

TITLE: Effectiveness of Learner Support Services at the Namibian College of Open Learning

Sub-Theme: Quality and Equity in Learning

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1. Introduction

The Namibian College of Open Learning (NAMCOL) is a semi-autonomous educational institution created by an Act of Parliament (Act 1 of 1997) and falls under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education of Namibia. The College's core activity has traditionally been its Secondary Education programme which enables those who cannot or do not wish to attend formal schools to study for either the Namibia Junior Secondary Certificate (JSC or Grade 10) or the Namibia Senior Secondary Certificate (NSSC or Grade 12). In line with its Act, the College has, of late, diversified its offerings to include professional and vocational programmes in the following discipline: Early Childhood Development, Education for Development, Local Government Studies (CLGS), Youth Development Work (DYD), Business Management and Administration, psychosocial support, Pre-Primary Education and Computer skills. These programmes have been introduced in response to the needs of the national economy.

In order to ensure that it continues to meet its national mandate effectively enough, NAMCOL monitors and evaluates its programmes and services on an ongoing basis. For this reason the College commissioned a study on the learner support services it provides to students in early 2014. The study was aimed at collecting evidence-based information on the quality of services NAMCOL offers to its learners.

1.1 Purpose of the Study

The aim of the Learner Support Services Quality study was to assess the nature, appropriateness and quality of learner support services offered to students/learners pursuing various programmes offered by the College. The study highlights the quality, adequacy and appropriateness of the learner support services at NAMCOL. The findings will lead to a re-positioning of NAMCOL's learners support services.

1.2 Objectives

The specific objectives of the study were to:

- Identify and evaluate the quality of learner support services at NAMCOL;
- Identify key factors required to improve learner support services provided by NAMCOL; and
- Provide research based information on the Learner Support Services for decision making process.
- Make recommendations on the improvement of learner support services at the College

The following guiding research questions were used to focus the study:

1. What is the nature of NAMCOL's learner support services?
2. To what extent do learner support services meet the needs of learners?
3. Do all learners receive the planned services?
4. What are the key factors that are required to improve learner support services at NAMCOL?

2. Learner Support: Perspective from the Literature

The subject of learner/student support is dealt with quite extensively in the literature. Whilst learner support is an important aspect of teaching and learning processes, whether it is in face-to-face encounters or distance education, it is given particular emphasis in open and distance learning (ODL) because of its potential to bridge the transactional distance between the tutor and the learner. The strength of an institution's learner support system determines its ability to meet the "three presences" that are critical success factors in distance learning, namely teacher presence, social presence and cognitive presence. In ODL, teacher presence is about stimulating, guiding, and supporting independent learning- enhancing Holmberg's (1989) "guided didactic interaction". Social presence is about maximising dialogue in order to avoid subjecting distance learners to isolated learning spaces that are boring and frustrating. Cognitive presence is an act of the mind; it is about mental processing of information perceived/gained through experience and reflecting upon that information in order to construct new knowledge. Thus, the fundamental purpose for learner support is to create conditions where teacher presence, social presence and cognitive presence interplay in the process of learning. This is a socially contrived environment achieved by employing multiple strategies that often include the human agent as well as the technological medium. But what exactly is learner support?

2.1 Learner support – concept and practice

Learner support is defined as the resources which learners can access in order to carry out planned learning processes (Garrison and Bayton, (1987) cited in Usun, 2004). In distance education, support is concerned with a range of human and non-human resources to guide and facilitate the educational transaction (Garrison, 1989). According to Sewart (1993:12) "...learner support is the interface between the institution and its students". Thus, irrespective of where they are, learners need to feel the presence and influence of the institution in their learning activities. Sewart places emphasis on the contextual nature of learner support services offered by an institution.

Sweet's (1993) notion of learner support is premised on the changing pedagogical practices that are associated with the evolution of distance education from the industrial mode in which learners were passive recipients of knowledge to more interactive forms of learning where learners search for and construct their own knowledge. . "The focus for this altered role is the promotion of interaction among and between students and instructors through either mediated or face-to-face means" (Sweet, 1993:1)

One of the prominent scholars who have written extensively on distance education generally and on learner support in particular is Allan Tait. Tait's view of student support is that it is "... the range of services both for individuals and students in groups which complement the course materials or learning resources that are uniform for all learners, and which are often perceived as the major offering of institutions using ODL". Tait categorises the functions of student support into cognitive, affective and systemic functions. Cognitive support entails supporting and developing learning through the use of standard and uniform elements of course materials and other learning resources for individual students. Affective support involves providing an environment which supports students, creates commitment and enhances self-esteem. Systemic support is about establishing administrative processes and information management systems which are effective, transparent and student-friendly, (Tait, 2002:288).

Simpson, for instance defines learner support as "...all activities beyond the production and delivery of course materials that assist in the progress of students in their studies". He argues that the first group of such services deals with supporting students with their cognitive, intellectual and knowledge

issues relating to specific courses of study. The second group includes such activities as advising, helping students assess their skills, advocacy, and administration (Sampson, 2002).

2.2 Why learner support in ODL

Allan Tait identifies three reasons why learner support is necessary in ODL:

- Most learners want support and interaction in their learning process, except for some 10% of students with personality types that may not want interaction with other students. The other 90% may look forward to it but demands on time and place prevalent in the lives of adult learners may constrain accessing such support services;
- Learner support, especially guidance and counselling, tutor support, effective information and administration are all affective forms of support which reinforce learners' sense of confidence and reduce drop-out rate; and
- Learner support activities like tutoring in group work in tutorial centres or online and comments in marked assignments (termed 'mediation') have a positive impact on the learning process.

As highlighted above, in ODL, learner support activities are aimed at reducing the transactional distance between the tutor and the learner in order for the latter to achieve his/her learning objectives. Therefore, learner support in its many forms is aimed at enhancing the conversation between the learner, the tutor and the subject content.

2.3 Learner support activities

A number of learner support activities are documented in the literature, although emphasis is placed on the context of an institution. Some of the support activities drawn from the literature include:

- Preparation for the challenges of distance learning
- Career guidance and counselling
- Remedial interventions such as responsible open admission programmes to help underprepared students achieve success (academic skills development included)
- In-text support as part of well designed, integrated and structured courseware promoting dialogue between lecturer and student
- Feedback to students on their learning
- Study groups and centres – actual or virtual (electronics).
- Access to libraries, laboratories and equipment.
- Communication networks
- Computer skills training, technology access, and library services
- Tuition support in the form of detailed, individualized and timely feedback to formative assessment
- Regional tutorials (discussions, practical sessions, demonstrations, etc.)
- Peer and community support (self-help and mentoring from community members)

It is clear from Brindley and Robinson's work that for an institution to meet the diverse needs of learners effectively, it needs to know its learner profile, establish what the needs of the learners are, and decide on the most cost-effective way of meeting those needs and use different tools to address the needs.

3. Research Design and Methodology

3.1 Mixed methods design

In this study, both quantitative and qualitative methods of collecting data were used. The mixed methods approach to the study was advantageous in that whilst it allowed eliciting information from a large group of learners in the shortest possible time, it also provided an opportunity for not only probing some of the views raised by learners, but also triangulating the research data.

NAMCOL learners were the key respondents in this study. This is primarily because learner support is the hallmark for both student retention and academic success in distance learning, and students' views on the appropriateness, adequacy and usefulness of support services are the best indicators for the quality of such provision. In order to reach as many students as possible and draw reliable and valid conclusions, a questionnaire was administered amongst students on their views on learner support services they get from the College. In undertaking studies where conclusions are based on people's opinions, it is always useful to achieve some form of data triangulation. Over and above surveying students' views, opinions of key NAMCOL staff were also sought. Thus, a similar survey was administered amongst NAMCOL tutors throughout the regions in order to source their opinions on learner support services at NAMCOL.

3.2 Sampling

The population for the study consisted of all registered students of the College in the 2014 academic year, excluding students registered on the Technical and Vocational programmes. The latter programmes are new programmes where students have not had enough experience with NAMCOL services to be able to give useful opinions on the College's learner support services. The population for the study therefore consisted of NAMCOL secondary and professional programmes.

To determine an appropriate sample size from the population, the following formula from Suber Peter, (2012) was used:

$$n = \frac{N}{1+N(0.05)^2}$$

In the formula, n stands for the sample size and N for size of the population.

Apart from selecting a sample of the correct size, in order to allow generalisation of findings, the sample should also be truly representative of the population in terms of population characteristics. Thus, the sample for the study was selected by programme of study, by regional distribution and by rural and urban location of the students.

Based on the above sampling technique, the following sample composition was used for the study:

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Table 1: Sample of study by programme

Course	Number	Percentage
JSC	205	30.4%
NSSCO	421	62.5%
NSSCH	24	3.6%
CED	14	2.1%
CLGS	3	0.4%
CBM	3	0.4%
CWCY	1	0.1%
DED	2	0.3%
DECPPE	2	0.3%
DYD	1	0.1%
Total	676	100%

4. Collection of Quantitative Data.

4.1 Fieldwork and data capturing

The bulk of the fieldwork was conducted over a period of two weeks, with a little bit of mopping up taking place in the third week. All completed questionnaires were sent to Windhoek for data capturing by the Windhoek-based fieldwork manager, working with a few data capturers. To facilitate capturing of data in a form that would allow analysis, data capturing spreadsheets were prepared in advance and sent to the data capturers. The spreadsheets allowed for checking the accuracy of data captured.

5. Collection of qualitative data

5.1 One-to-One Interviews

The researcher chose to interview some stakeholders on a one-to-one basis mainly because of the positions they occupy in the planning and implementation of learners support services at NAMCOL. Where a respondent was understood to play a central role in the planning and monitoring of learner service provision, a one-on-one interview was considered the most appropriate method of eliciting his/her individual views, opinions and concerns.

5.2 Focus Group Interviews

The focus group technique involves the use of in-depth group interviews in which participants are selected because they are a purposive, although not necessarily a representative, sample of a specific population. Discussion within the group is not allowed to range freely, but rather is 'focused' by a facilitator on a given subject or topic. As literature affirms, the uniqueness of a focus group is its ability to generate data based on the synergy of the group interaction.

For this study, the only participants who were involved in focus group interviews were Distance Education Coordinators at the NAMCOL headquarters. These were selected on the criteria that they would have something to say on the topic, had similar socio-characteristics and would be comfortable talking to the interviewer and each other on issues pertaining to the planning, implementation and monitoring of learner support services at NAMCOL. The rest of the interviews were conducted on a one-on-one basis, either face-to-face or telephonically.

6. Findings of the study

6.1 The Nature of Learner Support Services at NAMCOL

NAMCOL offers a wide range of support services to its learners throughout its four regions. Key amongst these services are the following:

- Study guides for the courses enrolled
- Tutors' comments on marked assignments
- Face-to-face tutorials
- Telephone communications with tutors
- Tutorial letters
- Orientation workshops
- Academic counselling
- Study groups

It is noteworthy that over and above the above-listed services, there are many other learner support services NAMCOL extends to learners. This study surveyed learners' opinions on at least 39 different types of support services. Most of the services are however open to all learners in the College, irrespective of the programme they pursue.

An interesting point to note is that NAMCOL acknowledges the advent of educational technologies and is making concerted effort to embrace the technology to improve its learner support services. The College also put in place a bulk SMS facility that facilitates instant communication with learners. Thus, apart from making use of computer supported services, the College also tries to exploit technologies prevalent in communities and therefore amongst learners, like cell phones and the radio.

It is worth noting that NAMCOL has MOODLE Learning Management System (LMS) where learners can access a variety of open education resources to support their studies. Amongst open schooling initiatives in the Southern African region, NAMCOL is currently the only institution that is harnessing the affordances of OER and LMS in a systematic way for the benefit of learners. Learner support services at NAMCOL consist of both technology-supported services (like telephone calls, Short Message Services (SMS), email, Learning Management System (LMS) and website) as well as direct human contact services (like regular tutorial encounters, vacation workshops, mentor sessions and study groups). Specially designed paper based study materials for independent study are also extensively used at NAMCOL. These materials are in the form of study guides/course books and have the "teacher" built into them.

6.2 Student awareness of College services

The study also surveyed which support services learners were aware of. This was done in order to establish whether there is awareness of learner support services across the four regions and in rural as well as by urban learners. In general students are aware of the various learner support services offered at NAMCOL, some services being better known than others. The majority of the respondents (91.2%) indicated that they are aware of the NAMCOL study guides/course books. This confirms NAMCOL documentation that all learners who register get a study pack right at the beginning. These are materials that cover the subject syllabuses being followed. Apart from study guides, learners are aware of comments in tutor-marked assignments (51.2%), face-to-face tutorials (47.8%), telephonic contacts with tutors (45.7%), tutorial letters (40%), orientation workshops (39.9%), academic counselling (38%) and study groups (37.8%).

To enable students to communicate directly with the Headquarter staff whenever there is need, NAMCOL put in place a toll-free call line. This facility is common in prominent open school systems with large numbers of learners, and is generally extensively used. The survey revealed that only 7.4% of the respondents were aware of this important facility. Survey results also show that technology supported services like internet, web-based learning, video and audio-recorded information as well as radio tutorials are some of the least known services in all the regions. Services that are least known by learners are also the same services tutors are least familiar with, and vice versa.

6.3 Use of NAMCOL learner support services

In addition to investigating learner awareness of NAMCOL services, the study also looked at the all important aspect of service usage – do students make use of the services at their disposal? In order to establish the extent of usage, we asked learners to indicate which services they have used during their studies at the College. The top six services most used by students, in their order of priority are face to face tutorials (76.9%), Study Guides/Course Books (73.5%), comments from tutors on tutor marked assignments (61.0%), orientation workshops (53.7%), telephone contacts with tutors (47.7%), and study groups (44.0%).

The six services learners reported they make least use of are NOLNET centres (1.9%), Email (1.9%), Toll-free line (1.9%), Video Recorded Information (3.7%), Audio Recorded Information (5.8%), and Radio Tutorials (10.9%).

Of interest to note is the correlation between students' awareness and usage of learner support services. Survey yielded a very strong correlation between students' awareness of learner support services provided by NAMCOL and levels of usage. This is not surprising, as the more one is aware of the existence of something the more they are likely to use it, if they perceive it useful. It is also clear that the services students know about least (email communication 6%, toll free line 7%, video recorded information 9%, telephone communication with Area Coordinator 10%, audio recorded information 11% and NAMCOL website 14%,) also have low usage levels.

Comparison of awareness and usage factors also reveals interesting patterns where, in almost all the cases students show higher levels of awareness of the existence of services than levels of usage. In other words, students do not always make use of services they know exist in the College. Although the differences between awareness and usage are quite marginal, it is worth further interrogating this aspect in order to fully understand why such differences exist in the College. Notably also tutors' comments on marked assignments, face-to-face tutorials, tutorial letters and telephone communications with tutors were rated highest in terms of usefulness.

6.4 Accessibility of learner support services

It is clear that most of the services reported to be most used by learners as indicated above are also reported to be most accessible.

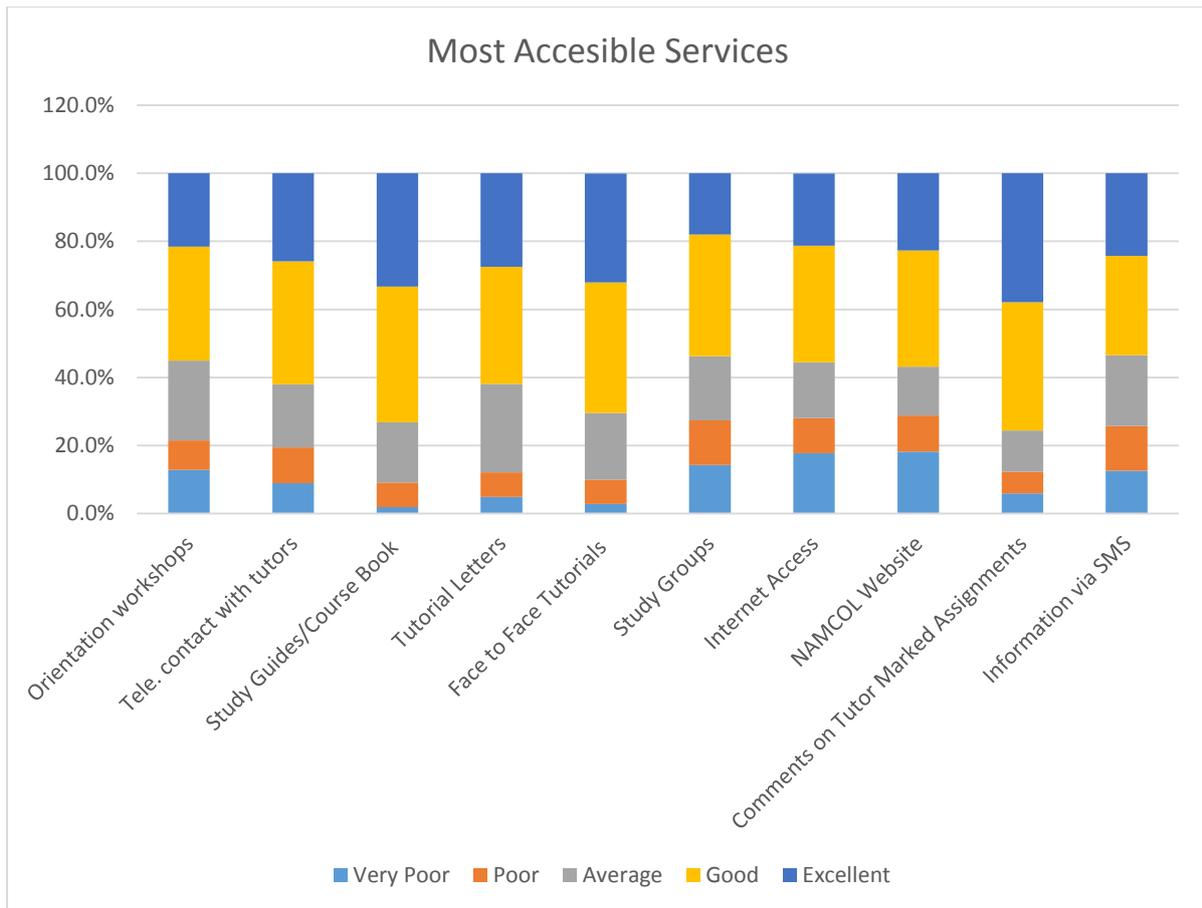


Fig. 3: Most Accessible Services at NAMCOL

It is interesting to note that learner surveys show that of all the 39 support services included in the survey instrument, none of them has an accessibility rate of less than 50%. This is in spite of the low levels of usage of some of the services reported above. The least accessible service were the toll-free facility with 52.3%, mentor sessions with 53.4% (only applicable to learners doing CWCY and CED), field trips with 53.8% and telephone contact with Area Coordinators with 55.7%. If all the 39 learner support services are categorised according to their accessibility ratings, 6 of them fall in the 80% + category, 11 in the 70-79% category, 16 in the 60-69% and only 6 in the 50-59% category.

Figure 4 below shows (at a glance) the general pattern of how services were ranked by learners in terms of their accessibility:

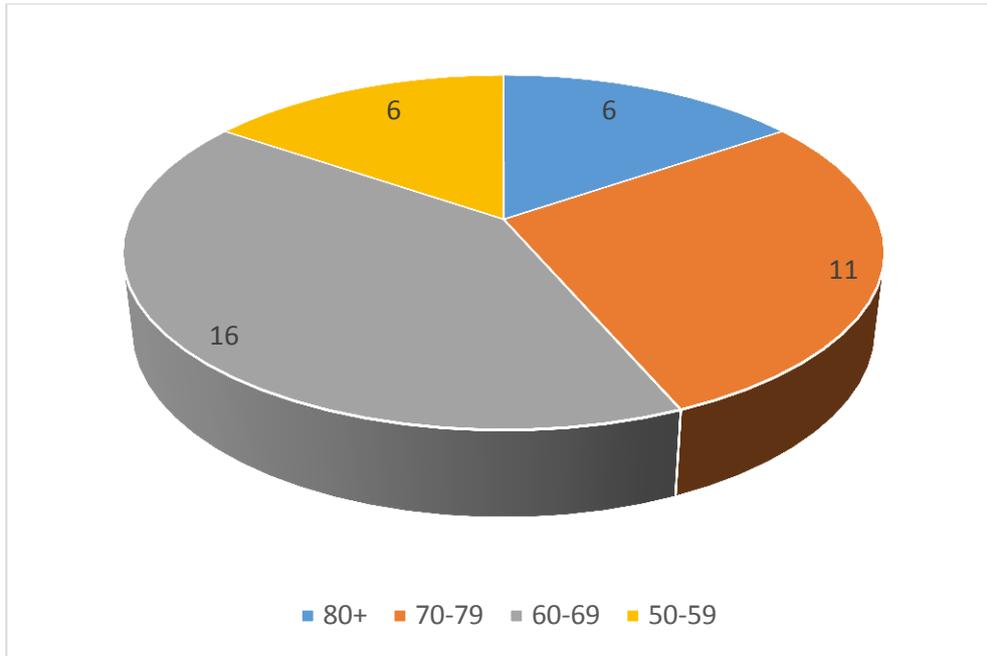


Fig. 4: Rating of Accessibility of Learner Support Services

6.5 Tutorial letters

A summary of learner responses shows that generally, learners are happy with the tutorial letters; they get the letters in time, they understand the language used and they also find the information useful for their studies. Learner views on the effectiveness of tutorial letters were also confirmed by data from the staff. Of the surveyed staff, 93% rated tutorial letters positively in terms of their effectiveness in enhancing learning.

6.6 Learning materials

Generally learners confirm they receive learning materials timely and the materials are developed in language they find easy to understand, quite a significant proportion of respondents (33.8%) feel that the materials are not sufficient for their needs. This indicates need for diversifying what is currently available to learners. This aspect on diversifying learning materials is also raised as one of the areas that need improvement.

1.1 Tutorial services

NAMCOL has other forms of tutoring distance learners so as to boost support for learners. This includes face-to-face contacts with tutors, a very important social aspect of learning. The following table shows how surveyed learners feel about the quality of tutorial services they enjoy at NAMCOL.

Table on Quality of Tutorial Services

	NAMCOL tutors are readily available when I need them	Communication style with tutors is suitable for me	My interaction with tutors is informative	I always feel free to seek help from NAMCOL tutors	Average
Strongly Disagree	9.4%	6.4%	5.4%	6.6%	6.1%

Disagree	26.5%	13.1%	14.2%	11.0%	12.7%
Agree	44.6%	55.8%	62.3%	47.6%	55.1%
Strongly Agree	19.5%	24.6%	18.1%	34.7%	26.1%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Generally NAMCOL tutors are readily available to learners. Learners find the forms of communicating with tutors suitable, they find the interactions informative and they always feel free to approach tutors seek help.

6.9 Multi media

In this study, we sought learners' views on the benefits of video clips and radio tutorials offered by the College. Table 11 below shows what learners think about these multi-media forms of support. The table shows that nearly 47% of the respondents felt that learning video clips are not clear and 45% didn't think the video clips are informative enough. About 42% of the surveyed learners do not find radio lessons useful for their studies, nearly 47% think that the radio lessons are not clear and hence 45% indicated that they do not listen to them often. Surveyed NAMCOL staff also ranked video and audio recorded information very low in terms of its effectiveness in learning.

6.10 Improving learner support at NAMCOL: The learner's perspective

Learners suggest that whilst the learning materials provided by the College are good, learning resources should be diversified (beyond study guides). In line with this suggestion is the need to improve access to library resources. As highlighted above, learners feel that there is a lot that has to be done in order to improve the services offered by NAMCOL tutors. Thus, a number of suggestions were made by learners regarding this aspect. The suggestions include providing more tutors, improving commitment by tutors, improving tutor attendance and tutor effectiveness in supporting learners.

6.11 The plight of physically challenged learners

Of the 674 learners used in the sample, 6.2% indicated that they were physically challenged whilst 6.8% of the respondents indicated that they knew of a learner who was physically challenged. The most common physical problems mentioned are visual and hearing impairment. Some learners reported that they can't walk and so they use wheelchairs. One indicated that he/she was born without four fingers on the left arm whilst another respondent indicated that he/she has no arm.

Learners suggest a number of support services that should be availed to learners who are physically challenged. Generally, learners propose more efficient services that are targeted at this group of disadvantaged learners. A good number of respondents suggested that as much as possible, learners with disabilities should be provided with enough resources to allow them to do most of their studies from home, with more intensive interactions through telephones, SMS, emails and tutor visits, where possible.

7. Recommendations

Based on the findings above, this study makes a number of recommendations on the improvement of learner support services at NAMCOL.

- Increasing learner and tutor awareness of the learner support services available at NAMCOL

- Improving service usage in order to improve learning gains
- Improving relevance and attractiveness of learner support services so as to encourage learners to use them
- Making as many of the support services as possible accessible to all learners
- Diversifying learning materials in order to provide learning enrichment
- Getting NAMCOL learners to understand the responsibilities of independent learning
- Improving the commitment and professionalism of part-time tutors
- Improving the services of physically-challenged learners
- Continuing with a strengthened multiple support model but moving more and more towards a technology-enhanced model of learner support.

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