

Learner Support In South African Distance Education: A Case For Action

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ABSTRACTS

The major challenge to Higher Education institutions in South Africa today is a response to the Higher Education Act, 101 (1997) and the expectations in the Education White Paper 3, (1997). Among these challenges are focus areas like redress, equity, quality, access and massification. Through policies of open access, many more students (massification) some prepared, some partially prepared and some without preparation are entering Higher Education increasing problems of retention and a low pass rate that already existed.

Learner Support programmes therefore have become critical to all institutions since Act 101 stipulates increased participation and increased graduate output as expected outcomes. At the same time there is not consensus between academic staff about the need and importance of learner support.

This study examines the situation of Learner Support in Distance Education Institutions in South Africa. It also focuses on the challenge to the merged institutions, UNISA and TSA to comply with the acts and the criteria of the Higher Education Quality Committee, HEQC.

INTRODUCTION

The distance learning institutions all over the world have been challenged to transform their policies and procedures to accommodate the ever-growing number of learners. At the same time the growing number of learners put more pressure on institutions to provide more services. Fundamental to these services, in South Africa in particular is the provision of Learner/Student Support. It is argued that effective learner support is likely to lower the drop out rate and increase the pass rate the very issue that South African Distance Education Institutions struggle with. The objectives of institutions should therefore be in line with Sewart (1992) when he says that the objectives must not

be focused on the production of highly acclaimed course materials but rather on the production of successful students.

OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING – OVERVIEW

Education is seen as the indispensable agent to bring about the change between what we are and what we want to be. In this context the role of distance education is not an option but an unavoidable imperative for many students, in South Africa. Residential institutions have limited space and are located in city areas.

Shastree (2002) believes that Distance Education symbolizes the transformation of education from the stage of craft to technology, enduring it with high flexibility and vastly increased productivity, by transporting knowledge to the people, in place of transporting people to the place of knowledge.

McKenzie et. al. (1975) suggests that open learning systems are designed to offer opportunities for part-time study, for learning at a distance and for innovations in the curriculum. The defining features of an open learning system include:

- maximization of the component of flexibility
- deliberate planning of educational opportunities
- Increasing the access of knowledge to individuals by using all modes of media thus ignoring the geographic distance

Ruggles (1983) warns however that all distance mode programmes may not qualify as open learning systems because of their rigidity and inflexibility, and although the marketing information of some institutions would refer to openness and flexibility, the learners experience something completely different when they stray from the rigid pathways.

LEARNER SUPPORT – SOME DEFINITIONS

There are many attempts at defining learner support. Included here are some definitions. Wright (1991) describes learner support as the requisite student service essential to ensure the successful delivery of learning experiences at a distance.

Thorpe (1988) describes learner support as the elements of an open learning system capable of responding to a particular individual learning. It is interesting to note the

close relationship between what Thorpe (1988) describes as the elements of learner support and how McKenzie et. Al. (1975) suggest with regard to an open learning system.

Hui (1989) sees learner support as the support incorporated within the self-learning materials, the learning system and assignment marking, focusing very specifically on the courseware, the exercise of learning and assessment.

Robinson (1995) acknowledges the many definitions but for him the commonalities lie in similar goals that include:

- providing interactivity and dialogue
- personalizing a mass system
- mediating between learner and materials
- institutional responsiveness to individuals
- differentiation of support according to different needs
- with diverse ways of achieving them

For Robinson (ibid) the learner support elements are:

- Personal contact between learners and support agents (people in variety of roles with variety of titles).
- Individual or group face-to-face or via other means.
- Peer contact.
- Feedback to students on their learning.
- Additional material such as handbooks, advice notes or guides.
- Study groups and centers – actual or virtual (electronic).
- Access to libraries, laboratories and equipment.
- Communication networks.

An analysis of Robinsons goals and elements indicates a challenge to institutions to:

- Know their students profile.
- Establish what their needs are.
- Decide how to meet the differing needs.
- Using different tools to address needs.

Tait (1995) says the term student support means a range of activities which complement the mass-produced materials which make up the most well-known elements in open and distance learning.

For Tait the student support elements are:

- Tutoring (all modes)

- Counseling
- Organisation of study centres
- Interactive teaching through TV and radio.

Again we find similarities with the elements of Robinson.

Keegan (1990) says it is the planning and preparation of learning materials and the provision of student support that distinguishes distance education from private study and teach yourself programmes – correspondence education.

An analysis of the definitions highlights commonalities but also what Tait describes as the rationale for learner support.

- Cognitive – supporting and developing learning
- Affective – that is related to the emotions that support learning and support
- Systemic – helping students to manage rules and systems of the institution in ways that support persistence, Tait (2000, p. 289).

DISTANCE EDUCATION EVALUATION – A SOUTH AFRICA PERSPECTIVE

Already in late 1993 the then African National Congress (ANC) Education Department recognized the importance of open learning approaches and distance learning and requested the South African Institute for Distance Education (SAIDE) to organize an international commission to review the then current provision of distance education and to propose ways in which it could contribute to the realization of an open learning approach. The key providers of distance learning in South Africa were and still are UNISA, TSA, VISTA and TECHNISA (SAIDE, 1994).

In chapter 3 of the International Commission report the finding states that what in South Africa is called distance education is essentially correspondence education with very little assistance other than from study materials and examinations. It further states that students registered at UNISA, TSA and TECHNISA experience overwhelming failure. The report therefore recommended that UNISA, TSA and TECHNISA should rationalize their course offerings and reallocate resources in the interest of greater efficiency. It states “We recommend that these institutions participate in an organizational analysis to ascertain the nature of the contributions they can make to educational reconstruction

and the development in democratic South Africa and the changes they would need to make to do so.”

(Executive Summary and Recommendations of the Report of the International Commission SAIDE, 1994).

Specific Findings

1. Concentration in one place – Centralisation.

- Student support is not an integral part of teaching.
- The absence of student support.
- Brief visits by lecturers.
- Turn around time of assignments too long.
- Unavailability of lecturers by phone.
- Lack of student-centred tutoring.
- One of the key recommendations was that existing providers of Distance Education would have to:
 - Rethink their responsibilities.
 - Radically transform their internal organization.
 - Invest many more resources in supporting and servicing students.
 - Make sure that all providers have access to Learning Centres which should be the focal point of student support.
 - A national coverage of Learner Centres would be needed, (ibid. p. xvii).

In the 2003 research of the South African Institute of Distance Education (SAIDE), they found that there was a lack of understanding of the particular character of learner support in distance education. SAIDE is emphatic when it states learner support is not;

- Simply individual counseling, or
- Just administrative support, or
- Is excluded from course design, and
- Is an optional extra.

Learner support is rather “Support available for every learner that directly affects his/her success and is part of the teaching and learning on the course.” (SAIDE, 2003)

SAIDE also reported, specifically about UNISA and said about the institution:

- They had low success in terms of completion and throughput rates.

- There was still too much of a correspondence nature of programmes in comparison with well-functioning distance education.
- There was inadequate learner support which is exacerbated by the lack of a coordinated regional network of learning centres. The very same would be true for TSA in 2003.
(SAIDE as cited in Nonyongo, P. 128, 2002).

BEST PRACTICE

A review of what is happening around the world in terms of learner support reveals much progress in a number of countries.

OPEN UNIVERSITY, UNITED KINGDOM

Characteristics

1. 13 Regional centres.
2. 260 study/learning centres.
3. All students have the opportunity to be linked to a personal tutor – 1 tutor to 25 students.
4. All students have access to personal tutor counselors.
5. Limited residential school experiences are provided.

(Simpson, C and Gibbs, G 2004)

PAPUA NEW GUINEA UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY

Characteristics

1. Tutorials offered from Monday to Friday.
2. Students are provided distance learning counseling.
3. Residential courses are offered at the beginning and at the end of each year.
4. Audio conferencing is provided – a lecturer from main campus teaches and the lecture is relayed to a number of sites.

(Njondo, 2002)

SINGAPORE OPEN UNIVERSITY

Characteristics

1. Associate teaching staff from tertiary institutions or industry are used as tutors.
2. Students are encouraged to keep in close touch with tutors who also mark assignments, grade them, provide detailed and constructive feedback and encourage student interaction.
3. Tutors are challenged to use the various media and technologies to provide academic counseling.
4. A formal mentor programme supports the tutors, providing guidance and encouragement.
5. Recognition and rewards form the basis for tutor motivation.

(Aggarwal, N 2004)

HONG KONG UNIVERSITY

Characteristics

1. A number of study/learning centres have been established.
2. Study material is in the interactive mode.
3. Library facilities are provided at study centres.
4. Continuous evaluation is done through assignments.
5. Weekend counseling classes are provided at study/learning centres.

(Fan, 2004)

INDIRA GANDHI NATIONAL OPEN UNIVERSITY

1. 29 Regional centres.
2. 17 Specific regional centres – Air Force, etc.
3. 650 study/learning centres.
4. Interactive radio and TV assistance are given.
5. Assignments are received and marked at regional level.

An evaluation of the characteristics highlight the following:

1. Tutors form the core of learner support.
2. The establishment of learning centres take the distance out of distance education.

3. Various activities are provided through a variety of mediums through a range of support staff at a range of places at varying stages.
4. Assignment marking and evaluation form the core of the assessment function.
5. A close relationship exists between lecturer and tutor and the tutors contribution is valued by the institution.

(Distance Education in India, 2001)

SETTING OF NORMS AND STANDARDS

The following criteria for quality learner support is provided by the South African Higher Education Quality Committee, HEQC.

1. Real two-way communication
2. The use of various technologies for:
 - i Tutoring at a distance
 - ii Contact tutoring
 - iii Assignment tutoring
 - iv Mentoring
 - v Counseling
3. Stimulation of peer support structures
4. Learners need for physical facilities
5. Learners need for study resources
6. Learners participation in decision making.

The HEQC further provides the clearest message in terms of their **expectations** and the elements provided are very much in line with all the other elements provided in the definitions put forward. They highlight the following:

1. Learners are encouraged to create and participate in 'communities of learning' in which the individual learner thinks and solves problems with others engaged in similar tasks. This is facilitated through a range of student support mechanisms – peer support sessions, tutorials/contact sessions, teaching on assignments, support in the workplace (mentoring), email and internet communications, and so on.
2. Academic support is built into the design of the course materials.

3. Learners have access to counseling before and during their course or programme, as well as after its completion.
4. Learner access to the technology relevant for the programme/course is facilitated, and learners are carefully oriented to how to use the technology for learning and communication.
5. Learner performance is monitored and learners at risk identified.
6. Timeous educational intervention is provided for such learners.
7. There are systems to organise and monitor decentralised support for remote learners – grouping of learners, allocation of tutors, location of suitable sites of learning close to where the learners live/work, and monitoring of attendance and performance of both tutors and learners.
8. The tutor/learner ratio is sufficiently small to enable tutors to know their learners as individuals, be able to support them in their study and monitor their progress.
9. There are sufficient contact sessions to ensure that the learners are able to achieve the outcomes of the course. These contact sessions are integrated into the course design, rather than being an add-on extra.
10. The teaching and learning activities at contact sessions acknowledge learners' existing knowledge and experience, and provide opportunities for guided integration of the new knowledge and skills as contained in the course materials.
11. Contact sessions are held at local venues or centres accessible to learners to reduce costs and time spent in travelling.
12. Both the academic and the administrative functions of learning centres are taken care of in the way that learning centres are managed.
13. Learning centres, to the extent that they become fixed structures, and particularly fixed structures with technological equipment, need to be accessible to the broader community, rather than merely an institution offering a formal programme.

14. Tutors are selected and trained for their role of mediating learning from the course materials. The training places particular emphasis on equipping tutors to analyze and assist learners with language and learning difficulties.
15. Staff engaged in online tutoring and the moderation of online discussions is qualified for the intensive engagement and direction, which is required.
16. Tutors are trained to teach on assignments by giving constructive feedback.
17. The turnaround time on assignments is kept to a minimum and specified to the learners so that they can use feedback to inform their learning on an ongoing basis.
18. Adequate administrative and professional support is provided to tutors.
19. Tutor performance is monitored regularly.
20. Feedback is sought from tutors for the review of courses and programmes.
21. Administrative staff is trained to be helpful, clear and consultative in the way they
22. relate to and make arrangements for learners.
23. The obligations and responsibilities of the learners and the educational provider
24. are made clear at registration. It is clear what resources and equipment the
25. provider will supply, and what the learner will have to supply himself.
26. Satisfactory and cost-effective arrangements are made to meet learners' needs for physical facilities for study, tutorial, and resource space.
27. Learners have access to the facilities (for example, libraries) and equipment that are necessary for their successful learning.
28. Learners are provided with technical support for each educational technology
29. hardware, software, and delivery system required in a programme.

30. Learner structures such as student representative councils and faculty associations
31. are established, recognized and empowered to represent learners on structures of
32. institutional governance.

An analysis of the 25 points may move us to ask “how impossible is this?” If we look at what we (new UNISA) are doing, there are already elements receiving attention. These emphasis are captured in the ILCDE (TSA) and Integrated Learner Support (old UNISA) documents. Unfortunately the implementation is characterized by:

- A focus primarily on contact classes.
- Some counseling.
- 3 learning centres.
- No integration of activities.
- A lack of common understanding of learner support.
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In other words, very much the same as in 1993, 10 years ago.

SUMMARY

South African institutions now have the definition, the elements, the findings, international best practice, new norms and standards (expectations).

The challenge to especially the new institution (UNISA) is to move swiftly, purposefully and productively to embrace the concept of learner support, put in place an implementation infrastructure and to develop into a successful, developing institution. Although learner support funding is made difficult because of financial constraints faced by institutions, it can be argued that effective learner support is likely to lower the drop out rate and increase the pass rate. It would therefore be logical for institutions to allocate more of their finances to learner support. Ngengebule (2002) Head, Department of Student Support at the old UNISA says that the experience they gained through the management of the learner support services has taught them that theorizing out policy frameworks and imperatives does not deliver the services to the students. “It requires the commitment, hard work and tenacity of men and women who are prepared to knuckle down, plan, co-ordinate and implement visible and viable programmes which

will be the 'building blocks' for concrete transformation of the higher education and the open distance learning, ODL system.

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