

LEARNER SUPPORT IN COURSE DELIVERY AT THE TECHNIKON FREE STATE AND TECHNIKON SOUTHERN AFRICA

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INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to give an overview on the learner support systems introduced at TSA and Technikon Free State respectively. In the first section an overview will be provided on the learner support system at Technikon Free State. In the second section an overview on the learner support at TSA will be given. The impact of flexible learning on learner support at TSA will also be discussed in the paper. A conclusion on the possibilities on the co-operation in supplying learner support to the Free State region will then be made.

LEARNING SUPPORT AT TECHNIKON FREE STATE DISTANCE EDUCATION FACILITIES

Technikon Free State (read Technological University) is using a dual contact distance education mode that implies limited contact lecturing by part time lecturers. The broader concept of learner support focuses on those learners who were marginalised due to post-political or other socio-economic reasons.

THE ROLE OF THE BUREAU OF COUNSELLING

This Bureau consists of two sections, Counselling and Liaison with Schools.

COUNSELLING

A full guidance service is offered. The emphasis is placed on the importance of decision-making and the acceptance of responsibility. Prospective learners are assisted by professional, well-qualified psychologists who use a variety of techniques and aids, e.g. psychometric tests, career information and discussions. This service is, however, only available to prospective learners who are already in grade 11 and 12.

LIAISON WITH SCHOOLS

This aspect of the duties of the bureau is the responsibility of public relations officers that have contact throughout the year with a large number of principals, guidance teachers, pupils and parents. They visit many schools where they inform staff and prospective learners of all aspects of life at Technikon Free State. They make use of a variety of audio-visual aids and advertising material. They are also responsible for arranging visits to the main campus by groups of pupils from all over the region.

READING DEVELOPMENT

The Bureau of Counselling offers a service aimed at improving a learner's reading and study techniques. The Bureau disposes of a reading laboratory where learners can improve his/her reading speed and reading comprehension as much as possible in a controlled and scientific manner. Reading and study courses are presented on a regular basis and the service is free to all enrolled learners on appointment.

SERVICE TO ENROLLED LEARNERS

Provision has been made for the handling of problems normally experienced by learners. Problems related to study methods, personal matters and relationships are handled by professional personnel.

ACADEMIC SUPPORT

The Technikon Free State has an academic support programme in place. Certain first year subjects have been identified as risk subjects in which supplementary and enrichment teaching is offered. All first year learners taking these subjects are invited to attend these supplementary classes. The names of the subjects in which supplementary teaching is provided will, according to Esterhuizen (1995), be made known to first year learners during the academic introductory programme of 1999.

SUPPLEMENTAL INSTRUCTION (SI)

In recent times more people have voiced their opinion that less strict admission requirements should be applied at tertiary institutions, so as to provide the opportunity to more prospective learners to obtain a tertiary education. This could imply – as we have already experienced – an influx of inadequately prepared (“underprepared”) learners. To face this challenge an academic support programme was launched. In stead of identifying risk learners and compelling them to attend, risk subjects are identified and all learners are invited to attend sessions, which are – incidentally – not remedial, but rather enriching. This type of support programme differs from the “traditional” programme therein that:

- learners are not evaluated before being invited to join – sessions start right from the very first lecture;
- the programme is open to all learners – not only the potentially weaker achievers, but also the potentially better achievers;
- the lecture is not repeated but discussed, uncertainties are elucidated; notes are compared and possible test questions are discussed; (Martin, et al. 1993)

Until the end of 1992 academic support was provided to learners whose academic achievements are not satisfactory. Unfortunately this programme was not very successful. A reason for this may be that it became stigmatised, because it only concerned the weak learners and for them attendance of sessions was compulsory. To face this problem a different approach was adopted since 1993. Based on the model that was developed by Dr Deanna Martin of the University of Missouri, Kansas City a new system of academic support, called Supplemental Instruction (SI) was introduced. This system differs from the “traditional” one there-in that it does not concern risky learners, but risky subjects (i.e. subjects in which the pass-rate of the previous year was unsatisfactory / gave reason for concern.) (Ibid)

This support programme is open to all learners – including the so-called more gifted. The above-mentioned stigma is thus absent. Where-as the traditional programme was only introduced once it was determined who the weaker learners were, in other words, after some kind of evaluation took place, SI proceeds from Day1, before any evaluation can be carried out. All learners are invited to attend sessions, sessions are not compulsory, although an accurate record is kept of attendance in view of monitoring the progress of those attending. A further difference compared to the traditional programme is that sessions are not offered by the lecturer (or evaluator) but by experts from outside the institution – usually housewives or post-graduate learners, according to Robert Blanc (1983:88). “Learners generally hesitate to be candid about academic concerns to course instructors for fear of demeaning themselves. They will, however, openly acknowledge their problems to the ... person whose duty it is to assist in such matters, and whose responsibility does not include assessment of learners’ performance.” In consequence of the exceptional nature of the SI programme, it is not seen as remedial, but rather as enriching. SI facilitators attend all formal lectures to get the “feeling” of the lecture room, to know what the lecturer says and what assignments are given. SI sessions during which the lecture – not the lecturer – is discussed, are scheduled on the official timetable. After such a session all those attending should:

- have a good, complete set of notes/source references;
- have gone through the work at least once;
- have discussed the work with others (class-mates);
- have made sure that he/she understands the work;
- have an idea of potential questions that can be asked on that specific part of the work.

WHY TUTORIALS ARE IMPORTANT

Learners can become involved at levels that have a personal meaning for them through which they get an opportunity to practise their thinking and problemsolving abilities, and to master and incorporate conceptual knowledge with their way of life. Tutorials can also influence the development of the disposition/attitude and values of the learners. It offers the learners an opportunity to develop their verbal proficiency by, for example, defending a point of view, explaining something; arguing a point of view; delivering a presentation; or discussing a problem or solution. It is completely appropriate to do work of a lower standard in tutorials than is done in other forms of contact at university.(Agar, 1992)

Tutorials are supremely suitable for certain types of “training”, e.g. to repeat practical techniques which may later be of importance to the learner. Tutorials are also important for the socialising role that they play. Tutors can get to know and acknowledge the learners as individuals in tutorials and the learners can gain immediate feedback from the tutor and other learners on their ideas, attitudes and values. Tutorials may be the first opportunity for learners (especially first-year), to make real contact with academics.

Tutorials also have the potential of helping learners master adult learning methods. The learning habits of undergraduate learners often make them dependent on others for direction and motivation; they do not question masters; they fear making mistakes. In contrast to this, adult learning is usually characterized by the individual’s acceptance of responsibility for the progress and direction in his/her own learning; the questioning of authority; the utilization of feedback from mistakes; and finding solutions to problems and answers to questions. The characteristics of interest, motivation, dedication, self-image, and open-mindedness are prerequisites for adult learning. (CF Bitzer, et al, 1993)

WHAT IS A TEACHING-LEARNING ASSISTANT (TLA) AT TECHNIKON FREE STATE?

One will find different terms in literature describing the tutor. For example:

TLA (teaching-learning assistant)

TA (teaching assistant)

tutor

facilitator of learning

SI leader (Supplemental Instruction leader)

All these terms refer to a person, usually a peer learner of greater seniority, designated to assist a lecturer in making learning material easier for learners. The tutor meets with learners in small groups in class situations or on an individual basis. He/she is generally in charge of teaching small introductory classes, facilitating discussions in small sections connected to large lecture courses and running laboratory sessions. The tutor may be a graduate learner or a qualified person. Tutor tutorial refers to a special one-to-one relationship between a teacher and a learner. Often, the word refers to academic development outside the classroom on a one-to-one basis. The relationship with learners is important. The kind of relationship with learners will either relax them or constrain them in their motivation to cooperate. For the greatest freedom, a level relationship is advocated. Levelling means functioning genuinely on principles like these:

“I am who I am and see no point in pretending to be more.”

“I accept these learners for who they are.”

“They have as much right to be heard as I do.”

“I don’t want to be judgmental of them for what they say.”

“My knowledge, even if assumed to be greater than theirs, is just as fallible.”

“My stature is not reduced by my admitting my mistakes.”

“I can, and would like to, learn from what they say.”

LEARNER SUPPORT AT TSA.

TSA(TSA) is the second largest higher education institution in South Africa. TSA is a distance education provider. As major roleplayer in tertiary education, with more than 85 000 enrolments in 1997. During 1996, TSA has formally gone into an agreement to cooperate with two of the other leading distance education providers in South Africa to form the Consortium of Open Learning institutions of South Africa (Colisa). The aims of Colisa are the following:

VISION

Colisa will put effective and flexible learning opportunities of quality higher education within the reach of everyone to meet the challenges of society in the twenty-first century by using and extending the capacity of its constituent members and partner institutions.

MISSION

Colisa as a confederal body of higher educational institutions will provide, separately and jointly comprehensive and quality learning opportunities in terms of open learning principles within a flexible learning system by facilitating synergistic ventures in:

teaching

research

community service programmes and administrative systems and to realise economies of scale and effective use of resources so as to create a culture of lifelong learning in higher education to meet learner expectations and future needs of a global and competitive society. By cooperation and attaining economies of scale more can be attained than the sum total of individual efforts. Colisa's joint academic and technological capabilities will enhance its participation in the globalization of higher education.

MAIN AIMS OF THE INTEGRATED LEARNER CENTRED DISTANCE EDUCATION MODEL (ILCDE)

The implementation of a learner support system was mainly motivated by the low passrate of the learners at TSA. In 1994 it was realised that only 11% of all learners that enrol eventually qualify for a national qualification. The second reason was that TSA is receiving only subsidy for successful learners. A developing country like South Africa can not afford to spend millions of rands on unsuccessful learners. The National Department also highlighted the importance of learner support in Act 101 of 1997 on Higher Education. The changing composition of the learner body also necessitated the launch of learner support at TSA. In die early 1990's most of the learners were Police learners, working for the South African Police services. Since then the learners in Economics and Management Sciences became the biggest group of learners. More of the learners are also unemployed and disadvantaged, lacking the practical working experience needed to make a success of Technikon education. The drive toward learner support is also in line with the vision of TSA to become a leading flexible learning distance education provider. In 1996 TSA has adopted a new learner support system called the integrated learner centred distance education model. (ILCDE). The model has three pillars namely

- effective administrative support
- quality courseware
- decentralized learner support

Effective administrative support.

To service 85 000 learners TSA needs an effective administrative support. From 1998 TSA started to send all courseware by registered mail to their learners. TSA have also started with the TSA Online that enable learners with access to the internet to register on the internet. The system also allows learners to view their financial statements, to contact their lecturer, to download courseware at home computers and in future it will even be possible to submit their assignments from the comfort of their own homes. This makes TSA's system more flexible. TSA has started with a three phase registration cycle, which enable learners to register approximately every 4 months for a next cycle. For the learner who wants to progress faster than usual it creates the opportunity to enrol for more subject in a calendar year. For the learner, on the verge of dropout, it creates an opportunity to re-register, within 4 months instead of annually as in the traditional system.

QUALITY COURSEWARE.

TSA is in the fortunate position that it has it own in house publishing section. At this unit the courseware is produced on the project approach with language practitioners, operators, didactic advisers and subject specialists. The courseware is written in an interactive mode with activities, self evaluation question and case studies included as part of the study material.

DECENTRALIZED LEARNER SUPPORT

During 1996 the TSA created a regional office in each of the 9 provinces in South Africa. At each regional office a regional director and tutor manager were appointed with the mandate to develop and operationalize a decentralized learner support system. As part of the learner support system, tutors are

appointed in subjects with more than 50 subject enrolments. The functions of the tutors are to be available for telephonic enquiries for a specific number of hours per week. They also conduct some group discussion classes and study groups. Some of the tutors are also evaluating the assignments of learners. The tutors can be seen as the extension of the lecturer in the region. The aim is to take the distance out of distance education and to improve the pass rate of the learners. TSA appointed about 60 tutors for 5200 learners during 1997. Although there is a clear need for the learner support system it is a new culture that still has to be created. Learners that have participated actively have some marked improvements in their success rate. Academic staff also still has to adapt to the new form of delivery.

The TSA has also installed some interactive video facilities at venues in some of the main cities all over South Africa. This opens up the possibility for the lecturers in subjects without tutors to present the contact classes centrally and at the decentralized venues simultaneously. First year TSA learners can also enrol for a service called the HELP programme. The aim of this free service is to equip the learners with the study skills needed to succeed at a tertiary distance education institution. TSA has also started to train Peer Helpers. The aim is for learners to support other learners in their counselling needs as well as to support the tutors in rendering academic support to peers. Marina de Jager, Learner Counsellor at Port Elizabeth Technikon, developed the peer helper program at TSA. The learners are trained in listening skills, Empathy, Questioning skills, Roadblocks to communication and various other lay counselling techniques. The rationale for using a peer helping programme, according to de Jager (1998) is based on amongst others the following:

- The number of certified professional counsellors are limited while the needs of the learner more extensive than most professionals can meet
- It is more cost effective than the traditional system
- Research have indicated that the peer helpers can be as effective as professional counsellors
- It is also less intimidating to provide information to a peer than to a professional counsellor.
- The peer counsellors can act as models within a educational setting
- Learning is more efficient when students assist other learners and accept more responsibility for creating the learning climate
- "training as treatment": the peer helper gains from being a facilitator to others.

FUTURE CHALLENGES FOR THE LEARNER SUPPORT PROGRAMME AT TSA.

The first challenge will be to implement flexible learning in its full consequences.(Moore,1996:1) At this stage the learner support that is supplied, is still only one option on the continuum of delivery modes between face-to-face and correspondence education. However, in view of the budgetary constraints facing Higher Education in South Africa, the problem is the financing of such activities. The problem of the funding of learner support is aggravated by the economic situation of the learners, which disable them to pay more for learner support.

One of the possibilities is to look at a differentiated fee structure, where they only pay for the services that they want to receive. The only problem with this concept is that the rural learner with the biggest need for learner support is often the poorer. The second challenge will be to make a success of implementing technologically based tuition in South African and sub Saharan Africa. Telematic tuition is a new field in South Africa. The approach will have to be adopted to the specific needs of the Free State Region. Many of our learners do not have free access to telephone or internet to make use of the virtual tuition that is being offered by TSA. The third challenge is to help the distance learner to become an active learner. The tendency is that a lot of learners enrol at distance education providers, because they cannot afford of have the opportunity to study at a face-to-face institution. These learners are also disadvantaged in terms of their study skills and ability to adapt to distance education

POSSIBLE CO-OPERATION BETWEEN TECHNIKON FREE STATE AND TSA IN TERMS OF LEARNER SUPPORT.

The first possibility is the sharing of physical resources. TSA learners can attend sessions at the Bloemfontein Campus of Technikon Free State and at the different Distance Campuses. Some of the lecturers of Technikon Free State are already employed as part time tutors at TSA. This leads to more interaction between the academics at the two different institutions. The peer counselling and

Supplementary Instruction programmes are already using the same methods and the institutions can learn from each other's experiences in that regard. Technikon Free States distance education division can also possibly buy the study material from TSA, saving the resources needed to start a complete printing house.

Conclusion

It is clear from the experience of implementing learner support at the two institutions that more research needed to be done to get the optimal form of learner support. At this stage the challenge is to get the correct and affordable combination of face-to-face and correspondence education utilizing all the potential of technologically enhanced learning.

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