

PLANNING STUDENT SUPPORT IN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING IN THE U.K.

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Introduction

This paper aims to identify the principles of planning for the development and management of student support services in Open and Distance Learning (ODL). 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.

First of all it is necessary to identify what is meant by student support services in ODL. By these are meant the range of services for individuals and students in groups which complement the course materials that are uniform for all learners, and which are often perceived as the major offering of ODL institutions. The function of student support services is to mediate the standard and uniform elements of course materials and other administrative services, primarily through recognising differentiated learner needs. Support services for students may typically include enquiry, advice and admission services, tutorial and counselling services, study and examination centres, and elements of continuous assessment and individualised correspondence teaching.. The division of labour between standard elements and student support services remains true irrespective of medium, e.g. whether core media are print and face to face, or the new generation of ODL of computer mediated conferencing (CMC). It is true however that CMC presents enormous opportunities to rethink student support in ways that are not yet well understood, in particular with regard to time and place.

Framework for development

The framework for the development of a planning tool for student support services is built around six core elements:

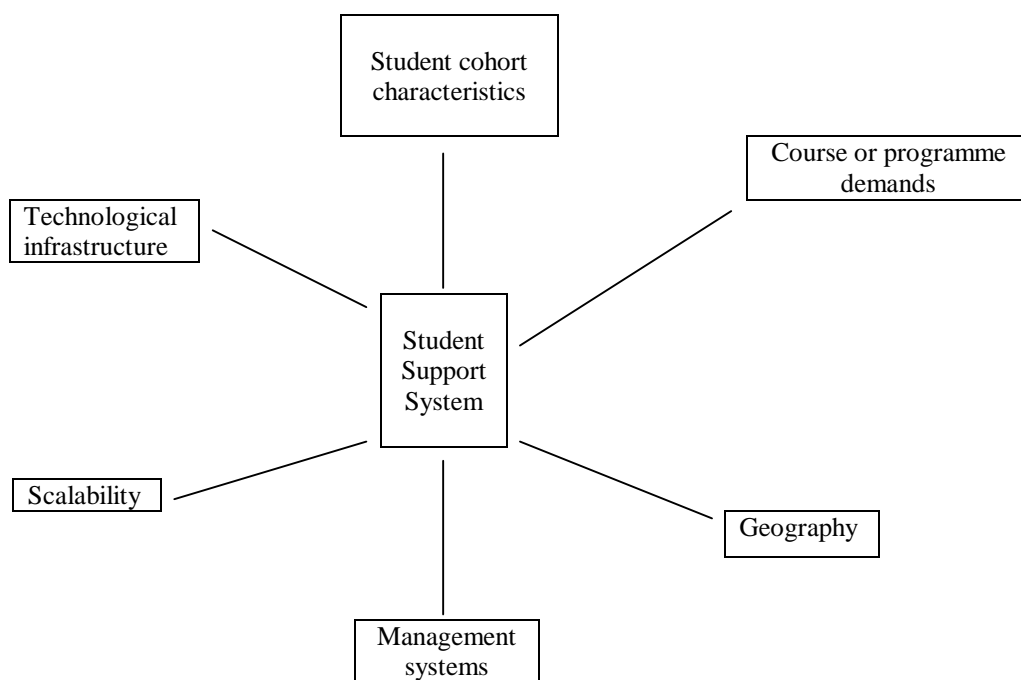


Figure 1: Framework for the development of a student support system

Student characteristics

It may seem obvious, but it is necessary to assert that the characteristics of the student body make up an essential and indeed central element in the development of a student support system. In ways that are now familiar from service industry we now 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

Domestic situation

Nature of employment or unemployment

Disposable income

Educational background

Geographical situation

Language

Ethnic and cultural characteristics

Without going in more depth into these characteristics, it is asserted here that consideration of their inter-related articulation in the range of individuals for whom a course or programme of study is directed when designing student support services is essential to reduce mismatch. Students with special needs e.g. physical disability, should have their needs recognised. The characteristics are not presented in any order of priority, but represent a matrix of qualities that need to be assessed when establishing what services particular students will need.

Technological infrastructure

There are two essential elements in assessing what technologies should be used in delivering student services. These are technologies which students themselves have access to, and 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 schools in villages).

This point is particularly relevant as institutions seek to use the new information communications technologies, and need to consider who will be excluded by such a move. 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 in a particular country), 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 which could attract a number of home-based students not in paid employment, then use of CMC may exclude them.

This leads to a final point in this section on the distinctions between domestic, workplace and social availability of technologies. In making any assessment of the use of technologies it is important to distinguish between these three modes. Social availability would include for example the general availability of reliable public postal services, whereas the private mode would include the availability only of commercial courier service. It would also include the availability of adequate CMC facilities on a public basis in a community centre or local college or library. Workplace availability, as already mentioned, is particularly fruitful for programme delivered to a particular occupational grouping. The danger in failure to distinguish in this way is that domestic availability is liable to be taken as the norm, and that groups of students will unwittingly be excluded. There is also evidence that gender and status can have a role in limiting actual access both in the home and workplace.

Course or programme demands

The specific nature of course or programme demands will perhaps be 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 that for a particular course it is 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 student characteristics as the rationale for meeting, e.g. the need for mutual support. 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 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.

Scalability

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 substantially 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, employed temporarily for the life of the activity, 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.

Geography

By geography is 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 of transport and at what prices, 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).

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:

- 1 Centre-periphery organisation: 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. There can often be strong characteristics of hierarchy in a centre-periphery model, which can be negative. 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.
- 2 Management of information flow: the concomitant issues of management of information flow to and from the peripheral elements, with updating a core task for both centre and periphery;
- 3 Quality assurance: 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 by correspondence or CMC;
- 4 Institutional budgeting: the ways in which judgements are 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 finance models are constructed, in particular with regard to the directions in which money flows within an organisation.

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, 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. While a minority of students in any institutions regard themselves as almost entirely autonomous, 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, the opposite effect takes place, as these are directly student numbers related. In addition therefore to whatever is thought to be the minimum level, 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 framework

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 may stand in tension with each other, with trade-offs between them representing the core managerial achievement.

Main elements of student support systems

The main activities and elements of a student support system are utilised within the framework set out above. These activities now examined in more detail.

Enquiry, pre-study advice and admission systems

While information and pre-study advice can be made available through prospectuses, many institutions provide the opportunity for the student to make enquiry in an interactive and individual manner. Experience has demonstrated that the more effectively students are able to match themselves to courses of study, the more persistence is supported and dropout diminished. Principle ways of offering such services are through face to face visit to the institution, outreach events in or near the prospective

students' communities, through telephone, by letter, or via the Internet. All of these allow individual enquiry. Enquiry and pre-study student advice should, from the student perspective, lead directly into the admission process where this is a mutually agreeable outcome. Dependent on the media used, the services can be delivered locally, centrally, or a mixture of both. Enquiry and student advice represent skilled activities where training is necessary for quality work.

Essential conditions for efficiency and effectiveness of the admission process, as for other elements in student support systems, are:

- timeliness
- transparency
- competence

The admission process may be organised locally in face to face enrolment sessions, by post, or by Internet. Least ideal is a system where the student must travel considerable distances to enrol. While admission represents an administrative process, it should be seen within the larger educational process of decision making leading to study.

Tutoring

By tutoring is meant the element of a teaching and student support system that acts in support of the main course materials however delivered. Most modern ODL systems have tutoring components. Essential decision points in the construction of a tutoring systems include:

- 1 Will the tutors be core members of staff of the institution? Or part-time peripheral members of staff of the institution? Or employed by another institution under a franchise arrangement?
- 2 Will the teaching be by correspondence (whether by mail or CMC), involving individualised developmental feedback?
- 3 Will tutors have a role in continuous assessment? Will that continuous assessment represent a significant element in the overall assessment?
- 4 Will tutors have a role in end of course examinations?

The nature of security of assessment and examination in a particular country will need to be taken into account at this stage. That is to say, can a system depend by and large on trust that say part time tutors will give grades that are fair and immune to bribery or other favours, or is the culture such that security must be very tightly managed within a corps of trusted staff only? Answers to these questions will lie at the core of the tutoring system that is planned. Dependent on the roles which tutors need to carry out will be the training and quality assurance programme that is necessary.

Counselling and student support

Student counselling and related advisory and support functions can include:

- 1 Course choice and programme planning;
- 2 Study methods learning support (e.g. time management; writing skills; examination techniques);
- 3 Administrative problem solving concerning the student's relationship with the institution;
- 4 Financial advice in relation to course fees;
- 5 Personal support.

Major decisions in the organisation of such services include the delivery of such services on a local basis or from a central point through personal visit, telephone or CMC, and the extent to which the roles are carried out through tutors and/or are available from specialised staff, advisers or counsellors. Training needs will once again need to be assessed, and delivery systems put in place.

Study centres

For those systems which decide on the option or necessity of local face to face meetings, study centres will need to be provided. There are a number of models around the world, including:

- 1 The rented model: where rooms are rented in another institution for the meetings or tutorials only;
- 2 The partnership model: where another institution or organisation provides the location and services;
- 3 The dedicated model: where the building (whether purchased or rented) is dedicated to the use of the ODL institution alone;
- 4 The civic model: where the local community through the City Council, Provincial Authority or Regional Savings Bank, takes responsibility to undertake the provision of the centre or network of centres in order to support education and training in its area. This can be for one institution, or can be a facility for any institution that wants to deliver its programmes.

The four models have different strengths and weaknesses. The rented model has optimum flexibility, in that the provision can be made in accordance with distribution of students at different times. It can also be cheap. The weakness can lie in institutional presence and sense of belonging for students. The partnership model has strengths of building alliances with other organisations, but weaknesses in terms of direct managerial control. The dedicated model has the strength of high institutional presence and visibility and a strong sense for students of belonging. Weaknesses can lie in cost and long term commitment with lack of flexibility. The civic model can have significant strengths in terms of economics, in that the local community can decide to commit its own resources in support of the local population and thus provide savings for the ODL institution. It can have, as does the partnership model, a weakness in terms of institutional managerial control.

Services provided from study centres can include tuition, student advice and counselling, admission and fee payment, collection points for course materials, and the hosting of student self-help groups.

In systems of substantial size, a regional office can be introduced as a co-ordinating element for a number of study centres and for related services.

Assessment

While the core assessment role may be thought of as belonging to the standard elements within ODL system, for example examination papers and assignment questions, these also can create significant roles for student support systems also. As noted above, where continuous assessment represents an element within the assessment system as a whole, this will need to be supported through the tutor system. The examinations will in most cases need to take place through provision in study centres or specially organised examination centres.

Essential decisions in this area will revolve around the degree of confidence the ODL institution has in the security of its assessment system when delivered on a regional or local basis, together with safe and efficient management of assignments, examination papers, and the scores and attendance lists which represent crucial components of security and student confidence in the institution. Not least, public respect for the ODL institution may significantly revolve around the effective management of assessment.

Conclusion

The specific elements and activities within student support need to be conceived within the framework that is set out in the first half of this paper (see Figure 1). There can be no universal blueprint for the establishment of student support systems, open as they are to a range of local, regional, and indeed national variations. It is also very much the case that the advent of CMC, and in particular of internet course, presents opportunities for reviewing how this account based largely on second generation ODL can contribute to the next generation. The aim of this paper is to provide a framework for planning such work.