

STUDENT SUPPORT IN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING

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This chapter will address the principles of student support in Open and Distance Learning (ODL), aiming to identify the central concepts which underpin this area of activity, and how from the practitioner perspective these concepts are realised.

The term student support means the range of activities which complement the mass-produced materials which make up the most well-known element in ODL. It is, of course, true that printed course units, television and radio programmes, computer programs etc., which replace the lecture as a means of delivery, and offer so much both in terms of social and geographical access, and in terms of cost-effectiveness, support students in central ways. But the elements of ODL which are commonly referred to as student support are made up of: tutoring, whether face-to-face, by correspondence, telephone or electronically; counselling; the organisation of study centres; interactive teaching through TV and radio, and other activities. These activities have as key conceptual components the notion of supporting the individual learning of the student whether alone or in groups, while in contrast the mass-produced elements are identical for all learners. It will be argued that both elements are essential – and integral.

The rationale for student support in ODL has been weakly conceived over the last twenty years, and, not surprisingly, in many ODL systems, weakly realised, and subject to wild fluctuations in terms of financial support (Paul, 1988; Brindley and Fage, 1992). This author is surely not alone in having visited study centres where students never seem to be present, or observing tutorials where lectures are given that repeat or replace the content of course materials. On the other hand, there has been an enormous growth in interest, and indeed institutional commitment even in times of financial constraint, to student support in ODL, and many examples in different countries of excellent practice, although in some cases this is born out of educational instinct rather than theoretical understanding. The objective of this chapter is to consolidate the basis on which this area is established, moving from concrete to conceptual considerations. The structure of the chapter is one

which has been developed as a model for planning student support in distance education, and can be represented as in Figure 22.1:

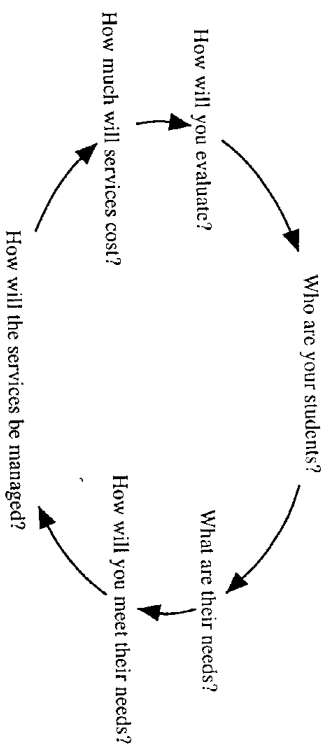


Figure 22.1 A model for planning and managing student services

WHO ARE YOUR STUDENTS?

Who are your students? This central question lies at the heart of the issue, and yet is often ignored. The question, though short and to the point, is one of considerable depth and complexity. It is not an original observation to say that education has represented a provider-led rather than a client- or consumer-led activity. ODL systems that start with the production of course materials in whatever medium can also ignore in important ways the consideration as to who their students are. There are very significant examples of alternatives, such as the learner-centred curriculum at Empire State College, State University of New York (Granger, 1990), but this by its unusualness reinforces the point. There are also very significant processes of social change which affect this. Market forces and consumerism are now near-dominant factors governing the educational system in many societies in ways that are very ambiguous at this stage of development (Field, 1994).

The question as to who your students are can be unpacked according to a number of dimensions:

- age
- gender
- geography
- social class
- cultural and belief systems
- income
- ethnic and racial identity
- educational background
- employment and unemployment

- language
- housing
- access to communications and technology
- physical disability.

This range of factors, which far from being exhaustive, represents a crude set of parameters which will need refining and expansion in particular contexts, contains the elements that begin to make it possible to know who your students really are. When articulated together they create the infinite number of individual lives represented in our student bodies. Of course, many educational institutions collect statistics on some of the elements identified above. However, what is more challenging is to use the information in practical ways in the planning and organisation of student support services (this is equally true of the construction of the curriculum, of course). It is asserted here that in constructing student support services the key task is to acknowledge the identity of the learner, complementing the mass-produced teaching materials which by virtue of their nature, and as a condition of their effectiveness, are unable to do so. Feminist analyses within ODL have been particularly educative about the principles of acknowledging the identity of learners (Tait, 1994, pp. 33–4). This is demanding for an educational institution. It may result in challenging social inequities that bring the institution into conflict with influential elements in a society, including the government. It certainly means vigilance and flexibility in organisational terms rather than continuity and hard structures. It means differentiation rather than uniformity and consistency. In organisational terms it represents moving from product to service, and in information technology terms it is paralleled by the move from mainframe to networking. In quality assurance terms it represents the centrality of the customer. In a whole range of different settings, similar ideas are at work which turn organisational thinking upside down. The function of student support services in ODL lies at the nexus of change.

Evans has provided the most interesting ethnographic accounts of student lives in ODL, and suggests:

The challenge is to develop and maintain approaches which enable students to have their voices heard and for the open and distance educators and their institutions to be able to listen and understand the practical implications of what is being said. Learners should also recognise that they are a part of a diverse body of people whose interests need to be voiced, and whose stories need to be told.

(Evans, 1994, p. 128)

WHAT DO YOUR STUDENTS NEED AND HOW WILL YOU PROVIDE IT?

Debate within an institution about who its students are, or will be, provides the platform on which to analyse what they need in terms of student support services. However, although this may sound obvious, it is surprising how quickly one can find in one's own and other ODL systems, examples of practice which represent past rather than current needs, or top-down provision which has not resulted from analysis of who and where students actually are. Examples include study centres in places which students find inaccessible; home-based study systems for groups which are inadequately housed and who need library or study space; tutorials taking place where only 20 per cent of the students are able or want to attend; services priced at levels which exclude certain groups on a permanent basis. Other examples will surely be known to readers. Working within student support services, it is essential to have the courage to challenge such practice, but it has to be acknowledged that it can be dangerous. Often, student support services are seen as the poor and marginal relation of the course production side, and to offer up criticism is to take a risk. To challenge current practice can seem offensive within a professional framework to other colleagues, especially if student wishes are taken as very significant elements in the design of provision, which of course they should be.

The range of services are provided through activities such as:

- advice/counselling
- tutoring individually and in groups
- the learning of study skills, including examination skills
- peer group support
- feedback concerning assessment and progress
- language support
- careers guidance
- administrative problem-solving.

(See Rumble, 1992, pp. 62–74 for further elaboration of these activities.)

Media such as correspondence, face-to-face, telephone, electronic communications etc. provide a range of means which differ widely in their effectiveness for individuals and groups in ways that are as yet inadequately understood, and need constant monitoring if provision is not to replace service. Crucial elements in the design of services also include the extent to which they can be provided on a local basis, and in groups. There has been published a considerable range of accounts of tutoring, but less in the field of counselling (the journals *Teaching at a Distance* and *Open Learning* have carried the richest seam of articles). Major issues in the design of counselling systems in the UK Open University have included the tension between a number of desirable characteristics. These include the desire to have the counsellor as local as possible to the student, but also to have specific

knowledge of the programme of study; and to have a link with the tutorial role but also to have continuity of concern for the student on a longer than course-by-course basis. The tensions can be represented as in Figure 22.2:

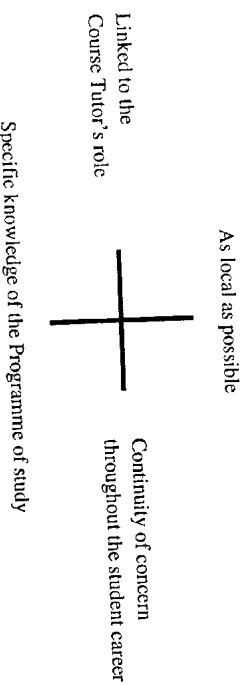


Figure 22.2 Desirable characteristics in tension in the counselling system of the UK OU

Social, cultural, economic and technological issues provide a range of factors in planning student support which ensure that each institution has a unique task, and no general schemes can be drawn up on an international or even national basis. Some of the issues can be considered schematically as shown in Figure 22.3:

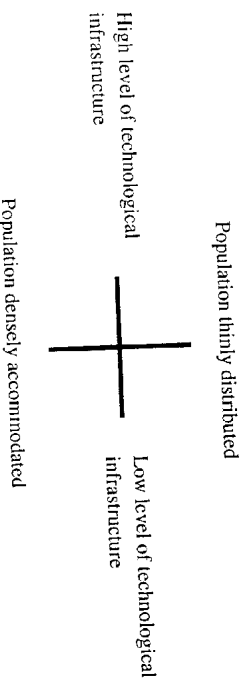


Figure 22.3 A framework of factors which affect the organisation of student support services

Thus both Norway and Sudan have low populations thinly distributed, but very different technological infrastructures which will demand differently organised student support. Equally, both London, UK, and Soweto, South Africa, have high populations densely accommodated, but again different access to technological infrastructure will demand different solutions. Economic and social factors provide further related diversity.

Study centres

Study centres form an established part of the great majority of modern ODL systems, providing the physical space for a range of activities to take place on a face-to-face basis, including variously in different systems:

- enquiry services
- pre-study advice
- application
- tutoring
- counselling
- interactive radio and TV
- telephone teaching
- audio-visual playback facilities
- library
- tutor training
- independent study spaces
- laboratories
- examination facilities
- student peer meetings
- publicity and marketing
- storage and collection point for study materials
- decentralised office accommodation.

There are also examples of 'electronic classrooms', or 'virtual study centres', which form part of the broad picture. There is not a clear terminological distinction between study centres and regional offices in different systems around the world, and it depends partly on usage, the range of the above activities which take place, and the centre-periphery organisational model that obtains, which term is employed. Sewart has examined the integrated role of study centres, rejecting the notion that they represent the 'dustbin' of distance education, i.e. where everything is put which cannot be fitted in any other way (Sewart, 1983, p. 57).

COSTS AND MANAGEMENT OF STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES

There are relatively few sources of reference for the issues of costs and more generally management of student support services in ODL, although Wagner (1983), Snowden and Daniel (1983), Rumble (1992, 1993), Paul (1990a, b) and Sewart (1983, 1993) all address the issues. Rumble (1993, p. 103) comments that, 'The cost of tuition and counselling is either a direct (variable) student cost or a semi-variable cost related to the numbers of students taken on by tutors and counsellors. Clearly the provision of such services represents a reversion to the labour-intensive methods found in traditional education.' It is also the case that in ODL, the creation of course

materials in many of the systems is more expensive than the costs of the creation of a course in traditional systems. However, by their nature student support services, which so closely relate to student numbers, and which represent the individualising rather than the mass production side of the total operation, work in reverse to the cost ratio of course materials which become cheaper per student the more students who are admitted.

Where, as is frequently the case, tutorial staff are hired on a part-time basis, the ratios in terms of costs can be seen as follows:

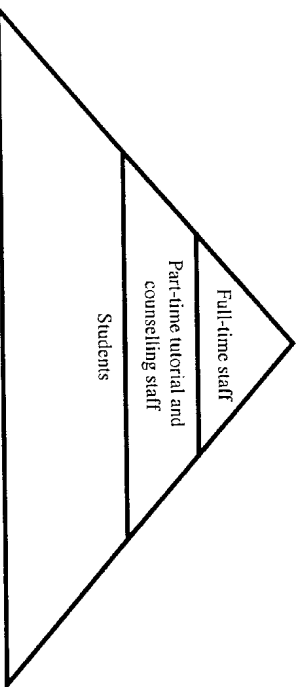


Figure 22.4 The pyramid structure of staffing and student ratios

Clearly, the varying of the ratios – how much bigger the base is than the other two levels – will be a significant element in the cost structures of student support services in many ODL systems.

In terms of management, Paul (1990a) identifies two principal areas specific to the management of student support services in ODL, namely the management of structures which are devolved from the institution's headquarters, and which involve centre-periphery relations, and the management of part-time off-campus tutors and counsellors. He also notes the crucial importance of information technology and communications (Paul, 1990b). None of these is specific organisationally to ODL systems, nor does ODL appear to have been more successful than other kinds of organisations in managing these issues. A major conclusion that emerges from Paul's work is the importance of staff development and training, in order to diminish the gap between perceptions of the range of individuals, whether based at headquarters, a regional location or part-time working at home. Sewart examines student support services from management perspectives, and notes that in the last part of this century the most relevant management theories are those which are systems-based, using the analogy of the brain or the organism, rather than the machine (Sewart, 1993, p. 8). Sewart also notes the importance of service industry rather than production approaches: 'the complex interrelationship between student volumes, course production costs,

and student support costs' (Sewart, 1993, p. 10); and 'the management of student support needs to take account of the needs of students as expressed by themselves or by the intermediaries' (Sewart, 1993, p. 11).

In conclusion it is clear that costing and management of student services has to engage with at least the following key issues:

- distribution and remoteness of staff and services
- the contribution to the reduction of student attrition
- the relationship of costs with volume of students and intermediaries (i.e. tutors, counsellors, and others)
- quality issues where service rather than production is the key activity.

EVALUATION AND QUALITY ASSURANCE

Evaluation and quality assurance have come together as terms in the last six or seven years in the UK. The first edition of the major work on evaluation in ODL by Thorpe in 1988 mentioned the term quality control only, pointing out the areas of concern that such a term omitted (Thorpe, 1988, p. 199). The term quality assurance allows concerns to be addressed not only about whether standards have been reached, but also about continuous improvement and the centrality of the student experience (the 'customer-centred approach'). Thorpe's work is also notable in that it deals substantially with evaluation in ODL in the field of student support services, in particular providing case-studies of evaluation of tuition and counselling. Major conclusions reached by Thorpe include the need for 'tutor self-evaluation as well as system evaluation', in order to improve tutor responsiveness to the learner (Thorpe, 1988, p. 86), and the need for documenting the counselling process, in order to diminish the perception which may be influential in the institution 'to see the counselling interaction as a minority concern for "problem learners" or a peripheral issue' (Thorpe, 1988, p. 118).

Major difficulties in establishing quality assurance work in student support services in ODL include the fact that many tutorial and counselling staff work on a part-time basis for the institution, and their time therefore is very limited; they work remotely in a range of dispersed locations away from more than occasional visits; there are so many variables in the factors that lead to student success or failure that the demonstrability of value of student support services has hitherto eluded researchers. On the other hand, monitoring systems for quality in correspondence teaching are well established (Tait, 1993). The arrival and establishment of the quality assurance movement in education should ensure that quality assurance will gain ground in ODL, as is already in evidence internationally (Deshpande and Mugridge, 1994).

CONCLUSION

This chapter should conclude by returning to the task which it set itself, namely addressing the principles of student support in ODLE. Student support systems, it has been argued, must address the question as for whom they are designed, and what is therefore needed by the learners. In turn this should lead to determination as to how those needs can be met, within the constraints of costs, technologies and geography. The management and evaluation of student support, largely influenced by notions of quality assurance, mean that student support has to be examined, documented and reflected upon. Finally, the necessary pragmatism, flexibility and openness to change does not remove the necessity to work within and contribute to conceptualisation and theorising. Research and development for student support in ODLE are therefore mutually reinforcing and interactive activities. Serving the client has become the dominant theme in many spheres as opposed to the earlier product-driven approaches: ODLE is no different. Those who work in student support in ODLE now find themselves at the centre of things and not at the periphery.

I would like to acknowledge that many of the ideas in this chapter have been developed through discussion and joint work with my long-standing colleague, Roger Mills.

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