

PLANNING STUDENT SUPPORT FOR OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING

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Introduction

Friedman commented at an early stage of modern distance education that the emphasis within the field on service to students was unusual for an academic institution (Friedman 1981 p123). However, while there has subsequently appeared a substantial literature on methodologies relating to the production of learning materials and resources for open and distance learning (ODL), relatively little has been written about the planning and management of student support. Robinson has set out basic elements of student support, drawn largely on the practice of the Open University UK (Robinson 1981). Paul and Rumble have within more general work on management of ODL addressed student support (Paul 1990; Rumble 1992); the latter has also examined student support from the perspective of the economics of ODL (Rumble 1997). Sewart has more specifically addressed the development of services to students within a service industry framework (Sewart 1993), and there are a number of essays on management of student support in ODL in particular in the context of dual-mode institutions, in Mills and Tait (1997). Brindley has discussed the contextual criteria which are key to designing student support systems, and the outcomes of persistence and attrition (Brindley 1995). The most extended review of the field has been produced by Sweet for the Commonwealth of Learning, in a volume that has a most helpful bibliography (1993), while case studies and accompanying analysis have come from South Africa (Nonyongo and Ngengebule 1998; SAIDE 2000). This paper aims to build on that range of work in a practical way in order to identify the principles of planning for the development and management of student support services in ODL at a time of great change. It is intended that a robust but flexible framework of ideas will be developed, which will provide a basis for work in an international context in a range of different societies and educational systems, at different stages of technology adoption, and free of institutional bias.

There are two principle and related dimensions of change at present dominating the re-engineering of ODL. Firstly, there is the revolution which the Information Communications Technologies (ICT) are presently driving, moving in many cases from print at the core of a variety of media, to the virtual environments carried through the Web, computer-mediated conferencing (CMC), and CD-ROM. ICT presents enormous opportunities to rethink student support in ways that are not yet fully understood, in particular with regard to time and place, and the social dimension of learning which can be enhanced or diminished through CMC. It is therefore important to identify as far as is possible which elements of student support can be rolled forward in the third generation, those which are likely to diminish or even disappear, and of course those which can be invented for the first time. It may be that ICT will lead to more uniformity in global terms in the ways in which services to students are delivered in the future. However, it also remains true for some audiences and in many societies that the new technologies are having a limited impact on the delivery of ODL. Secondly, and closely related to the ICT revolution, is the marketisation of education, where the student in ODL as in other educational fields is being constructed as a 'customer'. This leads to pressures on institutions both to drive their costs down and to find ways of out-competing others, while more widespread external changes in consumer culture lead to the demand for services to individuals to be speeded up. Indeed, the experience of contemporary ODL is being assessed as a guide to how education more generally will be structured in the future. The assumptions on which

planning has hitherto been based have thus come under increasing re-examination.

The situation is further complicated by the fact that the ICT revolution and the marketisation of education make change so fast and its outcomes so unpredictable that the present moment is a difficult time to write. This is not to say that the writing of an article such as this is not worthwhile or that discussion between institutions etc is not valuable! However, it remains a key notion of the approach in this paper to the planning of student support services in ODL that there is no blue print which can simply be transferred from one institution or country to another. The variations in educational and organisational cultures, geography, technology, programmes of study and student characteristics create such a range of variables that the building of student support systems must to a considerable extent be tailored to institutions and sectors. The reader will therefore need at all stages to match the ideas which are developed here against his or her own context. They are proposed as planning tools but not as plans.

Student support in ODL

It is first of all necessary to identify what is intended here by the term 'student support in ODL'. By this is meant the range of services both for individuals and students in groups which complement the course materials or learning resources that are uniform for all learners, and which are often perceived as the major offering of institutions using ODL. Student support is thus pragmatically distinguished within the totality of activities of an ODL programme, which overall, of course, could be said to have as its primary goal the support of students.

The primary functions of student support are proposed as being threefold:

1. cognitive: supporting and developing learning through the mediation of the standard and uniform elements of course materials and learning resources for individual students;
2. affective: providing an environment which supports students, creates commitment and enhances self-esteem;
3. systemic: establishing administrative processes and information management systems which are effective, transparent and overall student-friendly.

These functions are both essential and interdependent. It can be argued that student support is primarily seen as to do with administrative process, often from the perspective of efficiency (relating to function 3). But where this limited view governs, there will be a diminishment in the second function, relating to the extent to which a student feels committed and comfortable with the institution, and drop-out is more likely to occur. Equally however, an institution where administrative procedures or information management are ineffective, for example not being timely, or being obstructive through admitting no leeway or exceptions, then students will be pushed out. What is less often recognised is the cognitive function of student support, certainly where these services include tutoring and assessment. Such an understanding of the role of student support comes primarily out of social constructivist ideas that knowledge is in a real sense made and re-made by participation in learning. Where the support of students mediates teaching embodied in courseware, then it clearly relates to learning, and thus to cognitive outcomes. They also thus relate to the objectives of providing an environment where students feel at home, where they feel valued, and which they find manageable. In this way we can see that the three core functions are truly inter-related and interdependent.

In more concrete terms, support services for students may be summarised as typically including:

1. enquiry, admission and pre-study advisory services,
2. tutoring,
3. guidance and counselling services,
4. assessment of prior learning and credit transfer;
5. study and examination centres;
6. residential schools;
7. library services;
8. individualised correspondence teaching, including in some cases continuous assessment;
9. record keeping, information management, and other administrative systems;
10. differentiated services for students with special needs of one sort or another e.g. disability, geographical remoteness, prisoners;
11. materials which support the development of study skills, programme planning or career development.

Such a summary can be extended by readers themselves through tailoring it to their own current or future contexts. With regard to category 11, materials for the support of learning skills or other activities, this in some ways contradicts a central part of the definition proposed here as to what student services are, i.e. a response to the individual student, rather than a standard or uniform product. For the purposes of definition, it is proposed that it would be in the use of such materials that support to students is delivered, not in their production or distribution, which in functional terms is no different from the production or distribution of courseware. However, the fact of the matter is that many student service sections supporting ODL programmes create and distribute such materials (for good reason), and thus pragmatically they are included here.

Framework for development

The framework for the development of a planning tool for student support services is conceived here as being built around six core elements, namely:

- student characteristics
- course or programme demands
- geography
- technology
- scale
- management systems.

These are discussed below and then subsequently in relation to each other.

Student characteristics

It may seem obvious, but it remains necessary to assert within many educational contexts that the characteristics of the student body make up an essential and indeed central element in the development of a student support system (Evans 1994; Lunneborg 1994, 1997). In ways that are now familiar from service industry, we need to incorporate elements of client or customer centredness in our approaches to learners whose status has been hitherto restricted to the more lowly one of student. Indeed all the other elements which make up this planning tool must relate in part at least to student needs and capacities. In assessing student characteristics for a particular cohort, it is proposed that the following elements comprise the main relevant features of student identity:

Gender

Age
Employment or unemployment
Disposable income
Educational background
Geographical situation
Special needs e.g. disability
Language
Ethnic and cultural characteristics
Communications
technology connectedness.

Without going in more depth into these characteristics, it is essential that consideration of their articulation in the range of individuals for whom a course or programme of study is planned takes place when designing student support services. The characteristics are not presented in any order of priority, but represent a matrix of qualities that need to be assessed when establishing which services particular cohorts of students will need. Within a course or institution there may well be several cohorts of students who have characteristics needing separate consideration. This might arise from the different geographical situations in which students find themselves, or the unequal availability of opportunities for women and men, or the different needs which different programmes create. One of the key tasks that those working in the support of students bring to their institution is the analysis of student characteristics, and the refinement of services in ways that genuinely acknowledge these. Planning for a programme of study should begin with analysis along the lines of 'Who are our students?' as well as the more familiar question 'What are we going to teach them?', and thus should involve student support workers in the creation of courses if this knowledge is to be effectively accessible to the course writing and production process.

There will of course be a necessary tension between the need to relate services to students in all their particularity, and the cost-effectiveness that uniformity brings (which is the particular economic strength of large-scale ODL systems). While the pressure to drive down costs in delivering services to customers in many organisations leads to making them uniform, the critically vulnerable nature of morale in the educational environment makes resistance to such uniformity worth struggling for. The use of a variety of media and meaningful engagement with individuals, rather than simply the bland or manipulative approach to 'customer management', will permit more opportunity to achieve the affective goals of student services, thereby diminishing drop-out. While more expensive, if services to students contribute significantly to retention, they will lower the institution's costs per successful student (the most important measure of success), as well as benefiting the learner in achieving his or her goals.

Technological infrastructure

In assessing which technologies should be used in delivering student services it is essential to distinguish firstly between technologies which students themselves have access to, and secondly technologies that are available to the institution or organisation. For example, where no adequate postal system exists outside major cities in a country, clearly delivery of materials cannot be made via the mail to rural students and another system will have to be used e.g. delivery by truck to remote villages (Bhalalusesa 1999). Equally an expectation that students should use the telephone, or e-mail, will in some countries exclude a substantial proportion of students from meaningful service (SAIDE 2000). However, in both these examples the use of the post, telephone or e-mail may be both possible and necessary for staff working in the metropolitan areas. This point is

particularly relevant as institutions seek to use ICT, and need to consider who will be included and excluded by such a move.

In making any assessment of the use of technologies by students it is important to distinguish further between three modes: the domestic, workplace, and social availability of technologies. Social availability would include for example the general availability of reliable public postal services, the absence of which, as noted above, creates major problems of access. It would also include the availability of adequate CMC facilities on a public basis in a community centre, local college or library. It may be that for a programme where the student cohort is employed in places of work where networked computers are available (say teachers in schools or nurses in health centres), then an assessment can be made that use of such media for that body can be valuable. If however the programme is a general one at undergraduate or School Certificate level that could attract a number of home-based students not in paid employment, then use of CMC may exclude them. Even with students in employment where ICT facilities exist, there may be problems with their use for external or non-work related purposes, and once again there may be variety rather than homogeneity among the student cohort in terms of access. There is also evidence that gender and status can have a role in limiting actual access both in the home and workplace, and that there are gendered differences in the uses of ICT by women and men (Kirkup and Von Prümmer 1990). The danger in failure to distinguish in this way is that domestic or social availability is liable to be taken as the norm, and that groups of students will unwittingly be excluded. However, the domestic availability of ICT is changing very fast in many countries developing and developed, and an analysis of accessibility for particular cohorts of learners has to be made frequently in order to maintain currency.

As ITC becomes more and more widely used, decisions have to be taken about the extent it will be used as a supplement to students services variously available face to face, by phone or by letter, or the extent to which it will replace them entirely. There are a number of core questions. Is the progress along the technology adoption cycle in any particular context seen as a simple transition, with the end result likely to be the complete replacement of face to face or telephone in favour of virtual meeting? Will the local face to face retain a place within an overall varied range of media (as has been the case in the move from correspondence to distance education)? For the most part in second generation distance education, we have not seen the telephone or the television replace print and face to face, but supplement them. However, in a number of other commercial services areas such as insurance and banking we have seen the telephone replace the local office. E commerce is doing the same for bookstores, records and videos. Is education a service that is qualitatively different or one that will be restructured in essentially similar ways?

There are no simple answers to these questions for two principle reasons. Firstly, this is because the revolution in ODL set in train by ICT is still at an early stage, and there are a range of potential outcomes and subsequent evaluations, and secondly because there are likely in all events to be different outcomes for different kinds of activities. In this context, higher level educational programmes such as MBAs are already being delivered to a student body that feels confident working on an international and virtual basis. This trend is likely to be accelerated with the increase in education delivered on a global basis (Mason 19xx). For other programmes learners are likely to retain a sense of commitment to their local or regional environment, for example when they access early stages of education, or educational fields that are much more dependent on national cultures and legislation such as education or social work. Their successful recruitment and retention will demand an acknowledgement of the local within a range of support services. While that will change over time, it is likely to do so much more slowly. For the majority perhaps, the hierarchy that by and

large obtains in most organisational life will persist: that is to say that where something sensitive or complex needs to be managed, we feel we must include at least a telephone conversation as a supplement to print or electronic communication. Where this process is intensified we feel that for a variety of reasons a face to face meeting is preferable over and above the telephone. It should be noted however, that where it is accepted within an institution with a plurality of student cohorts that both the virtual environment and the more varied environment should be retained, there are considerable cost implications in running both alongside each other. This is very much an issue in many institutions at present.

Course or programme demands

The specific demands made by a course or programme will perhaps make up the first element of student support that is conceived. Teaching and assessment will lie at the heart of what is delivered. The most significant decision points will include:

Will assessment be continuous, final or a mixture of the two? If it includes continuous assessment then further decisions will be necessary as to whether this will be undertaken by core teachers or academics at the organisation or by a body of part-time teachers or tutors. Also to be considered is whether it is intended that teaching as well as grading take place through continuous assessment, or only grading. If both, the training and quality assurance systems will need to reflect that, especially if continuous assessment is to represent a significant rather than a marginal element of overall assessment. The practice of correspondence teaching (which continues where CMC or e-mail is employed) greatly enhances the learning potential of continuous assessment for the individual.

The face to face element, if there is to be one, may begin from a consideration of course or programme demands. It may be that for a particular course it is considered necessary for students to come together, for example to practice language skills with the tutor, to do some experimental work, or more generally to share experience. In this latter regard we may be coming back more to the affective element and to student characteristics as providing the rationale for meeting, e.g. the need for mutual support for a particular cohort. The face to face element may be organised on a study centre non-residential basis, or on a residential basis. This variation may be based on course-specific elements, but may be more driven by geographical factors e.g. meetings in a particular configuration of geography and transport are only feasible for a period of time which demands residence, or social factors e.g. a period of social learning experience is deemed to be essential for the particular programme of study.

Scale

This element within the framework relates to the intended volume of activity, and is a significant determinant of the ways in which systems should be constructed. For example, an institution or organisation which intends to recruit 80 students on a course learning through ODL methods will need to construct different systems from those which might have more than 100,000 learners.

These differences will impact substantially on the extent to which investment is made in course materials through whatever media, but also in the investment in and organisation of student support. For example, can students be supported through the marginal time of full-time teachers within the core staff, or does volume demand the recruitment of a corps of teachers or tutors from outside, probably part-time, and distributed around the country in order to be near the students? Equally, the dimension of scale will impact on the ways in which enquiry and admission is organised, and on the need for local facilities like study centres or regional offices.

A particular problem which has to be addressed lies within institutions or organisations which have very different activities taking place within them, e.g. both small scale and large scale programmes, but which have a common student support structure. It may well be found that what serves one programme will not serve another, in the sense that the economies of scale on which the services are based for larger programmes cannot be replicated where programmes have specialised and small scale needs. This issue also arises with acuteness in dual-mode institutions where small scale distance education may find it difficult to have its needs for systems attended to within an institution that sees itself as most importantly conventional. Careful costing, flexibility, and some degree of differentiation in the management of services will be necessary.

Geography

The geography within which the institution and its students find themselves represents a very important dimension in planning the ways in which student services can be delivered. Early distance education in Canada and Australia was established to offer educational opportunity at school as well as post-secondary levels to those who were isolated by enormous distances from educational institutions. The new ICT environments diminish geographical distance fundamentally, so that students from other continents who are distant from the educational opportunity they want can gain access to it. However, for the many examples of second generation ODL, and those which straddle the second and third generations, it will remain the case that there are enormous differences in delivering services in countries such as Norway or Hong Kong.

However, by geography is also and importantly meant a social dimension of the term, in addition to consideration of the basic terrain. The term thus includes also the density of population in rural and urban areas, the availability and cost of transport, and the cultural dimension to movement outside the home (which may particularly restrict women and girls in some countries, or may restrict evening travel for all in dangerous areas in others). The social meanings of geography interlock in significant ways with technology, and are together significant determinants of the ways in which services to students can be delivered. These factors will particularly affect the possibilities for students and tutors to meet, and may also be pertinent in overall student demand.

Management systems

Specific issues with which management of student support systems needs to engage will include a number of significant issues. Firstly, the centre-periphery nature of more than small scale ODL systems, where services are to a significant degree delivered away from any central location or campus, is a significant element in terms of organisation and management. There can often be strong and negative characteristics of hierarchy in a centre-periphery model. It is possible to work towards more of a partnership model between production and presentation, where the concept of a 'distributed model' may be preferred, and the opportunities offered by ITC environment may be particularly helpful in this regard. Secondly, the management and manipulation of information is central to the effective delivery of quality services to students. Through the management of information student progress can be monitored and services introduced to intervene in its support. Evaluation of services will also depend in crucial ways on the information that has been collected. The flow of information to and from the peripheral elements, with updating a core task for both centre and periphery, represents a central element within overall management of information. Thirdly, Quality assurance in ODL has long been regarded as essential in order to move on from the

reputation of poor provision derived from the historical legacy of correspondence education where that was often indeed the case (Koul, cited in Tait 1997:5). It remains essential for the more important reason that, as in all organisations of any complexity, there needs to be close management of how well the organisation is doing, and a continuous process of trying to improve. There are particular difficulties in the ways in which quality of service is assured where many of the services are delivered out of sight of the contracting body, as with tutoring and counselling of students delivered locally in study centres, or teaching by correspondence or CMC. Fourthly, judgements have to be arrived at on the proportion of institutional budget to be committed to student support, and the ways in which reward for such investment can be defined in terms of student persistence, robustness of assessment and examination systems, and quality of learning experience. There are also significant issues in the ways in which financial models are constructed, in particular with regard to the directions in which money flows within an organisation, and the extent to which programmes of study and support activities are precisely and discretely costed.

It is worth saying more about drop-out and persistence at this stage, as they make up central elements in the case for student support. While there is evidence for saying that a complete absence of student support within an ODL system contributes to high dropout (SAIDE 1995: 64), there is no easy formula for assessing how much drop-out will be reduced and persistence enhanced by a particular investment. The variables of educational preparedness of students, quality of course materials, reliability of institutional and extra-institutional systems, and life circumstances of a particular student cohort are so great that each case has to be constructed independently (Brindley 1988). While a minority of students in any institutions regard themselves as almost entirely autonomous (perhaps 10%), it is clear that a majority welcome student support services, and in fact always demand more.

The particular economics of ODL mean that the unit cost of course materials in whatever medium drop with the more students who are recruited. With student support however, costs rise with student numbers, as these are directly student number related over and above a threshold of fixed costs. In addition therefore to whatever is thought to be the minimum level of services to students, it will be necessary to estimate in accordance with the culture of education and training in a particular system, and what is adjudged from the student and institutional perspective to represent a good quality of learning experience, how much resource to commit to the student support system.

Review of the elements of student support

These elements can be conceived as being in relation to each other as in the figure below:

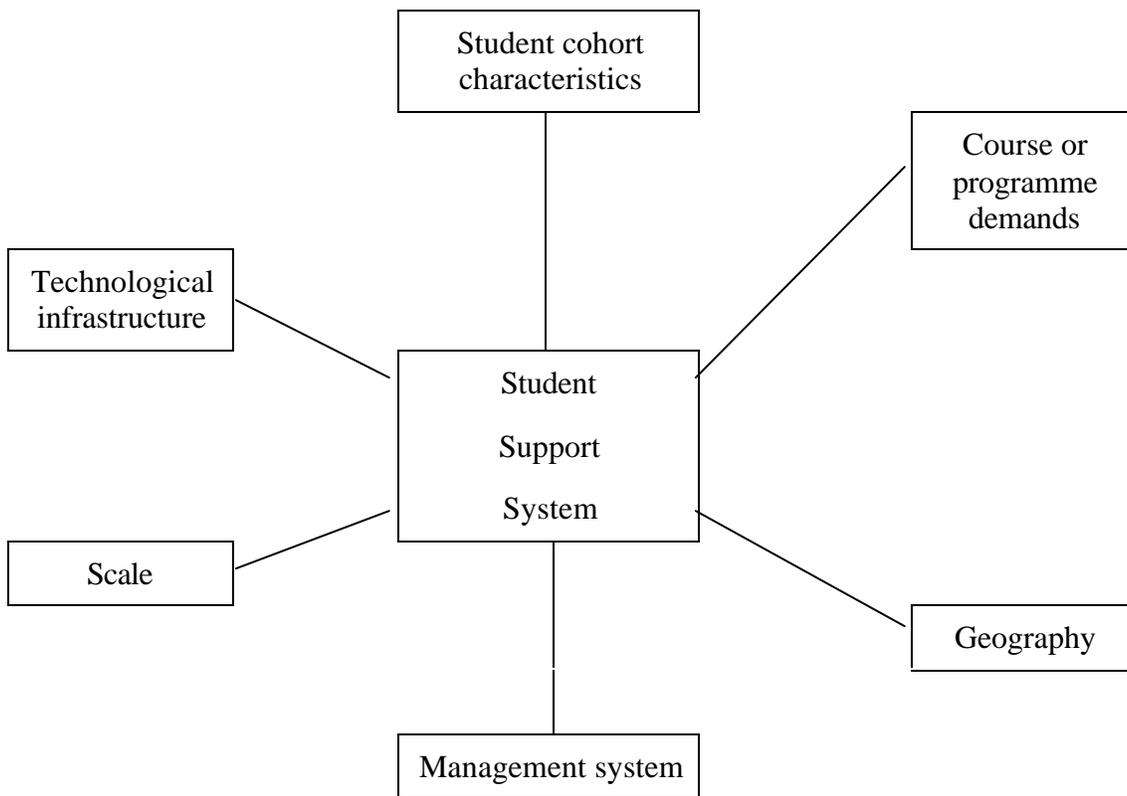


Figure 1: Framework for the development of a student support system

The six elements of the basic framework for planning student support interact in complex ways. They cannot be ranked in priority, nor can one element be ignored. Thus while course and programme demands may be the first to be conceived by those planning education or training, these will need to be framed along with the other 5 dimensions if effective services are to be provided.

The elements stand in tension with each other, with trade-offs between them representing the core managerial achievement. For example, a teacher education programme may demand a period of teaching practice which makes the programme difficult to scale up; without scaling up, the financial issues within the management dimension may be difficult to resolve. Or in a School Certificate Programme the characteristics of the student cohort, which might be made up predominately of women in a particular case, may be difficult to balance with the social geography which governs women's travel to study centres. Or the course demands for specialised tutors may be such that neither technological infrastructure nor indeed a cadre of specialised staff can be located. In all of these very real cases, there will need to be, if the programme is to be successful, a trade-off between a number of desiderata. The success of the planning process lies in identifying within the core elements of the study support system which specific compromises provide optimal results.

Conclusion

The specific elements and activities of student support can be conceived and organised within the framework that is set out above in Figure 1. There can however be no universal blueprint for the establishment of student support systems, open as they are to a range of variations across the characteristics of student cohorts, programmes of study, educational cultures and geographies in all their complexity. The compromises and trade-offs between a range of desirable features and within the discipline of institutional budgeting make up the particular managerial achievement in every situation. The ways in which services for students in ODL will be developed in the future will be determined by two inter-related streams of development. Firstly, the advent of ICT and the WWW, which supports access to information, advisory services and administrative procedure as well as learning resources, and supports student-student and student-tutor communication through the media of asynchronous electronically delivered text and multi-media. Secondly, the increasing domination of the social by the business environment brings challenges for educational institutions to retain their role when the marketisation of education means that commercial companies wish to enter the field in pursuit of revenue. One result is likely to be change in new understandings of customer care replacing notions of student support e.g. through Web sites supported by Call Centres. Whether greater student success will be the result is not however yet known. One fear is that the real human cost of educational failure will be replaced by the diminished notion of the disappointed or even worse inadequate customer. However, it is also true that education itself has in some contexts diminished learners through the misuse of the status of student as against teacher. Even more difficult to assess are the ways in which the quality of the learning experience will be changed. It can be argued that the richness of the student-student and student-tutor interaction which can be delivered effectively for ODL by ITC for the first time will counterbalance the 'thinness' of student experience which some believe the domination of the virtual over the physical to represent. Reviewing how support to students developed in second generation ODL can move forward to the next phase of development is thus no easy task. It is essential however that such a review take place if student success is to remain the key measure of institutional success, and if ODL is to retain its student-centred mission.

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