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## **Open learning centres: theory and reality - institutional and learner perspectives**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

External studies, distance learning, open learning, flexible learning, represent a chronology of various approaches used over the past few decades to support the learner.

This paper describes the process that The Open Polytechnic of New Zealand (a distance and open learning institution in New Zealand) has used in establishing its regional open learning centres. It summarises the institutional purpose in initiating this new venture, and outlines some issues raised by key staff. It also describes comment and reaction from students. Finally, institutional and student perspectives are compared and contrasted, and the implications explored. Evidence from the author's recent research is used throughout.

### **BACKGROUND TO STUDENT SUPPORT**

Until about five years ago The Open Polytechnic of New Zealand's (TOPNZ's) student support system was operated solely by tutors. They represented the total interface with the student community, responsible for all academic and administrative tasks related to a student's enrolment, coursework and support. The service provided was personal though inconsistent, depending very much on the response of individual tutors.

#### **The effects of restructuring**

When the Polytechnic was renamed with an emphasis on open learning, learning support became centralised, with a small, mainly administrative unit under a manager. At the same time the need for regional learning support was recognised, and with the flair and innovative insight of a new Principal, the decision to place regional learning support within other independent regional polytechnics was made.

#### **Regional learning support centres**

Formal alliances were made with a number of regional polytechnics. TOPNZ's learning support centres were sited within the host polytechnic, staffed by local

polytechnic staff trained and inducted by TOPNZ, which made a contribution to their salaries and supplied basic equipment.

The success of these individual regional learning support centres varied, but in many respects, as a concept, they were a product of their times. When major changes in educational administration were implemented by Government, they became difficult to sustain in a competitive environment. An independent evaluation by TOPNZ (Dallas and Lynch, 1992) confirmed this, so that by the end of 1993 contracts were cancelled and TOPNZ took complete control of its own learning support.

### **A centralised service**

TOPNZ had worked hard to develop central services, and the small group of staff developed print resources, implemented a counselling service, gave advice on loans and allowances, arranged learning networks and acted as an interface and troubleshooting agent with the remainder of the polytechnic, which was becoming more and more complex.

Very quickly, this centralised service became not only popular, but also an essential part of what was offered to and used by students. A freephone (0800) number was introduced for enrolled students; this gave immediate contact with tutors and other support within business hours.

### **Regional Resource Centres**

Although the central service was successful, data suggested that most students were within large metropolitan areas (nearly 50 per cent of students within the polytechnic's northern region). Once again, there was seen to be a regional need, but this time it was for one that could be supplemented and strengthened by an expanded central service.

In 1994, major Regional Resource Centres were initiated in Wellington and Auckland. A further centre is planned for Christchurch in 1995, and for Hamilton in 1996.

## **INSTITUTIONAL PURPOSE AND VISION**

Each Centre fulfilled a major student support function. On one level there was a strategic purpose:

- an understanding that Centres were in TOPNZ's and its students best interests
- a long-term broad educational and business commitment to the region publicly heralding TOPNZ's claim in the region to all communities interested
- deliberate choice in siting Centres in regions that would maximise opportunities for all stakeholders, implementing vision and policy on a regional basis
- a wider range of options for support and delivery, resulting in a blurring of the boundaries between contact and distance teaching

At another level there was a tactical purpose more specifically relating to student support:

- provision of high-quality local and regional support, information, guidance and advice
- providing and integrating technology designed to enhance learning
- networking with other institutions and community agencies to provide increased learning and personal opportunities for students
- providing outreach facilities outside the metropolitan areas.

In particular, TOPNZ formed a partnership with Telecom NZ. Its Regional Resource Centres facilitate and manage official Telecom videoconference bureaux. As well as commercial opportunities, this will offer a wonderful opportunity for delivery of its own courses and learning support.

### **Staff perspectives**

In the first half of 1994 a series of interviews was held with a small number of key staff involved in the promotion and establishment of Regional Resource Centres (Reid, 1994). The open-ended interviews canvassed staff views of Centres under broad headings. As a result, issues identified included:

- autonomy, accountability support and control
- clarity of purpose and vision
- business v. learning tensions
- communication
- development of potent and accurate success indicators
- relating all facilities and resources to services provided.

Further comment on each in more depth is indicated, as follows:

#### **Autonomy, accountability, support and control**

Management must be assured that institutional policy is being implemented. Regional staff are accountable for implementing that policy, but at the same time must have latitude to make local decisions within broad limits.

#### **Clarity of purpose and role**

Although a relatively common vision of Regional Resource Centres has been developed over several years, there is no common agreement on detail. Each section or Directorate of the organisation attaches a different importance to activities as they are examined and assessed to be in its own interests or not. As yet there is no acceptance or adherence to a 'conceptual' view that is not parochial.

#### **Business v. learning tensions**

Policy has always emphasised student support, but changes in Government funding and administration have meant that affording Regional Centres has become a major issue. There is an expectation that Centres will be self-funding within a three-year period. There are some concerns over the balancing of the needs of learners with the need to introduce commercial operations in order to achieve self sufficiency.

## **Communication**

Where parts of an institution are separated geographically, communication becomes more difficult and expensive. Over the last 18 months the following problems have been highlighted:

- some central staff know little about the Centres or their staff. Others do not understand the rationale for the Centres
- normal internal communications sometimes do not reach regional staff
- when regional staff communicate directly with central staff it is often urgent, but that urgency is not always appreciated
- central staff often cannot reach regional staff who have complex roles which may take them out of the office for long periods
- central and regional working hours may be different.

In a practical sense these problems mean that positions are easily misunderstood and that real attempts need to be made to act in the interests of the total organisation, and to understand the needs and perspectives of others.

## **Success indicators**

There is a good match between indicators commonly used to evaluate the operation of Centres internationally and the views of staff interviewed.

There is general agreement that student perception and satisfaction are critical to success, but that to what extent individual student needs are being met may be complicated by a belief that many students choose to work through distance learning for its flexibilities (which include omission of direct contact with tutors).

Staff satisfaction is seen as another potent indicator.

## **Services**

Services are a most important aspect; they drive the facilities and resources. What is provided is determined by how closely services relate to the key operations of the Centres: learning support, provision of information, career and academic planning and advice, administrative support, enrolment and liaison with clients. Two other important factors also influence services: gaining access to tutors and other central organisation functions, and the recognised need to provide the most support for students early in the first year of study (McInnis-Rankin and Brindley, 1986).

## **Student reaction**

A group of 100 students who had made use of the Auckland Centre were surveyed in order to gain a student perspective. An advisory group of students assisted the author in the preparation of a detailed questionnaire which covered the following issues:

- awareness of the existence of Centres
- circumstances of use
- the range of assistance sought
- student perception of the purposes of Centres
- student perception of the benefits of Centres

- evaluation of services, facilities and resources offered
- comparisons between central and regional use of services
- whether Centres should assume a proactive role
- to what extent services should be free of charge
- suitability of the physical features of Centres
- opening hours
- means by which Centres can best support TOPNZ students.

### **Awareness**

Eighty five per cent of students were aware that TOPNZ operated learning support centres. Most discovered this through information sent as part of course material or through a student support newsletter.

### **Use**

Regrettably, none of the students had used the Centre before enrolment, 88 per cent during coursework, and 21 per cent when their course was completed.

### **Assistance sought**

In descending order, the following percentages relate to either very acceptable or acceptable service: assistance with study/exam skills (100%), information re courses or programmes (100%), use of Centre facilities or resources(100%), assistance with tutor communications or relationships (86%), assistance with assignments or assessments (86%), recognition of prior learning (80%), personal counselling (67%).

### **Main purpose of Centres**

Most students thought Centres provided 'free face-to-face contact with other students and staff who fill the gaps of impersonal contact met by distance education Other emphases suggested included learning support, the provision of technology, immediate advice, seminars and personal help with problems.

### **Benefits**

Ninety six per cent saw a direct benefit from the availability of Centres to students, 81 per cent saw a direct benefit to the institution; students were evenly divided as to whether there were benefits for employers. Comments included 'allows students a more personal relationship with the institution, encouraging their continued enrolment'.

### **Services**

The following services were unanimously listed as essential or desirable: information and advice, learning support (seminars, 1:1 work with professional staff when needed, formal study groups and buddy networks) and assessment of prior learning. Twelve per cent of students thought the use of examination centres unimportant.

### **Facilities**

In descending order, students found the following facilities either essential or very desirable: second hand book exchange, access to library service and computer suite (100%), student information noticeboard (97%), photocopying facilities and

provision of self-teaching Materials (96%), pre/viewing videos (91 %), fax (89%), Telephone access and teleconferencing (88%).

### **Central v. regional use**

Eighty five per cent of students had used the central services. Fifty five per cent of students used regional rather than central services. Comment-. 'central and regional services go hand in hand. I use each for different purposes.'

### **Taking a proactive role**

A proactive role for staff was endorsed: where the enrolment form indicates a special needs requirement (Yes 96%, Maybe 4%), where students indicate they want contact with/details from other students (Yes 85%, Maybe 15%), where performance in the course is of concern (Yes 81%, Maybe 15%), whenever a new student enrolls (Yes 81 %, Maybe 19%), where a student has not completed work for some time (Yes 62%, Maybe 35%).

### **Charging for services**

Quite a clear direction was given: core services, facilities and resources should be free (Yes 81% ' Maybe 14%), all services, facilities and resources should be free (Yes 52%, Maybe 22%), full cost recovery for only what students use (Yes 45%, Maybe 30%), users pay a contribution towards everything regardless of whether they use services (Yes 10%, Maybe 90%).

### **Siting of Centres**

The following features were seen as essential or very desirable: close to motorways and bus routes (100070), provision of disabled access (96%), good signing (92%), car parking nearby (88%), central business location (74%), and ground floor access (66%).

### **Access**

Ninety two per cent of students found current opening hours (weekdays 8.30 am to 5 pm with two late nights until 9 pm) very acceptable or acceptable.

### **Support**

Students who have used the Centres have very specific suggestions as to how they may be supported. Comments ranged from 'Centres might be useful for a student who could benefit from the flexibility of correspondence ... combined with the more structured services of the regional resource centres' to 'I have reservations about open learning centres. Anyone who could use one ... could get similar services at existing institutions ... and should consider contact classes.'

## **INSTITUTIONAL AND LEARNER PERSPECTIVES: IMPLICATIONS**

What do interviews with staff and the results of the student questionnaire tell us? How might anyone working in student support use the findings?

First, they confirm that there are institutional perspectives and student perspectives, and that while some of the views are shared, others relate to the particular positions and concerns associated with each.

Secondly, acknowledging and acting upon a student perspective is crucial in a market-driven, political economic environment. It must be borne in mind that:

- students know their own needs best and can be assisted in making these overt and explicit
- students are very positive about the benefits to themselves and the organisation when commenting on existing open learning centres
- within institutional constraints of policy and budget, established student need is the sensible basis for determining services, facilities and resources
- in this research, while there are differences in student opinion, those students who have used services have very similar views about their needs.

From the results of the research the following specific suggestions relating to learner and institutional perspectives are made:

- there must be an important drive to market and promote Centres and their identified benefits
- significant encouragement to use Centres at a pre-enrolment stage must be instigated and there should be a follow-up early after enrolment especially for those enrolling for the first time
- if Centre staff are to provide counselling or academic support, then these staff need to be carefully selected and trained
- the types of services, facilities and resources that distance learners want to be available within a Centre are those that are not freely available in the workplace, or are unaffordable for the majority of students
- students support Centre staff s taking a proactive role to make contact, although there may be sensitivities in the context where student work has not been completed for some time
- students do not share a similar sense of importance to staff with respect to the physical features of the Centres
- opening hours could be extended to include a weekend morning.

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