presentations more efficient and effective

CHALLENGES:

Transportation.

The biggest challenge face by LSS staff of SINU Distance is transportation. Most of the distance students reside in villages where the Network coverage is not reliable or if they have the coverage, they may not have access to a mobile phone. So LSS must travel to offer the much needed help to support learning. Below is a snap shot of this challenge.



LSS Staff paddled, sailed, or walked across rivers to most of the schools to support the students.



This Tutor walked these mountains on bush tracks and swam across this winding river to offer support to the students.

• **Time:**

The duration of 5 days for the workshop is inadequate. Contents usually covered in a semester are done only in one session of two hours consequently a brain straining exercise of content selection is of priority. This challenge can only be done by the writer of the courses as they have the skill of doing it.

The timeframe for delivering all units, marking and return of assignments was too short. Lecturers expressed concern about workloads of teaching and marking the TIT Program during blocks when they needed to prepare for new courses in the pre-service program.

• **Logistics:**

Hiring of vehicle is very expensive and ineffective due to the fact that most roads end at 100 to 200 metres away from the schools and villages. Therefore the money spend on vehicle hiring does not meet the need although a vehicle needs to be hired during the workshop for efficiency purpose.

Litrature Review

Literature reveals that a distance education program must design and applicate effective learner support services and systems. Unfortunately, in many distance education systems, more resources are invested in the technical system at the expense of the learner support system. Equivalent or more resources

should be invested in the learner support system if the distance education enterprise is to be successful (Gunawardena, 1996, 271). This actually is what has happened at SINU Distance Flexible Centre. The three LSS models studied has proved this to be true. More resources have been invested in the management level for technical support but very little to support the distance students with the current model of support.

Learner Support Services (LSS), mean any other services provided to the learner other than the study learning materials (SLMs). Thus, complementary services like: personal contact programmes, counselling, organisation of resources, library facilities, telephone teaching, interactive teaching through TV and radio and similar activities form the components of LSS (Chander, 1998; Venkaiah, 1998). While this paper agrees with Chander and Venkaiah the complementary services like: interactive teaching through TV and radio, organisation of resources and library facilities is not provided by the SINU DFL centre to the learners. This has course a lot of study challenges to the learners as was sighted in their responses.

Conceptually, in the distance education system, it is generally argued that frequent faculty- learner contact is desireable on the assumption that such experiences contribute to the growth and development of the learners (Shivann, in K.T, 2001 in K.Murali Monahar, 2001).

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DISCUSSION

The results of the study revealed that the high percentage of the respondents agreed that model three would be the right LSS model for the SINU DFL centre. More on direct interaction with the learners by the LSS staff and SoEH tutors will solve a lot of problems faced by the distance and remote learners.

Most respondents showed that they are satisfied with model three where there is direct contact and interactive conversation with the LSS staff and tutors. This though has a challenge in the means of communication medium; still have satisfactory results on the learners. They are satisfied when conversing with the right people. As a result of weak support provided by the first two LSS models, learners faced a lot more challenges and issues as they study from a distance. However the study proves that these challenges and issues reduced as the LSS model improved to a more inter- person interactive model. The fact that more respondents wish to receive their support through a more face to face mode or direct interaction with the tutors or LSS staff proves that model three will work best for the distance learners of SINU in a developing country where resources for distance learning is scarce.

Another interesting result is the number of learners who have completed their study and graduated with a certificate at the end of their two years of study. More student who have studied under model 1 and 2 have not graduated due to non-submission of assessments and discontinue of study due to communication and content support, while 100% of learners who were support with model three has graduated and now working as certified teachers in their schools. These

learners thought that Lss model three is effective or very effective for them.

Although the SINU distance education system provides learner support and content; learner support and learner needs, the others such as learner support and institutional context; and learner support and technology is still a long way to reach and even to provide at this stage.

RECOMMENDATIONS and Conclusion

To enhance learner support in the Solomon Islands distance education system, the following suggestions may be proposed:

1. SINU DFL students should be supported through Student

Centres. These centres should aim at reducing their individual deficiencies and contributing to their learning rather than introducing courses.

2. The SINU DFL's budget must be increased to provide good institutional support for its students.

3. There should be more studies about the characteristics, unique needs, and socio cultural context of Distance student-learners to improve the LSS as there is insufficient information in the related literature. A lot of further research needs to be done about the learner support and learner needs, content, institutional context and technology in the Solomon Islands for SINU Distance purpose.

6. Library and publication support for DFL students should be encouraged, and provided for from the point of view of quantity and quality.

7. Students' services through the learner support model must offer study tips, test-taking tips, and external instructional resources such as tutoring. This was not offered through the first two models and students did not learn self-development strategies so that they can accept responsibility for developing their own skills study successfully as distance students.

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