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INTRODUCTION

The Student Services Round Table was developed to address those areas which The Commonwealth of Learning had identified as relevant and was to result in concrete recommendations which would guide COL in creating a plan for future activity. Professional staff at COL had determined that the Round Table would function best if discussions were centred on a keynote paper, which was commissioned in November, 1990. Although COL staff was well aware of the issues to be considered and how best to facilitate a meeting which would have the necessary results, all involved agreed to allow a dynamic process to unfold and to build in flexibility. This flexibility and the willingness of the invited participants to use it productively, proved to be the major component of the success of the Round Table. The agenda of the Round Table was designed to allow maximum participation, with small group work an integral component.

Keynote Paper

The keynote paper was developed to summarize the field of student support services as it existed at the time of writing. It was to be a largely descriptive paper which would attempt to draw out the issues relating to the provision of student support services, in an international context. The paper was re-drafted on several occasions and the invaluable assistance of Janet Jenkins, then senior programme officer in research and gratefully acknowledged by the author. The paper was also written to bring some focus on the areas of relevance which had been identified in advance by COL

Areas of Relevance

The COL personnel had identified several areas as being particularly relevant for any discussion of Student Support Services. These were:

*organizing student support with minimal resources
*the use of decentralized models
*student support in science, technological and vocational programmes
*the use of telecommunications technologies for support
*student support in teacher training programmes
*the special needs of women
*providing support for staff training

This list provided the basis for the selection of participants for the Round Table. Each participant was asked to submit, before the Round Table, a short paper dealing with a specific area in which he or she had some specific expertise. These papers, with the keynote paper, created a base for discussions centred on the identified areas. All papers were distributed to the participants before the Round Table. Extracts from participant papers comprise the section of the report entitled "Views from the Field".

From a process perspective this development of thoughts before the Round Table helped participants to structure their participation in advance, thereby allowing for less time to be spent in the development of a common understanding of the issues.

The Round Table

All participants were given a list of the main objectives of the Round Table and the outcomes which COL sought. In addition, they received a list of the issues around the area of student support services which had been lifted from the keynote paper. Some discussion of the process took place very early on in the Round Table, at which time the concept of the flexible agenda was introduced. The Vice-president of COL referred to the Round Table on Training as an example of how COL would use the findings of this Round Table.

Participants were then given approximately 10 minutes to describe what their institution was currently doing, 10 minutes to describe what they would like to do and 10 minutes to consider what COL could do to help. This served to bridge participants from their own experience into the international perspective which COL requires for success. After each presentation some discussion took place, largely for clarification. In several cases, the discussions provided a framework for agenda changes over the next several days, as participants immediately began to take ownership of the process.

This report consists of the **Keynote Paper,** the **Views** from **the Field** and **Recommendations** arising from the Round Table. **Discussion Papers, Suggested Plan of Action** and **List of Participants** are appended.

STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES: AN OVERVIEW
by Marian Croft

The Commonwealth of Learning was established in 1988 to create and widen access to opportunities for learning by promoting co-operation between universities, colleges and other educational institutions throughout the Commonwealth, making use of the potential offered by distance education. One of C0L's major functions as stated in its Memorandum of Understanding is to assist in the development of local support services to students. This paper aims to provide a focus for the Round Table on Student Support Services convened by COL and held in the spring of 1991.

The purpose of the Round Table is to help COL to develop policies aimed at assisting institutions to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of existing support services, and to encourage innovation. The main objectives are:

to identify issues relating to the provision of support services of adult students;

to identify existing policies and procedures relating to student support and to review their scope;

to determine criteria for developing student support services and assessing quality;

to develop programmes and strategies for COL to assist institutions in designing, developing and improving student support services.

For the purposes of this paper, the discussion will be restricted to those support services which institutions provide or could provide to their adult students. Distance education is rapidly growing in areas of primary and secondary education, but the needs of children (up to school leaving age) are very different from those of adults.

1   Issues

This paper raise certain issues in the field of student support services, describe these issues with relevant examples and, where possible suggest methods to deal with them. There are no "perfect" solutions and few which can be transferred in their entirety from one institution to another, much less from one country to another. The issues are therefore identified for discussion at the Round Table.

Many solutions may be particular to the environment in which they were developed. Some may be appropriate to a developed country, with certain infrastructures, and inappropriate to developing countries. On the other hand, developing countries constrained as they may be financially, may offer ingenious solutions which would rarely be considered in developed countries, to their loss.

As well, different types of students have very different needs. New students, with no experience of distance education or who have been away from learning for some time, have needs different from experienced students or those with basic literacy or numeracy problems. Disabled students have specific needs which distance education may be able to address better than in-person courses. Some researchers have suggested that women learn differently from men and that this may have an impact on the services they need. Different cultural backgrounds, both within and between countries, can also influence decisions.

Disciplines like science, technology and management and training for trades require relatively sophisticated physical support. This , too, calls for special consideration, again in the varied contexts of the developed and developing world. If programmes lead to professional designations, acceptance by the various governing bodies becomes critical and may be determined by the extent and quality of the support services which supplement the distance taught components.

The paper, in defining student support services, distinguishes between those administrative functions which support learning at a distance and the support for learning normally provided through advising, tutoring and counselling. The discussion touches on two different schools of thought. The first considers student support services as a simple physical function surrounding the utilization of course materials. The second school is represented by an ideological argument which ties distance learning to the development of independent learners and ultimately, to the development of democratic value Systems.

The paper also discusses whether or not it is possible to tie the provision of certain student support services to student performance. Is it possible, for example, to associate higher or lower attrition rates with the level of support provided? The paper considers, too, the concept of cost effectiveness and the appropriateness of its application to something with as many variables as student support services and performance.

The value of face-to-face communication, through study groups, tutoring and residential schools is considered next. The paper touches on how both established and emerging technologies can facilitate the provision of student support services (it does not discuss the use of technologies to teach at a distance, which is an entirely a different matter) and in so doing considers the broader issue of technology and distance education, from the perspective of student need, appropriateness (both from a learning perspective and culturally) and cost. Technologies will be examined according to the level of interaction they offer, with telephones and teleconferencing being highly interactive, offering an immediate response, while computers, audio-cassettes, radio and letters usually offer a pre-programmed or delayed response.
The paper then considers the various administrative systems utilized by both single and dual mode institutions and how these structures may affect the quality of student support services.

Finally, the paper discusses the potential role to be played by COL in developing the area of student support services.

2   Definitions

Let us begin by reviewing what we consider to be student support services. In the days when distance education courses were simple correspondence courses, the definition was easy. Quite literally, anything other than the actual course material which an institution provided to its students became support services. The list included record keeping and administration, admission and registration information, and was later expanded to bring in pre-admission counselling, administrative assistance, bookstore services by mail, library access by mail, tutoring and personal counselling, residential schools, study groups, examination administration, grade generation, exit interviews and career counselling. Today, with electronic communications technologies, the list also includes on-line searches of library catalogues, electronic mail, student newsletters and networks.

One way to begin to make some sense of such a broad range of services is to divide them into two areas, those which represent administrative functions and those which contribute directly to the learning function. In this system, record-keeping, information provision, admission and registration, bookstore and library services are administrative functions; and counselling, tutoring and advising, residential schools and study groups support the learning process.

3   Why Provide Student Support Services?

In all distance education institutions, systems exist to maintain student records, to mark student assignments and generate grade reports. Good distance education programmes, however, provide more support than these basics.

The goal of most support services is to help the student realize the instructional objective of the course by minimizing the negative effects of isolation and the lack of regular personal contact. Normally, we put in place support services to help students deal with the institution and to augment the package of course materials. We hope thereby to improve the students experience, to prevent drop-outs, to provide some extra assistance to weaker students, and to provide counselling for those who have personal difficulties.

The provision of student services is, in some ways, a reflection of the institution's commitment to its distance students. Considering the economic constraints familiar to all distance teaching institutions, student support services must produce the results that we expect. However, because results are not easily evaluated and because support services are normally reviewed as of secondary importance to the primary teaching role, they tend to be the first cut in times of budgetary restraint in both single and dual mode institutions. Unlike their on-campus counterparts in dual mode institutions, distance education students are virtually invisible and they are rarely able to speak for themselves when such decisions are considered.

New distance teaching institutions work first on the development of their course materials. As their major emphasis is on cost efficiency, student support services, where cost-efficiency is not proven, inevitably receive lower priority. Student support services are usually introduced in a second stage of development, as the institution, having created a certain number of courses, begins to consider attrition rates, student performance and special needs. As this happens, the institution expects to see tangible results with the introduction of specific services.

When budgets are threatened senior administrators often require proof that these services are both cost efficient and effective in increasing student success. Such proof is very difficult, if not impossible, to provide (Paul, 1988). As Daniel and Clement pointed out in their 1977 paper "costs tend to increase in direct proportion to the number of students, creating a series of painful choices for administrators who seek high quality and a healthy degree of redundancy to accommodate differences in learnings styles". This is in direct contract with one of the most attractive features of distance education systems namely that tremendous economies of scale can be achieved as student numbers climb.

The simple dilemma is that interactivity, through the provision of student support services, often costs a great deal, while independence, leaving students to sink or swim, costs very little To complicate matters, it is usually very difficult to prove that any particular support service is cost effective. The concept of cost effectiveness, as it applies to the provision of student services, will be referred to throughout the paper. At this point, it is sufficient to observe that given the wide variety between and among single and dual mode institutions, it has proved difficult to develop universally applicable formulae to assess cost effectiveness in the light of student performance.

This section introduces the first issues of the Round Table:

Are student support services essential components of a good distance education system? If so, what aspects of students support services are considered essential?

How can institutions make thoughtful decisions on the establishment of student support services when the value of the services cannot easily be assessed?

4   Problems Faced by Distance Education Students

Distance students face the same problems as their peers studying. conventionally. In addition they face problems of two kinds, those relating to administration and those arising from the learning process. Administrative problems are concerned with access to information and services. Students may encounter difficulties in trying to interact with a distant and apparently impersonal institution. They experience isolation even alienation, from the institution, because of geographical remoteness, and a lack of collegiality. Even the simple act of registering becomes more complex. Access to textbooks and library resources requires confidence in an invisible internal system and a postal service, either of which may not function efficiently.

Other services surround and support the learning process and attempt to deal with the psychological problems distance education students may perceive. Distant students have no reliable access to their fellow learners for help, advice or information. They are unable to acquire learning strategies by observing others and adapting their practices. They experience no sense of camaraderie, are able to make no comparisons of their success, form no co-operative alliances and engage in no competition for success, all of which are normal components of the learning process. Because of the isolation and alienation they experience, they may never attempt to utilize whatever advising, tutoring and counselling services are available to them

For example, in some programmes a low proportion of students actually takes advantage of opportunities for telephone tutoring (Thompson 1989). The first contact with a tutor is critical. Most institutions urge students to contact their instructor in the case of trouble, but few students wish their first contact to be negative. They often perceive a problem to be theirs alone, resulting from their own stupidity. Successful Telephone tutoring programmes are those where a tutor makes the first contact, to begin to develop a non-threatening relationship with the student.

This example illustrates the need for a careful plan for the implementation and administration of any student services. What applies to telephone tutoring can equally apply to other forms of contact with students. Implementation itself may influence the utilization rate and ultimately, the success of the service. Administration of the service, continuing the example of tutoring, requires a special training programme for tutors and adequate support for their work.

Distant students also experience problems relating to study techniques and learning' difficulties. Managing time, scheduling their work, expressing their thoughts in written form, developing adequate reading and comprehension skills to allow them to process what they read and to cope with the volume of reading - all these problems face adults returning to education and are accentuated by the added demands of learning at a distance.

In addition, many adults also face personal problems such as the lack of a suitable place to study, no access to libraries, working hours that prohibit attendance at meetings, tutorials or study groups, and domestic or financial problems (Robinson 1981).

It is dangerous to generalise too extensively, as certain types of distance students may not have the same experience. The National Technological University, a distance teaching consortium in the United States, uses satellite transmission of television to offer masters' level degree programmes to professional engineers. These students have significant experience with the educational system and need less support and counselling than other students. Their tutorial needs are almost exclusively for clarification and much discussion takes place during working hours, either in study groups or through audio, video or computer conferencing (Sarchet and Baldwin 1990).

This variation in needs introduces another of the issues for this Round Table: how can institutions identify the particular needs of their students and then determine what support services will best address these needs?

The discussion so far reflects various perspectives on the view of student support services as a physical function providing students with access to resources. There is another view, what may be a different ideological perspective or may simply be the opposite end of a continuum where any point may be of importance to a student personally or to a society at any time. This second view of the importance of student support services involves the intentional development of independent learners through distance education as a first step. There is little disagreement here, as this thesis forms the basis for much distance education. However, the concept is extended from this development of independent learners through to the development of adult status, as a reflection of independent learning and, ultimately, to the inculcation of democratic values through the development of independent adulthood.

Tait contends that an emphasis on the problem-based or pathological characteristics of distance learners misses the real purpose behind tuition and counselling, elements of the learning process which help develop adult status and democratic values and act to individualize the mass product of distance education courses. He sees this as a major difference in orientation, from the commonly held development orientation, which seeks to develop individual students, to a higher level dissemination phenomenon, whereby open learning allows for a more effective dissemination of knowledge, reflecting a more hierarchical image of power and authority in society (Tait 1988).

Normally, most distance teaching institutions introduce support services for process reasons, to encourage and assist their students, to facilitate their learning and to provide them with the necessary advice, information and tools to allow them maximum advantage and opportunities for success. This seemingly altruistic set of goals is often simply sound business practice. It is thought that these services result in lower attrition rates. This raises another important issue.

Is there any evidence to prove that specific support services improve student performance? Or are there too many variables - individual learning styles, requirements of different disciplines, student motivation, cultural considerations, level of service and access to it - to allow conclusive analysis?

5   What Support Service and for Whom?

In this section we will consider the various forms of support services, as they are encountered by students stage by stage and as they fit into the two functions described above, administrative function and support to the learning process. Administrative functions are the simpler of the two and are generally provided at all institutions. Support to the learning process incorporates various counselling systems, which are developed to deal with student problems. There are three stages of counselling. Pre-admission counselling includes all services necessary to bring a student into a programme well-prepared. The second state deals with problems the student encounters while involved in studying. Finally, a comprehensive student support services system also provides exit counselling to students, which may include advice on career planning or on future study.

i. Information

Distance education students have some obvious needs. In order to register for a course, they must have access to the administrative functions of admission and registration. They need information that is clear, readable and consistent. Many prospectuses are so complex that it is a wonder students are able to make their way through the forms and regulations. Good information services allow a student to proceed through the process of admission with easel, and support personnel should be available to answer questions.

Education is often a major expense for adult students. Advice on financing and the various grants, bursaries and assistance programmes for which they are eligible is rarely easily accessible to distance students. Unfortunately, lack of this information may result in their withdrawal.

ii   Pre-Admission Counselling

Before they actually are admitted and register, many potential students need pre-admission counselling and advice. Such counselling supports the learning process, as it allows students to make thoughtful, informed decisions which influence their future learning.

They want to know what subjects to study, what level the material will be, what qualifications they need for entry, what qualifications they will receive when they finish, how much the course or programme will cost, how much time it will take. They may lack the skills to complete the work successfully and ask about preparation for the course. Administrative and clerical staff can answer some of these questions, while others require the assistance and guidance of a trained counsellor. Without advice, many students attempt courses at which they have no chance of success. Let us consider the moral and ethical dilemma presented by an admissions policy, rationalized as being "open", which assumes that adults have the necessary skills to make sound decisions.

The need to help potential students to determine their study goals and their realism is substantiated by a study from Germany. At the FernUniversitat, the German open university, a study of the 1987-88 class revealed that goals can be roughly grouped into three groups: professional and work-related, broadening of general knowledge and instrumental motives, which involve skills development. German women tend to study more for personal enjoyment (84%

compared to 73% for men), are more interested in intellectual stimulation (74% compared to 56%) and seek to increase their self-esteem through study (64% compared to 54%). Men tend to seek higher income levels through their study (52% compared to 43%) and job security (31% compared to 24%).

When surveyed after their studies, 72% of the students in the study felt that their specialist knowledge had been increased and 57% felt they had been provided with a comprehensive theoretical background, but only 21% of the men and 13% of the women felt that this had resulted in higher income levels. Women received professional recognition at a greater rate than men (36% compared to 24%), but were less successful in increasing their chances for a promotion (13% compared to 31% for men) (von Prummer, 1990). Although the study was conducted on students from an industrialized, developed nation, the data points to two issues which are likely relevant in any system: first, we must help our students identify realistic goals and secondly that women may have different interests, concerns and challenges from men and may experience different problems in realizing their goals.

This study leads to the issue of pre-study packages or preparatory courses. In the past, distance education has taken it for granted that students are independent, mature adults able to decide what they need and do not need. Recent work at, for example, Athabasca University in Canada has brought this into question. Are distance education students by nature self-motivated, self-directed learners able to take responsibility for their own learning process? Brindley and Jean-Louis (1990) contend that while students should be able to maintain their independence, they do not necessarily have the right skills or background training to make sound decisions about their education nor do they know how to meet their educational goals.

Athabasca University now has compulsory pre-study packages for certain students. As part of its admissions programme, several steps are required for those identified as "at-risk" students. This interventionist model of student support creates "safety nets" in the form of information and counselling services designed to help students assess their own educational needs and meet their goals.

Other institutions offer optional preparatory courses. Laurentian University in Canada offers "The First Step", a non-credit package designed to introduce potential students to university study. The package is popular, although it is not compulsory. Many distance education students at this institution are first-time university attenders and often have no accurate picture of the requirements of university study at a distance. In some cases, potential students decide that university work is not for them or that they will postpone their studies until they are better able to make the necessary commitments. A similar programme, 'Taking Off', is available through the British Open University which has a complementary withdrawal package, "Bailing Out'.

The provision of student support services involving the sale of textbooks and access to library resources is an administrative function which also supports the learning process.

There are two ways in which bookstore services are important to distance students. In the first case, textbooks may be an essential and basic part of the package of learning materials, either provided to the student directly or purchased through a bookstore. In the second books are used by students as supplementary reading to enrich their studies. In both cases, it is the responsibility of the distance education institution to ensure that these books are available. Failure in the first

case means that the courses are inoperable, in the second, it results in a lack of richness in the learning experience.

In the case where students must purchase the books, bookstore staff tend to service the long line of full-time students before the phantom hundreds studying at a distance who never come into the store and whose orders are received by mail. At the University of Zambia, a recent survey showed that 30% of the students failed to get any of the books they had ordered from the bookstore (Siaciwena 1990). Those institutions which provide texts as part of the course package may eliminate this problem (provided that the institutions themselves can obtain the books), but many institutions require their students to purchase books through the bookstore.

Students also need access to library facilities. Often, institutions rely on public libraries. Some run their own services for distance students, but the practice often leaves something to be desired. At the Panjab University in India, there is a Postal Library service but only 2% of students ever use it. Considering that between 50 and 60% of these students do not return the material they borrow, this may not be as bad as it first appears! (Chib, 1988) At the University of Zambia, 77% of the students surveyed indicated that they sometimes got the books they requested, while 11 % failed to get any books whatsoever from the library. (Siaciwena, 1990)

Although these examples are taken from the developing world bookstore and library services in institutions in the developed world are also far from perfect. In many dual mode institutions, a library service to distance education students is provided as an afterthought, often poorly funded and supplied. A few dual mode institutions, like Laurentian University in Canada, have specialised library personnel whose sole responsibility is the provision of library services to distance students; this is likely the exception, rather than the rule.

iv   Study Skills Training

Once they begin their studies, many adult. students need assistance in developing their study skills. This process of development can also become a process of personal development. As adults bring to learning their life experiences, and counsellors bring their expertise, knowledge and skills, interaction takes place on a basis of equality, each learning from the other. Each student develops a unique learning path, influenced by both internal and external factors, which interact with each other and change over time. This creates a need for flexible working partnerships between students and counsellors. It also provides opportunities for students to develop and exercise their autonomy (Rhys 1988).

Many adult students simply need reassurance that their study skills are adequate to achieve their objectives. Others have come from unsatisfactory experiences at school or have been away from formal education for a long time and are unprepared for higher level work. These latter students need careful attention, through specialised programmes in such areas as reading, writing and research skills, essay and report writing, and examination preparation. Other adult students, with lower levels of literacy and numeracy, have more basic needs. The potential of distance education to address these pressing needs, both in developed and developing countries, is only now being considered (da Silva 1990).

v   Tutorial Assistance

A tutor provides feedback to students on assignments through marks and comments, is able to clarify the course materia4 answer questions, discuss issues with the student - in short a guide through the learning process, or a facilitator and an assessor. In some institutions, a tutor is a different person from the course author while in others it may be the same individual. The relationship between student and tutor is often the single most important component for success, especially for new students who are attempting to cope with a first course.

Tutorial assistance may take place either in person, through study groups or individually, or in a mediated format, usually by mail, teleconferencing or computer conferencing, audiocassettes or radio. While in-person meetings have many advantages, in many places they are simply not feasible, because of vast geographic distances and scattered distribution of students, cost factors or an inability to reconcile various schedules. In almost all cases, inperson contact is provided in addition to the distance tuition. Institutions must be concerned with both the quality of the distance tuition and the value of face-to-face components.

Face-to-face sessions, either of groups of students or a student an tutor alone, are available in some distance teaching institutions. They require that either student or tutor travel, either to the home institution, to a regional centre or to a satellite location. In many countries, climate, distance and geography combine to make such sessions inaccessible to many students.

Face-to-face sessions work differently in different settings and contexts. Patterns of employment among students are often quite different from country to country. In Britain, Open University students uniformly prefer to attend evening tutorials after work to accommodate employment, whereas 90% of the students at the Universitas Terbuka, in Indonesia, prefer daytime tutorials, with 50% of the female students preferring the morning. The least qualified students are those most likely to attend tutorials. They are considered to require these services and as this group makes up a high proportion of the institution's students, any reduction in tutorial services would likely result in a higher drop-out rate (Hiola and Moss, 1990). It may be that the circumstances of the client group are particularly relevant to the value of the face-to-face component.

Tutorial assistance by mail is a component of most student support services. It is a relatively reliable way of providing feedback on assignments to virtually every student. Mail tutorials tend to be most effective when the problem presented are simple and can be dealt with without an extended clarifying dialogue. The method allows tutors the time to read and reflect on the content before responding, to write and re-write their responses and allows students to keep the response and consider it over time. It is often easier, too, for students to communicate feelings in writing than aver the phone, especially negative feelings of hostility, anxiety and a sense of failure.

Good correspondence-based tutorial assistance is written in a friendly, relaxed style, avoiding direct criticism, is perceptive and responsive to the principal feelings and emotional concerns expressed by students, is well-organized, responding to the student's enquiries, presents open-ended solutions, not necessarily answering all the questions but rather helping students to think through the issue by themselves (Simpson, 1988).

Cultural considerations play a role in tutorial services and in the manner in which they are utilized. In some cultures, students tend to develop heavy dependence on their instructors, and distance education students are no exception. For example, the Malaysian distance distance education organization DISTED discovered that although its students had access to well developed distance education material they prefer to learn in classrooms because of the importance of the relationship with the tutor.

The major problems of mail tutorials include the slowness and unreliability of many mail systems, the difficulty of "reading between the lines", the lack of immediate interaction and the need for the tutor to avoid prejudices related to handwriting, style, and layout.

vi   Methods of Communication

Communication with students, either face-to-face, through various forms of meetings and residential schools or mediated by technologies is an essential component of student support services. The development of new communications technologies has allowed distance learning systems to become much more interactive. Technology has always been a part of distance education, as print packages formed the basis for all distance learning. Early attempts to add technology to the learning system incorporated radio first. As technologies such as audio and teleconferencing, television and computers become more available and costs come down, increasing use is made of them to mediate the communications process.

The area of student support services is no different from the actual provision of courses when it comes to addressing the issue for the choice and use of technologies. The use of new communications technologies to mediate the learning process has been controversial for many years. Distance education has continued to develop the concept of learning Systems, where technologies are used to facilitate the learning process. However many institutions have remained committed to one or another technology for reasons having little to do with learning. One university may use audio cassettes, because it has had great access with them, while another may choose to use television or radio, because a channel has been made available. In the best systems, careful consideration is given to the needs of the student and the requirements of the subject matter, and technologies are chosen to meet these needs often on a multi-media basis. The aim is to achieve virtual 'transparency' of the technology as quickly as possible, so the student quickly accepts the mediation and begins not even to notice it.

We will consider the various forms of communication used to provide support services, looking first at face-to-face methods, then at mediated communication, starting with the more interactive technologies.

Many distance teaching institutions have followed the British Open University model of residential schools of varying lengths of time Attendance at these schools may be optional or compulsory. These schools are set up for tutorial purposes, to allow students to come together, to experience a learning environment, to become part of a learning community. Once tutors and student have put a face to a name, contact tends to increase between them. For many students, residential schools provide necessary motivation for continuation.

In certain cases, for science, technology and trades and management training especially, residential schools provide an opportunity for institutions to deliver laboratory sessions, test skills

competencies, teach case study methods of group problem solving and demonstrate technologies. This can be particularly useful in conjunction with on-site supervision by experts, as it ensures the development of these skills from both a theoretical and a practical stand-point. Residential schools may bring students together in an apprenticeship type of model to practise skills, demonstrate mastery and be assessed.

Telephone tutoring is used successfully by many distance education institutions to link students and tutors. Tutors may initiate the process, phoning students to introduce themselves and set in place an open and friendly relationship. Alternatively, students may be provided with a phone number and encouraged to call in case of problems or questions. This type of system may supplement or take the place of individual face-to-face meetings with tutors and has varying levels of success, depending on the personalities of the tutor and student. For many students, a first contact based on a problem may create feelings of inadequacy and stupidity. In a classroom situation, students may hear others articulate their questions in a non-threatening environment but at a distance, the student is alone.

Teleconferencing allows a number of people in different places to join in a discussion. Normally, they must meet in a group at a designated centre to do so. Several groups can then talk together. The technique has rapidly gained acceptance in the developed world, because of the ability to link students from great distances and its cost-effectiveness, when compared to costs of travel for faculty and tutors. Technical quality-control issues and high rates for long distance calls remain the most significant problems, as many telephone systems are still not good enough to provide the uniformly high service this tutorial system requires. In the absence of a high technical standard, many students are frustrated, feel overwhelmed by problems which inevitably occur when systems like this are first used and by internal problems such as line failure or disconnection, and quickly withdraw (Collett et al 1988). However some teleconferencing systems, like Contact North in Canada, are quite successful and students and institutions alike are satisfied with this form of mediated communication (Hickling Management Consultants 1990).

The advantages of teleconferencing are that students from isolated communities can come together to share their ideas and concerns with a tutor, in a manner which may closely emulate face-to-face study groups. However, this technology requires students to be at a certain location at a certain time,, which can inhibit access. In some teleconferencing systems, students living in remote areas can call in from their homes, but this increases costs considerably. In addition, only one person at a time can speak-, only a few can participate actively if numbers are large.

Audio cassettes provide a valuable form of contact with a tutor, helping to reduce students' feelings of isolation and to build morale. They humanize the relationship between tutor and student, they are less formal and more personal than the written word, they are cheap to produce and copy, they are a widely disseminated technology, and are under the control of the user. They also eliminate problems of location and scheduling meetings.

However, audio cassettes have some disadvantages. They do not allow immediate dialogue, and are not suitable for pressing issues. The ease and comfort of the tutor in producing the tapes has a definite impact on their quality (Blom et al 1988). Their usefulness to the student varies with the material they cover. Tutors have to take care not to introduce new topics in tutorial audio-

cassettes, as this both adds to the student's already high workload and may also create confusion (Ryan 1987).

Computer conferencing is now used by some institutions in developed countries as an electronic tutorial service. It allows students to participate in the equivalent of a tutorial on either home-based on study centre Computers linked to a computer network. Conference systems allow delayed interaction between tutor and student in the form of questions, comments, messaging, reading, reviewing and requesting help commands. The computer conference frees students from the demands of location (if they have access to their own machines) and scheduling, common to both teleconferencing and study groups (Glexhill and Dudley 1990, Black et al 1988).

Students with access to electronic mail often use it to communicate with each other. This peer contact provides a way to help fight isolation and appears to result in reduced withdrawal rates (Scriven 1990). However, until computers linked to a network are widely available, problems of access make this technology still largely experimental and almost exclusively limited to the developed world.

Radio is also used as a tutorial tool. At the University of Zambia, it reinforces study materials and motivates students. It is considered to be quite effective, despite problems with government support and the number of broadcasts allowed weekly (Siaciwena 1990). Radio is especially valuable for student support services in the developing world, as it is a widely disseminated technology. However, it has been used more for teaching at a distance than for student support in, for example, China, India and Canada (Zhao 1990, Mullick 1988).

Any technology must be controllable by its users. This obviously includes the learner, who must be comfortable with the technology, but is not restricted to just the individual. In developing countries especially, it is critical that any choice of technologies take into consideration the society and culture in which the technology must operate (Chung 1990). For example, there is no point in setting up a teleconferencing network if telephone lines are not guaranteed, or a computer conferencing network if there is no access to electrical sources, or a broadcast television operation if no replacement parts are available. It may be that some developing countries will have to continue to rely on face-to-face contacts or letters as their only contacts with their students, simply because nothing else is appropriate or available. Technology must be appropriate in all aspects of its use.

vii   Peer Help

One feature of student support services is also, to some degree, evidence that autonomy and independence is being developed among students. Self-help groups are an old idea. Students occasionally discover that they can help each other, and form groups. These groups may be formal and are usually informal but in some cases receive support from the teaching Institution

At Massey University in new Zealand, the distance education students have created a system whereby graduates act as Area Communicators. They provide administrative information, answer questions listen to problems and provide reassurance. New students receive a letter from their Area Communicator, inviting them to attend an inaugural Meeting, which gives them initial face-to-face contact with other students and the communicator. The system also facilitates access to second-hand books, study groups and background information and opinions concerning

various courses. It is funded entirely by the students' association, not the university, and is successful. Past students are often seen by newcomers as more credible in their comments and suggestions than university employees and representatives (Cooke 1988).

In another similar project, distance education students from northern Ontario, Canada, isolated by vast distance and a rigourous climate, have created "Students' Voice", a computer conference which allows them to share their experiences and address feelings of Isolation Students share information on courses and institutions, sell textbooks, discuss examinations and share biographical information. The project is funded by Contact North, a collaborative government distance education project (Nelson and Foulds 1990, Croft, Arblaster and Derks 1990).

Most peer group activities at tertiary level involve relatively small proportions of students and require encouragement from the institution to initiate and sustain them. In distance education for adults at secondary and basic levels peer groups, perhaps led by a trained facilitator, have more importance. Support networks have also been found to be of value to ensure that professionals continue their education. In Britain, the Health Education Authority commissioned a study to consider the value of networks in maintaining interest in opportunities for continuing education among professionals, including doctors, nurses, midwifes, pharmacists, dieticians and social workers. The study concluded that networks did indeed provide such encouragement but that their success was dependent on features including the use of enabling rather than directive facilitation techniques, effective communications channels, participative decision making, availability of adequate resources and responsiveness to changing needs (Heathcote 1990).

This section raises many issues. For purposes of discussion, we have combined them into three:

What criteria can institutions use to make decisions on the usefulness of various forms of student support services?

How can institutions ensure that the services provided are high quality?

Should the use of some services by students be compulsory?

6   Administrative Issues

Administrative support provides the foundation of all student support services. It underpins all learning. Administrative system often provide an insight into the importance of student support services to the distance teaching institution.

In single mode distance teaching institutions, student support services tend to be run out of centralized student services offices. Despite institutional commitment to distance learning, support services are rarely seen to be on par with the academic components of the enterprise (Paul 1988). All support services may be centralised at the home campus of the institution or some may be decentralised in the form of regional centres. The more a system is decentralised, the more issues relating to control and consistency become important. Decentralised systems allow for maximum responsiveness to the particular needs of the community, but could be seen to risk falling below the overall standards set centrally. Under some conditions, each regional centre could become the equivalent of a separate institution. On the other hand, centralised

systems run the risk of becoming so rigidly controlled that they are totally unresponsive to student needs because they are so homogeneous.

In dual mode institutions, student support services tend to have low status. If the institution has nay commitment to student support services, and many do not, this is normally seen as something to be offered during usual business hours to full-time students of between 18 and 22 years of age. The system is rarely geared to cope with the needs of adult students and the various functions are usually widely distribute4 with little contact between the areas which could or should provide services. Administrative systems for admission, registration and record-keeping are normally housed in Registrar's Offices, tutorial services are provided by the administrative unit which runs the distance education programme or the faculty involved, counselling services, when they are available to the adult distance student, are run from student service offices and study skills programmes may be operated through another office. Bookstores and libraries also function independently. Sometimes also satellite campuses exist and each has its own set of policies. In these types of institutions, responsibility for decision-making is so dispersed that there is no perception of the needs of distance students, no coordination and often very few real services available.

The decision of which administrative system to put into place should be based on an analysis of how best to meet the needs of students. Unfortunately too often both single and dual mode institutions create systems which they perceive to be easy to administer instead of considering which will best serve students.

A number of issues need to be highlighted. First, distance education institutions may be flexible or "open" in their administrative systems, with rolling enrollment dates, flexible completion schedules and examinations at student request. Alternatively, they may follow definite term dates, with inflexible start and end periods and a fixed examination schedule. Normally, dual mode institutions follow a closed system, for ease of administration.

Next, there are questions of access to study resources. If, for example, the central unit responsible for the distance education programme develops a policy on cancellation of study centre sessions as a result of bad weather, it may conflict with the institutional policy of closure or local needs in the regions.

For disabled students, the ability to study at home, without required attendance at classes, is often not a choice but a necessity. At many institutions, disabled students are given special opportunities through distance education by the use of various technologies. 'Talking books", audio-cassettes and teleconferencing allow increasing numbers of blind students to continue their education and those students for whom mobility is a problem are often able to participate fully in courses from their homes.

Women present a special challenge for distance education. In many nations, women constitute the majority of students 1 at a distance, because this method allows them to study at home, without interfering with child-rearing or full or part-time employment It offers a high degree of flexibility and individual control and is usually less expensive than classroom courses. However, distance education may be frustrating for those who already feel constrained by staying at home.

Distance courses, in the very way they are packaged, can suggest an immutability of knowledge and emphasize the authority of the printed word, with often no interaction and no encouragement

of the development of critical thinking. Many women come to distance education because their initial education was cut short. As a consequence, many lack confidence in their ability to learn. This may be reinforced by distance study without regular access to study centres, and yet many women find it difficult or impossible to get to study centres.

Some research has suggested that women's learning needs are different from men's. Many women respond better to non-authoritarian non-coercive, cooperative learning and for interactive learning processes leading to consciousness-raising and social action (Coulter 1989). Telephone tutoring may be one of the real strengths of distance education for women, as the student may exercise a fair amount of contro4 the potential exists for developing a more cooperative and shared approach to education and it may encourage mutuality between two adults who both teach and learn from each other. The implications of feminist research and the conclusions it presents for both course development and the provision of support services for women remain to be more fully considered, as does the final validity of the work itself.

One case where institutional response to the needs of women students has proved critical is recorded by Simpson (1990) in her account of residential sessions for in-service training of women teaching in Papua New Guinea. Nursing mothers were encouraged to bring their infants to the course and suitable facilities and rest periods were incorporated to respect their needs.

Minority cultural groups are often most concerned with issues of cultural differentiation and assimilation. They have different learning traditions, which may, for example, be oral in nature, instead of written and may succeed better when this tradition is recognized and utilized. Distance education support services must be considerate of and responsive to these needs. This requires conscious thought on the part of administrators and the involvement of members of the cultural group in any planning exercise. Advisory committees including minority representatives provide one way in which, distance teaching institutions can attempt to deal with this.

The major administration issue is as follows: to what extent should administrative convenience control the organization of support services?

The issue involving students with special needs is: in what circumstances can the needs of special populations be taken into consideration in the development of student support services?

7   Practical and Project Work

Greater importance is being given today to education and training relating to employment. As distance education continues to develop and gain international acceptance, increasing numbers of courses are being offered in areas which require practical or project work. These include courses in scientific and technical subjects and programmes for vocational and professional education. Students in these areas experience some special needs.

The resources necessary for successful distance education in science management, trades and technology include laboratory or practicum facilities and qualified demonstrates. It is a serious problem for most institutions to provide such facilities although they are critical for the development of competent professionals whose credentials are recognized as equal to those taught in classrooms or apprenticeship programmes.

In some cases, course materials provide the stimulus for practical work at home. Sometime, for example, the need for laboratory work is addressed through home kits, perhaps with a video tape presenting a demonstration of the session. In most cases, arrangements must be made for these components to be delivered face-to-face. Thus they fall in the province of student support. The requirement often presents a major stumbling block for developing a programme. Some institutions committed to developing a curriculum which includes science, trades and technology programmes have found creative ways to approach the problem, usually involving cooperative arrangements with other facilities. Wijeyesekera (1990) writes about a proposal of the Sri Open University to make cooperative arrangements with other universities throughout the country to provide both facilities and qualified staff to support these programmes. Other institutions have equipped vans, buses and even ships as mobile laboratories and learning centres, which constantly travel throughout the catchment area to provide facilities for students. This system only works if distances are manageable, the climate is not too severe and students can meet in groups.

In-service professional and vocational education at a distance has to find a way to provide centres for practical work near to the students' places of employment. Laurentian University, for its programmes for registered nurses and social workers uses what it calls satellite campuses. It makes special arrangements with high schools, community colleges, social service agencies, hospitals and health units for the use of facilities and staff. While the arrangement works well, it is labour-intensive and expensive, requiring that the university often send both specimens and equipment out to those centres which are not well supplied. It also requires that these centres have trained preceptors, approved by academic units on campus, to oversee and assess the students' work (Viverais-Dreisler and Kutschke, 1990). In the case of trades training and technology programmes, the necessary equipment may be available only in certain industries, so partnerships between the industry and the institution may be required for the programme to be successful.

Sometimes special study skills are called for. Subjects such as management studies require case study or project-based research. Although at first glance such work may not appear to be difficult at a distance, it causes problems both for the students who must complete it and for the tutors who must mark the assignments. Special attention needs to be given to the design of such assignments and fall guidance given to both students and tutors on how to deal with them.

In some cases, video tapes or video-discs an provide a valuable demonstration of the skills and techniques being developed. This method may prove especially useful in combination with residential schools, where students are required to come in to the main campus to complete the laboratory work which has been previously demonstrated. Much time can be saved if students are already familiar, even if only visually, with the facility and the equipment they will use.

No institution considering the development of distance education courses in science, trades and technology should do so without carefully considering the substantial cost, both financial and human, of supporting these students adequately at a distance.

Issue: how far is it possible to provide economic and flexible support for practical and project work without reducing access or downgrading quality?

8   Assessing Student Support Services

As budgets continue to shrink and cost-effectiveness becomes an increasingly important consideration in all areas of the distance teaching enterprise, institutions already offering programmes must re-evaluate the success of what they do and those at the planning stage must consider their goals and objectives.

Criteria must be developed both to develop student services and to assess their quality. This requires that the institution have a very clear picture of both its Mission and its clientele. Surprisingly few institutions have this.   If an institution's primary goal is to introduce programmes to adults who have never had the opportunity to study before, it should be prepared to provide those students with adequate back-up programmes to at least given them a reasonable chance to succeed. There are too many examples of programmes with high attrition rates where the justification continues to be "we give them the chance, they're adults, they should know..." On the other hand, if a programme is set up to serve the masters-level needs of professional engineers, the same services will likely not be necessary.

Distance teaching institutions also have an obligation to conduct research for the development of the field and for its improvement. In single mode institutions, there is little questioning of the validity of research directly related to the field of distance education itself, whereas in dual mode institutions, most research has tended to be discipline based, to consider the implications of distance education delivery for a particular region or discipline. Given the ambiguity of much of the anecdotal evidence surrounding student support services, their cost effectiveness and the development of success criteria for their assessment, well thought out research projects could be of enormous value.

Student support services must also fit within the normal limitations of the institution. If no funds are available for course development, an institution is likely to assign funds for student support services . There is also a consideration of whether the institution is single or dual mode and whether its philosophical base is centralised or decentralised. Other limiting factors include: the physical location of the institution and its students, which affects study groups and residential schools; cultural components, which may limit the appropriateness of certain services, the times at which they may be offered and the manner in which they are offered; and technologies, which may or may not be available, appropriate, cost-effective and reliable.

The development of policies which govern the provision of student support services requires an institutional commitment and should take into consideration the academic side of the enterprise as well as the administrative, as both academic and support services must mesh to meet the needs of the learner, if either is to be truly successful.

Issues:
what systems can be put into place to guarantee on-going evaluation of an institution's student support services?

what are the issues for research?

9   An Agenda for The Commonwealth of Learning

How can COL be most effective in assisting the development of student support services?
The review of existing practice and discussion of issues at the Round Table will help COL to
define its priorities. COL's present resources suggest that, in addition to proposals from Round
Table participants, it should concentrate on the following types of activities:

providing information about experience and good practice;

supporting research and its publication;

supplying specialist consultants;

providing equipment and technical support for innovations;

training staff involved in student support, and training their trainers.

Round Table participants will be asked to advise COL on future action in the area of student
support services. The paper began with a caveat against seeking perfection. Let us end
optimistically. Every distance student should receive sufficient support to give him or her a
reasonable chance of satisfactory completion of study; COL seeks to establish guidelines towards
this end and it aims to help institutions to implement them.

Issues:

How can COL best assist the development of student support services?

What should the priorities be?

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VIEWS FROM THE FIELD

By Roger Mills

Introduction

The quality of distance education depends on the quality of teaching materials and the efficiency of delivery and support systems.

This statement at the beginning of the concluding chapter of the report on The Round Table on Training Distance Educators entitled "Perspectives on Distance Education" (1) whilst being entirely accurate, is clearly made from an institutional and programme development point of view.

This Round Table on Student Support would encapsulate the issues of quality rather differently. Although the input to any educational system is important, what really matters is the output. Have the students benefited, can they be seen to be of high quality, can they do things they couldn't do before or better than they did before.

Current thinking on the part of most specialists in distance education recognizes that a distance education course or programme is not simply the neatly packaged materials, but is what actually happens when the student interacts with those materials and other elements of the learning system.

So, in calling together 12 people, all committed to Student Support, The Commonwealth of Learning was looking for a different perspective on distance education, one which put the learner or student in the centre of the picture... and it certainly got it! This analysis of what went on in Vancouver during the week 27 April - 3rd May, 1991 will, I hope, illustrate:

a)   the complexity and variety of distance education systems

b)   some underlying principles which apply to all systems and to all cultures ways in which

institutions and governments can learn from each other

But first the input.

Input

Twelve people wrote twelve papers which each focussed on a specific theme. Because of space limitation complete papers have not been included in this report-t but are available from The Commonwealth of Learning or directly from the participant. The following quotes, taken from each paper, however, give a flavour of the different perspective and context.

The Distance Teaching Division of the Institute of Adult and Continuing Education, University of Guyana will aim at the provision of training in academic and professional areas of study for a far more representative percentage of the Guyanese adult community. It will reflect the national trust towards democratisation of access to education and ultimately the view that 'all people should have the opportunity of the extent and kind of education their full development required, and that education should be a continuous process from infancy to the end of life'.

It is interesting to note that the mandate to the Institute of Adult and Continuing Education also includes the phrase 'Assisting the University in increasing the quality and quantity of its intake'. *(Samuel A. Small, Director, Distance Teaching Division, Institute of Adult and Continuing Education, University of Guyana)*

"Distance education, will by definition, continue to be essentially a form of independent study, but it should not be a sentence to solitary confinement.

Of crucial importance in any student support system is the ability to provide (the student) with rapid, accurate and sympathetic advice when the need arises.

They (support staff) will only be able to perform their tasks efficiently if they are supported by well designed systems, for example, a comprehensive student data base, which is regularly reviewed and up-dated to reflect changing circumstances." *(Ian Small, Deputy Director, Distance Education Centre, University of New England, Australia)*

"The Women's Education Unit of the Federal Ministry of Education (Lagos) has published a blueprint on women's education. This document states clearly that women have been disadvantaged for a long time and that the anomaly must be corrected now. Government must see to it that..." all citizens have equal educational opportunities irrespective of sex, age locality, creed or social status.

Unfortunately, when the programme came on stream, lack of resources caused the sheding of some of these plans for the provision of adequate student support service. It is also most unfortunate that most of the plans are still on the drawing board". *(Mrs. C Bako National Teachers Institute, Nigeria)*

"Professor B.N. Koul sees the "entire gamut of open distance education as an exercise in student support services". All distance learners, because of their peculiar situation and characteristics, experience a variety of problems at different stages from pre-entry to passing out. Therefore, institution of strong and effective student support service is necessary to help students cope with the freedom of open learning and improve their study habits, and thereby help them achieve independence as learners. And continuous augmentation of support services is essential in view of the newness of the open university system." *(Dr. P.K Mehta, Regional Director, IGNOU Regional Centre, Ahmedabad)*

"A major recommendation arising out of the earlier experimentation and studies was that an interactive rather than a broadcast system be used because of the clearly expressed wish of potential participants, particularly in the more isolated population, to communicate in real time.

Although proud of our successes we do recognize our areas of weaknesses and are attempting to strengthen them with assistance from organizations such as COL and collaboration with other distance teaching institutions. One such area of weakness is precisely that of student support.

When considering special student support needs for science subjects, the first thing which has to be done is for the teachers of the science subjects to take a critical look at how they teach what they teach. Some scientists trained in the "old school of thought" may feel that learning science m any other method than the way they learned is not acceptable. Yes labs are important. But the question needs to be asked does the student need to spend as many hours in the lab? Can less hours in a lab be supplemented by computer programmes, Video tapes? Is the lab for demonstration or manipulation skills? How sophisticated does the lab need to be?

Primarily, though, there has to be the will on the part of the institution to meet the needs of the students as identified by the students and those who interact with them within the resources available."
(Christine Marrett Project Officer, University of West Indies Distance Teaching Experiment)

"Quality control and appraisal of the learning support provided by part-time staff is a key current issue.

Another major issue is the changing balance of the different elements of the teaching and learning system, as the University expands in terms of numbers, the curriculum and geographically.

There is increasing recognition that effective and high quality administrative services are as important to student success as learning support and counselling.

It is important that clear opportunities are provided for students to feedback to the institution ideas for improving services such that their needs are more effectively met." *(Roger Mills Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Presentation and Student Support), UKOU)*

"The student support services at the University of Zambia have their foundation in the report which led to its creation. The report recommended that "the student's interests will be paramount" and the contact between teacher and taught will be far greater than in the profit-making type of course which is usually thought of when a correspondence course is mentioned."

The Department of Correspondence Studies has no administrative control over various providers of student services, and can exercise no control for any failure to provide adequate and efficient support services to the students.

Thus some of the support services cannot be said to be integrated into the administrative structure of the whole distance teaching system. For example, the efficient provision of library, bookshop and, to a great extent, tutorial support and academic guidance, is largely dependent on the commitment of staff in various units/departments. The level or degree of accountability in the provision of counselling services in various departments is therefore low."
(Richard M. C Siaciwena, Department of Correspondence Studies, University of Zambia)

"In all these systems, students are required to attend one year of full time study on-campus after they have accumulated 84-90 credit units.

It is because of this full time study experience that the university has decided that all off-campus students have to attend one year of full-time study on-campus. Therefore, quite a number of the students could not attend the intensive course and have to postpone their study. The intensive course is compulsory, if they do not attend then they will be barred from the final year examination and automatically the supplementary examination for that particular year. For science courses various reference books are placed in libraries at the Regional Centres under the supervision of the various Regional Tutors.

The opening time is very important. If the time is not suitable to the student times these facilities would not help the students.

The student come to the Regional Centres just to attend to planned activities. Therefore, the library facilities should be opened for the whole weekend."
(Md. Noor Saleh, Centre for Off-Campus Studies, Univesiti Sains Malaysia)

"AIOU has a mandate to serve the masses and the special groups of educationally handicapped persons like women living in rural areas and students with disabilities.

The University has to continue in its efforts to bring women's enrolment on par with men's. To achieve this objective the University has two pronged approach. One to introduce such courses which are likely to attract more women. Second to provide some extra help like women tutors, separate study centres, and the services of sympathetic field workers to reinforce the desire to study. The experience of the Allama Iqbal Open University is that women of Paldstan are more keen to learn at all levels than men. They do face many odds but a little help goes a long way in helping them to help themselves." *(Allama Iqbal Open University's Student Support Services, Dr. Iftikhar N Hassan)*

The main objective of the Distance Education Institutions is to provide facilities of education to those who due to socio-economic or other reasons have not been able to peruse or complete their education through the conventional system.

In most cases the students have left their studies long ago and studying in a distance education institution is quite a different experience for them. As there is no regular classroom teaching, special student support services are needed to facilitate the process of education through the new system."
(Student Support Services in Distance Learning, Dr Ghulam Rasul C H Pakistan)

"Identifying needs takes time and skill. But the larger the number of students, the more tempting it is to consider all their needs to be similar. If they and their advisers are separated by space and/or time, the temptation is even greater. When they are adults, it is always easy to ignore their mixed motives feelings, defence mechanisms, and the complex personal, social occupational and economic pressures to which they, like most other adults are subjected - after all they should know their own minds and take responsibility for their own decisions. If needs are to be analysed correctly and sympathetically, and to be acted upon in appropriate ways, it is essential that trained learning managers are involved."

In order to provide the sophisticated and individualised student support which is expected by a dramatically changing clientele, there is a need to identify and install the systems and procedures capable of delivering that support. The resources talents and commitment to drive those systems particularly if they are technology based - are vital. Relevant and practical basic training and continuing staff development must be provided to develop skills, knowledge and, equally importantly, appropriately positive attitudes." *(Organising Student Support Services for Technical and Vocational Education, Mr. Jack Foks, Head, Victorian TAFE off-campus network)*

"Contact North has been described by someone as a "neutral electronic highway", which links the teaching institutions and the communities or more specifically the individuals within the communities who want to avail themselves of the resources of the teaching institutions. In the context of this Round Table on Student Support Services, it may be appropriate to assert that Contact North is an institution totally dedicated to student services.

Contact North is mandated to serve francophons and native people. Both of these minority groups have been especially educationally disadvantaged and so require special support Systems.

Efforts have been made to provide access sites which are accessible to the disabled. Even though some sites do not meet this criterion, it remains an objektive of Contact North. Both audio and computer conferencing lend themselves well, by their very nature to usage by disabled students."
(Contact North/ Contact Nord, Mr. Gerard Lafreniere, Canada)

So, participants brought with them to the Round Table a breadth of experience and a range of key issues. Interestingly but not surprisingly all the institutions involved had a dedication to providing access to groups of people hitherto not the traditional consumers of higher education. In Pakistan there was concern for equality for opportunity for women, in Nigeria there are programmes to recruit different groups into teaching profession and in Canada, the Contact North network aims at the encouragement of non-traditional adult students to take part in the programmes offered by institutions using the network. During the discussions a number of themes arose and the importance of evaluation and research was of central concern. We must know what we are doing and we must be able to analyse long term trends through longitudinal study. It is important, for the future of student support services as resources are ever scarce, to be able to show precisely how they help with retention rates and help to reduce drop-out rates.

Training was high on the agenda and the importance of training the trainers and devising appropriate methods of training tutors, academic counsellors and others was recognised. Although training techniques may differ with different cultures the fundamental output is that the people being trained should understand better the job they are meant to do and be able to provide more effective support for students. The most obvious area where training can result in rapid improvement is in correspondence teaching where the tutor once he or she realises that this is the main method of interaction with the student can really move very quickly from an approach which involves simply marking papers to one which involves teaching by correspondence. One theme that arose out of the meeting was the common view that administrator and computer specialists should not be allowed to develop students administrative services. The lead and the control of services to students should be taken by those working in student support themselves and administrators and office systems specialists should provide the expertise to implement the requirements of those most closely in touch with student needs.

Was it all worth it? Well certainly the answer was yes for the participants but what will the output be. To assist COI, a Suggested Plan of Action was formulated and is included as Appendix C. Much depends now on whether the staff at the Commonwealth of Learning are able to bring to fruition, the recommendations of the Round Table.

Recommendations

1.   We recommend that The Commonwealth of Learning should sponsor the development of Principles of Good Practice in the Provision of Student Support Services and distribute this document internationally. The document would establish many of the guidelines for the project p proposals described here and provide a framework for the development of a set of questions to be addressed in establishing, developing or evaluating student support services.

It could include the following components: that student support services are a fundamental requirement of any good distance education system; that the emphasis must be on the needs of the student; that equity of access, quality of service, effectiveness and efficiency are all requirements; that good services are culturally centered and appropriate; that informed professional staff at academic, administrative and clerical levels are required; that technologies must be controlled by the users, accessible to users and must optimize the service; that providers must be aware of copyright legislation and must knowingly conform to it. The document should be understood to be a working document, which would be open to periodic revision.

2.   The Round Table participants appreciate that many of the following
recommendations cannot be carried out by COL alone given the organization's current staffing levels. External consultants will need to be contracted to carry out specific duties as detailed.

As distance educators, we acknowledge the importance of face-to-face meetings and the networking opportunities they provide. With this in mind, we recommend that The Commonwealth of Learning sponsor regional and national seminars, workshops and orientation programmes to cover a wide range of areas including:

a) the promotion of distance education for institutions new to the field, to give staff an opportunity to understand the importance of student support services as the programmes are developed

b) the creation and consolidation of linkages and networks with the sole purpose of promoting exchanges

c) the promotion of course-utilization agreement, within nations, regionally and internationally. This may include the sharing of material, its sale or the development of "franchising" operations as appropriate

d) the development of credit transfer banks, which will provide a very necessary support service to international students who currently experience great difficulties in transferring their credits from one jurisdiction to another

3.   The COL Student Support Services Round Table participants have developed a set of assumptions upon which this recommendation is based. These assumptions are:

a)   that there is tremendous strength in the diversity of Commonwealth institutions teaching at a distance, which must be shared;

b)   that the exchanges which are described must be mutually beneficial;

c)   that COL must encourage east-west linkages as well as north-south and south-south (e.g. a possible linkage between the University of Zambia and IGNOU, or between Allama Iqbal Open University and the University Sains Malaysia) these linkages may take the form of projects;

d)   that all projects must have measurable success/performance criteria to be considered;

e)   that projects must have specific timelines;

f)   that project proposals must demonstrate a capacity for sustained commitment and continuity, either by the partners and/or the governments involved

Institutions, agencies or networks may either submit their proposals with partners already selected or may request that COL match them with a partner (s).

We recommend that The Commonwealth of Learning, through bilateral and multilateral projects as described above, sponsor partnerships to build expertise and the capacity for student support systems in the areas of:

a) Management:
  i.   student access to information in the form of catalogues, programme counselling services, financial assistance, appeal processes etc.
  ii. record keeping: admission, registration, programme and assignments
  iii. staff access to information
  iv. management of technology:
         *developing and infrastructure
         *training
         *installation
         *maintenance

b)   Training:
  i.   training the trainers:
         *pre-course counselling, including admissions systems, publications, student guides
         *correspondence tuition and assessment monitoring systems
         *the role of face-to-face academic support in distance teaching, including the training of residential school tutors and counsellors
  ii. sponsoring attachments, which will provide assistance to both participating institutions.

4.   We recommend that The Commonwealth of Learning should create a bank of case studies or descriptive anecdotes, connected to the principles of good practice and the framework for decision-making discussed elsewhere. If necessary, COL could commission monographs which describe innovative student support service systems.

5.   We recommend that The Commonwealth of Learning should access existing databanks, acquire access for members and orient and train users (in some cases, this may also require the installation of necessary hardware and equipment) and, if necessary, create a new system devoted especially to student support services and systems.

6.   We recommend that The-Commonwealth of Learning should sponsor and promote research and evaluation in the field of student support services:

> a)   by commissioning the development of instruments to assess the pre-course, in-course and post-course needs of students. These instruments could then be adopted and adapted by different institutions within the Commonwealth to ensure cultural appropriateness;

> b)   sponsor institution-specific, area-specific (dealing with differing needs affected by geographic, social and economic conditions) and group-specific (women, minority groups, the disabled) research projects;

> c)   exchange and support research into students' use of different media and the future potential of developing technologies;

> d)   provide bibliographical search capacity for research in student support services in distance education;

> e)   provide resources to augment existing library collections in developing countries in   the area of student support services.

> f)   act as a clearing-house for information on research in progress.

CONCLUSION

The main outcome of the Round Table was achieved in that participants identified a strategy that will allow COL to better address the Student Support Service needs of Commonwealth distance teaching institutions. As the participants worked through the presentations and discussions, issues relating to the problems of Student Support Services were identified, existing policies and procedures were reviewed and critiqued and suggestions made for the establishment of General criteria for developing Student Support Services. During the Round Table five areas emerged where COL could have impact. Although the recommendations speak to these areas, a brief review of them will provide a summation and at the same time give a sense of the dynamics of

the round table. The areas were evaluation and research, training, linkages, management and information services.

Evaluation and Research: Participants suggested that COL could contract to develop a Student Support Services assessment instrument which would be useful to assess the needs of students before a course was started, as well as during its progress, and upon its completion. In this way profiles could be built up based on student experiences. COL, it was suggested, could also consider contracting for the development of an evaluation system for Student Support Services which would monitor effectiveness of the service, cost effectiveness and the utility of technologies. Since there did not appear to be very much research based information available on these topics COL could also encourage research in any of these areas, by working through or in cooperation with existing organizations involved in research. The emphasis placed on developing profiles based on student experience suggests that a discussion on Student Support Services may not be complete without the voice of the students.

Training: Participants agreed that much work has already been done in the area of training staff, but little information exists about it. They suggested, therefore, that COL could either develop or disseminate information on existing staff training packages. These packages could be for staff who work with distance education units rather than in distance education units. These personnel would include registrarial staff or library personnel. This information would also be useful for existing distance education staff where there is still much work to be done with training the trainers. This training might occur at a formal level in which case it would be part of a certificate, diploma or degree programme, or at an informal level, when it would take the form of workshops or seminars. COL has started activity in this area by mounting workshops on Managing Student Support Services and Techniques for Tutoring. A beginning has been made in dissemination of information about training packages through the preparation and distribution of The Directory of Courses and Materials for Training in Distance Education

Linkages: In this area, participants focussed on the need of institutions and networks to collaboratively. The Round Table participants felt strongly that COL could provide a very valuable service through assistance for support of existing networks by; sponsoring conferences such as this round table, supporting and promoting bilateral linkages, assisting in the development of area-specific student support strategies and promoting international course sharing agreements. COL is already active in this area through its materials acquisitions function and encourages and supports bilateral linkages. As the recommendations of the Round Table are developed there should be more opportunities for linkages between developing countries.

Management: The Round Table participants considered the management concerns relevant to the provision of Student Support Services and suggested that COL might contract the writing of case studies which would provide examples of successful and unsuccessful experiences to assist those institutions who are in the process of developing student services. COL-s assistance is also required to compile information on student records management systems. A need was also expressed by members of the Round Table for the development of policy framework or mission statements dealing with the provision of Student Support Services. The COL is in the process of developing a micro computer based student records management system for small institutions,

and plans to develop a document offering guide-lines for the provision of Student Support Services similar to the Principles of Good Practice document (Appendix B).

Information Services: A recurring theme of the Round Table was the difficulty in accessing information and participants suggested that COL could provide a valuable service by establishing a library for research reports and articles relating to student support services, both existing and ongoing. Access to information about research that is underway would be very useful and COL is exploring the Potential for an electronic bulletin board as a beginning to this access to research problem.

During the discussion the various groups considered frameworks for decision making which will prove valuable to COL as it endeavours to put the recommendations into practice. Summary outlines of the discussions are included as appendix A.

The results of the Round Table not only offered COL advice on the formation of a strategy to assist the development of student services but also pointed out the urgency and magnitude of the needs of many Commonwealth institutions for assistance in developing their own student support systems. In some of the broad areas of concern arising from the discussion COL is already active, while in others, provision of assistance is in the planning stage. Nevertheless the issues, arising from this Round Table, many of which are reflected in the recommendations, are numerous and varied and will challenge COL to develop new strategies and resources.

Appendix A Discussion Papers

MANAGEMENT OF STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES

1.   COL to sponsor partnerships to build management expertise and capability for student support systems in the areas of-.

a)   Student access to information
b)   Records keeping
c)   Staff access to information
d)   Management of technology
      i)   Developing an infrastructure
      ii)   Training
      iii)   Installation
      iv)   Maintenance

Proposal basis:

a)   May identify partner <u>OR</u>
b)   May identify needs (strengths/weaknesses) and COL will match partners

Project will clearly identify measurable success/performance criteria, specific timelines, capacity for sustainable commitment must be in place, each partner must have definite needs to be met by project.

2.   COL to sponsor regional seminars on management issues in student support services at both senior and second levels of management around identified topics, such as records system management.

3.   COL to develop the principles of good practice in student support services and distribute this document to all members. This document establishes many of the guide-lines for project proposals as noted above.

Attachment A

Information:

The Arrangement of data to meet specific needs:

Types: Programmes
 Students: traditional
            specific - activities away from campus assignments

Resources: Human: staff - payroll
Non: facilities
           equipment
           packagings – size
                       media
                       ownership
                       how to obtain
                       cost

One official base

Processed: collect
               collate
               retrieve

Formal vs informal information sharing: impacts of legislation

Attachment B

Principles of Good Practice in Student Support Services

Possible Components:

1.   Fundamental requirement of good distance education systems

2.   Emphasis must be on needs of student

3.   Equity of-access to services

4.   Quality of services

5.   Effectiveness of services

6.   Efficiency of services

7.   Presence of informed, professional staff (academic, administrative, clerical)

8.   Judicious selection of appropriate technologies:

    a)   technologies controlled by users

    b)   technologies access to users

    c)   technologies must optimize student service

9.   Copyright implications

10.   Working document open to revision

How to Do:

1.   COL to develop internally, send out for comments, refine

2.   COL to contract work out, commission

LINKAGES

1.   Specific proposals for collaboration linkages may be initiated by interested member countries/institutions, COL should act as a catalyst/facilitator to encourage bilateral/multilateral collaboration/ linkages between:

a)   developing and developing countries
b)   developing and developed countries
c)   any two/interested countries/institutions

For example, bilateral linkages may be established to facilitate exchange of materials/personnel information between Pakistan AIOU and India IGNOU or Guyana and Caribbean countries.

2.   Bilateral, multilateral linkages/ collaboration/ network should be supported by COL to share/ exchange materials/resources/personnels/information amongst Commonwealth countries and, if possible, with non Commonwealth countries. Some of the non Commonwealth countries may have such materials/expertise which could benefit Commonwealth institutions.

3.   Under the aegis of bilateral/multilateral collaboration/ linkages/networks, conferences/ workshops/orientation programmes may be organized to:

a)   promote distance education in general
b)   promote its collaboration with the formal system and
c)   consolidate linkages/networks so that exchanges may be promoted effectively or undertaken speedily

4.   COL may organize regional conferences/workshops and may provide suitable consultants for the national level workshops.

5.   COL may provide a database of consultants for organizing national level workshops or for specific projects that institutions want to undertake.

6.   COL may acquire access into international database and make it available to its members. In some cases, it may orient and familiarize people how to access into data system. In other cases, COL may install technology/equipment to help member institutions to get access into international database.

7.   COL may assume responsibility to accumulate data regarding various research going on in Commonwealth countries in the first instance and then the world over, research on distance education and different technologies relevant to distance education in general and student support services in particular.

8.   Because of differential nature of target learners due to geographical, social economical reasons multiple strategies need to be thought of and adopted. The multiple strategies may be:

-   city based typical regional (support) centres - tailor-made
-   town based support centres
-   utilizing existing education centres and augmenting town/village based support centres with augmented facilities
-   establishing mobile support centres to cater to specific target group viz. women, culturally disadvantaged and geographically disadvantaged group like learners of hill regions, desert and sparsely populated areas, learners residing in reverences and other areas not easily accessible
-   whenever possible and situation warrants, use of mass media to supplement
-   COL should identify strengths of present successful operating support-centres and may also launch studies to investigate suitability of various strategies as outlined above for different disadvantaged groups and culture groups.

The training of tutors, counsellors and study centre organisers is important for any distance education Institution Study centre organisers (trainers) need to learn how to train tutors and counsellors."

The above statement comes from the report of the Round Table on Training Distance Educators "Perspectives on Distance Education" published by The Commonwealth of Learning.

Group 2 has addressed this issue in some detail and has the following recommendations to make:

A.   TRAINING THE TRAINERS

We believe that institutions can help each other here. There are a number of areas which could be addressed:

- pre-course counselling (including admissions systems, publications (calendars), guides to the potential student)
- correspondence tuition and assessment and monitoring system
- the role of face-to-face academic support in distance teaching (including the training of residential school tutors and counsellors)

As a result of this Round Table, we would wish to see the following action completed by December 1992.

1.   COL to collect and catalogue all materials used for the training of tutors in the skills of correspondence tuition and circulate the catalogue to all member institutions. (We pick corresponding tuition because we believe it is a universal skill and requirement for all distance teaching institutions and can have very valuable "spin offs" for teachers in traditional institutions).

2.   COL should arrange participative attachments as follows-.-

a)   Senior trainers to visit another Institution (or 2) to participate in that institution's staff development programme, to examine materials and to spend time converting materials for use in own Institution

b)   Senior trainers, plus member of staff from other Institution to run training the trainers course. e.g. University of Zambia member of staff visits UKOU and IGNOU to join in programmes. Uses what it best and most appropriate from each institution. Arranges a training the trainers session in Zambia will help both IGNOU and UKOU staff.

c)   The time of members of staff concerned is counted as a contribution to COICOL would not have to make consultancy payments. It can be argued that this kind of activity is staff development for all parties concerned. We should like to see bilateral/multilateral links of this kind geared to improving the quality of correspondence tuition and raising its status in the eyes of course writers, students, administrators and tutors.

We identify this as our first priority for training in student support services , and we believe it should be an interactive process in which improved programme could be measured by monitoring by students and staff.

B.   SPONSORING ATTACHMENT

We believe COL should <u>not</u> sponsor <u>visits</u> but only carefully planned attachments which will provide help to the receiving institution as well as to the visiting member of staff.

For example:

member of staff from Allama Iqbal Open University visits Universiti Sains Malaysia to look at pre-course counselling. During visit, member of staff of AIOU talks to students and staff of SM about pre-course advice, application forms etc. and writes a report. In this way, both institutions benefit This approach would also allow details of the mechanics of processes to be aimed for good ideas.

C.   SPONSORING RESOURCE PERSONS

We believe COL should do this.
e.g.   If a member country wishes specific advice about the use of particular technology, then a resource person could be asked for through COL. COL should establish and publicise a list of people with expertise.

D.   FRANCHISING

Courses (certificate, diploma) etc. produced by one institution should be available for use by Others who could either give own accreditation and perhaps use the accreditation as a franchise basis from the originating institution.

The whole issue of credit transfer and of the use of one institution's courses by another will be a central issue for COL

RESEARCH AND EVALUATION

1.   Commission the development of "instruments" of assessment and research on how to assess students' needs at all stages (e.g. pre-course support, in-course support); these instruments to be tested and adapted by different institutions within the Commonwealth.

2.   Sponsor institution specific, area specific (e.g. needs of remote students) and group specific (e.g. needs of people with disabilities), case studies of student support services of different institutions.

3.   Exchange and support research into students' use of the different media and the availability of media in different countries in the future.

4.   Provide a bibliographical services for research in distance education and resources for developing countries to augment libraries when necessary.

PRINCIPLES OF GOOD PRACTICE IN DISTANCEEDUCATION

Prepared by the: Planning Framework Subcommittee of the Distance Education Task Force TV Ont. October 30, 1987
Adapted with permission from the: "Principles of Good Practice in Continuing Education", developed by the Council on the Continuing Education Unit

PART 1 -   LEARNING NEEDS IN DISTANCE EDUCATION

1.1   Accessibility of distance education is enhanced if sponsors or providers of distance education programmes/activities utilize appropriate processes to define and analyze the issue(s) or problem(s) of individuals, groups, and organizations for the purpose of determining learning needs.

PART 2 -   LEARNING OUTCOMFS IN DISTANCE EDUCATION

2.1   The distance education provider gives clear indications and planned learning outcomes for the pro e/activity but recognizes that input from the learner will be important as well.

2.2   The statements of intended learning outcomes of a distance education programme/activity focus on learning that can be applied by the learner to his/her life/work experience.

2.3   Learning outcomes are sequenced with appropriate feedback so that learners are able to recognize their progress towards achieving the stated learning outcomes.

PART 3 - LEARNING EXPERIENCES IN DISTANCE EDUCATION

3.1   Course design will take into account the general principles of adult learning and the best practices in curriculum design and delivery.

3.2   The characteristics of the learner and the intended learning outcomes determine the selection and Integration of learning strategies, resources and appropriate learning environments.

3.3   Distance education course design and delivery requires the consistent use of a multiskilled team of learning designers, tutors, content experts, production staff and student support staff and administration.

3.4   Staff in distance education are qualified by education or experience and provide quality instruction in the subject matter area.

3.5   When group learning is part of the course design, it shall occur in comfortable and efficient facilities.

3.6   All learning technologies shall be reliable and easy to operate.

PART 4 - EVALUATION

4.1   Learner progress will be assessed in terms of planned learning outcomes an and other personal learning achievements

4.2   Course and programme evaluations shall be ongoing throughout the developing and delivery process using a variety of techniques

PART 5 - DISTANCE EDUCATION ADMINISTRATION

5.1   Each distance education provider has a clearly stated, written statement of its mission, which is available to the public served.

5.2   The distance education provider has appropriate, sufficient, and stable human, fiscal and physical resources to provide quality programmes/activities over an extended period of time.

5.3   The distance education provider's promotion and advertising provide control systems are in place and in use within its organization

5.4   The distance education provider ensures that appropriate quality control systems are in place and in use within its organization.

5.5   The distance education provider shall be responsible for ensuring ongoing staff training and development.

Action Plan for Student Support Services for The Commonwealth of Learning

How can COL be most effective in assisting the development of student support services and what should the priorities be?

The recommendations made by the Round Table participants have already been set out in an earlier part of this report.

Here we advise COL on an action plan and on priorities for the implementation of these recommendations.
1.   Time scale   Our suggests a timetable for activities in 1992 and 1993.

2.   Priorities plan

A   PARTICIPANTS

            a)   Any institution wishing help with a particular aspect of student
                 support services should complete a pro-forma detailing what is required
                 and when.

            b)   Institution willing to provide expertise should be asked by COL to

indicate which service they are able to provide.

c) The list of requests and the list of services available should be up-dated annually and should be available on disc as well as hard copies.

d) As a matter of priority in 1992 COL should sponsor east-west, south-south and south-north consultancies, rather than the traditional North-South approach.

e) A complete review of all activity should be undertaken no later than November 1993.

PRINCIPLES OF GOOD PRACI'ICE

The development of a document "The Principles of Good Practices in Student Support Services" should be undertaken with an author specifically commissioned to undertake this work.