



THE COMMONWEALTH *of* LEARNING

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**PERSPECTIVES ON  
DISTANCE EDUCATION**

Student  
Support Services:  
Towards More  
Responsive Systems

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Report of a Symposium on  
Student Support Services  
in Distance Education

The Commonwealth of Learning

## PREFACE

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This report summarises the results of a symposium convened by The Commonwealth of Learning in Delhi between June 21 and 27, 1992. The symposium was entitled "Models of Student Support Systems in Distance Education" and consequently was oriented more towards policy than practice. Nevertheless, the deliberations were anchored in the personal experiences of participants and their institutions, which lent an especially lively tone to the discussions. These centred on the institutional case studies presented by representatives from the four open universities in India, the new distance education programme at Bangladesh's national university, and the institutions in two non-Commonwealth countries, Thailand and Indonesia.

The report is in two parts. The first reviews the literature associated with recent developments in postsecondary distance education. The literature review builds a context for support service change by outlining developments in the mandate, operating principles and practices, and curricular emphases of the distance teaching universities. The literature review not only introduces the case studies but informs their interpretation and the recommendations of the participants at the symposium.

Generally, the literature review shows that, to the extent that support services reflect changes in the institutions of which they are a part, their direct support activities must include the intellectual and personal development of students as well as their problems. This means an expanded role for the traditional support service. Where energy and resources previously were directed exclusively to helping the distressed student, there now is a requirement to redefine the tasks of advising and tutoring to better support the instructional transactions required of an altered view of learning — one that sees students as actively engaged in constructing meaning and shaping a personal understanding of their studies.

The second part of the report presents eight case studies that describe the operation of student support services at the open universities represented at the symposium. The case studies are followed by a summary of issues raised in the discussions of the cases presented. The report concludes with a list of research priorities aimed at the development of more responsive support services.

The issues and trends revealed in the literature and the stated experiences of the participants clearly intersect. While the cases reflect the constraints (and opportunities) of day-to-day support service practice in South Asia, their concerns coincide with those expressed in print by researchers, theoreticians, and policy analysts. In particular, both the literature and the cases document attempts to make student service systems more responsive to the needs of learners.

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