



Dimensions of Distance Student Support: Analysis of Practitioners' Views

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ABSTRACT:

The Open and Distance Learning system is acknowledged and encouraged by distance learners because of its inherent characteristics like openness, freedom of time, pace and place. Its success is to a large extent dependent upon effective student support services built in the ODL system. This article analyses the practitioners' views and submits arguments for the effective student support services in ODL. It examines different definitions of support services, characteristics, problems and special needs at different stages of learners and various components constituting student support services. An attempt to classify the support services in to different domains and the justification for student support services are looked at. It concludes with the discussion on the built-in the need for humane element through support services for effective delivery of ODL Programmes.

Keywords: Student support services, Distance learning, Instructional delivery, Material development

INTRODUCTION

A distance education/university system consists of many divisions and sub-systems. Rumble (1992) stated that distance education system consists of two important sub-systems namely materials sub-system and student services sub-system. In addition he identified other sub-systems or divisions in a distance teaching university such as academic faculties, schools and departments, administration, finance divisions, etc. Organisational structure of distance education system is basically divided on functional divisions of work among different

sub-systems and divisions. The materials sub-system deals with course development, course production and course delivery/distribution. The student support sub-system deals with student admission and allocation, advisory and counselling services, assignment handling and correspondence tuition, face-to-face, telephone and two way radio tuition and residential schools, use of technologies for student support services (Sharma, 2010), examinations and local centres. It can be said that student support sub-system is very important in the organizational structure of an open university system. The research

studies on student support services are relatively less when compared to other areas of research in open and distance education. Robinson (1995) identified following issues as some of the reasons for lack of much research in student support services: area of student support is perceived as a less glamorous activity, often regarded as peripheral activity when compared to the real activity of developing course materials, vulnerable to financial cuts and basically / largely a pragmatic activity based on experience.” (p,221). Lack of adequate research studies on student support services from the point of view of practitioners formed the basis of this study. Tait (2003) gave three important reasons for providing student support services in open and distance learning system: the majority students want support, the support services help in reduction of drop out and because of nature of learning at a distance. He stressed that student support in the form of guidance, counselling, tutorial, information and administrative support system contribute for “reinforcing the student sense of confidence, self-esteem and progress” and the support services aim in “assisting students learn successfully.”

PRACTITIONERS' VIEWS OF STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES

The definitions given by various practitioners of open and distance learning have brought some of the crucial and important components of student support services into forefront. According to Marian Croft (1991) student support services can be defined as the “services other than actual course material which institution provides to the learners to realize their learning objectives of the programme.” Simpson (2000) stated that student support services are “all activities beyond the production and delivery of course materials to assist the progress of students in their studies.”

Tait (2000) explained student support services as a “range of services [both for

individuals and for students in groups] which complement the course materials or learning resources that are uniform for all learners, and which are often perceived as major offering of institutions using open and distance learning.” Reid (1995) stressed that student support service “is not an ‘add on’ but ‘an all pervasive’ component of educational process which ensures that learning and teaching are approached from a learner-centered vision of education.”

Thorpe (2000) felt that the support services for learners can be considered as “all those elements capable of responding to a known learner or group of learners, before, during and after the learning process.” Srivastava (2000) defined the support services as “the range of activities which complemented the mass produced materials.” Mehrotra and others (2001) defined support services as “all the institution’s interactions with students except those conveying instructional content.” Kishore (1998) noted that the support extended by the distance learning institution to meet the varied needs of the learners can be called as student support services.

Keegan & Ericsson (2003) used the term ‘student support services’ for those parts of a distance or electronic learning course which are additional to the provision of course content. These student support services can be either ‘learner support’ or ‘learning support’. Learner support comprises all the assistance provided by a distance education or an eLearning system which matches the facilities which a face-to-face system provides for the success of its students.

A critical analysis of above definitions of student support services brings out some important aspects and components of student support services in distance education into forefront. Student support services cover wide range of services and activities other than mass produced course materials, crucial to successful delivery of programmes, cover all pervasive areas of

educational and learning process, and are aimed to meet wide variety of learner needs.

Characteristics of distance learners

Student support services are provided in distance education system because of the diverse nature and characteristics of students. In distance education settings, the learners (Venkaiah, 1996) are isolated, come from diverse backgrounds - educational, economic, social and occupational, lack study skills and are highly motivated, committed, mature and responsible.

Problems faced by distance learners

Distance learners face a variety of problems while they pursue academic programmes. Common problems faced by distance learners include isolation from the institution counsellors and fellow learners/peer group, difficulty in organizing studies and finding sufficient time to study, difficulty in balancing work, study and family responsibilities and commitments, lack of motivation, lack of resources and

equipment and lack of study techniques (COL and ADB, 1999b).”

Satyanarayana & Sesharatnam (2000) identified the problems faced by distance learners pertaining to study techniques, learning difficulties, difficulties arising in dealing with remote and impersonal institution and personal problems (p. 143). In addition, distance learners might have some particular needs, which arise due to the problems they face in the open and distance learning system. Some of such needs of distance learners are information about programmes and institutional system, whom to contact when they had academic and administrative problems, dealing with an impersonal institution which is far away from them and advise on how to study and whom to contact for support.

Stages of student support services

The distance learners need support services at different stages of their studies. Support needs to be provided to the distance learners as per their learning needs at different stages as shown in Table 1:

Table 1. Support needed by distance learners

Stages	Needs
Pre-enrolment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information about the institution and its programmes • Advice on which programme / courses to choose • Advantages of being a lifelong learner • Features of Open and Distance Learning • Guidance on how to finance studies
Enrolment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowledge about learning materials • Skills for studying at a distance • Advice on planning studies
During Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Effective communication through email, telephone, online discussion forums, interactions during tutorials • Academic and administrative support • Motivation and Time management • Assessment and evolution
Completion and graduation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information on course completion and results • Career guidance • Scope for higher studies

(Source: COL & ADB, 1999a, p.3)

According to Dodds (1983) the distance learners need four kinds of advice and support at three different stages of their studies. They are pre course advise, tutorial advise on subject matter, non-subject counseling and follow up counseling. According to Mehrotra et al. (2001) the distance learners need support services in three phases of their learning, which include before enrollment in a programme, the support in providing information to prospective students, admissions, financial aid, academic advising and registration. During their enrollment the student support covers the facilities of book stores and library services, technical support, tutoring and services for students with disabilities. After course or programme completion support covers the transcript services, alumni association, continuing education opportunities and career services.

Lewis (1995) identified the needs of open learning students in six stages of their studies which include before the course, entry to the course, early days on the course, mid-course, examination/leaving point and after the course. Rowntree (1992) stated that open learning's open door can easily become a revolving door that deposits the learners back on the pavement and at three stages the learners need help, before they even begin learning, as well as during and after a learning programme.

All these experts have emphasized the need to provide student support services at different stages of learning to the distance learners.

COMPONENTS CONSTITUTING STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES

Proponents of student support services have deliberated upon different components of student support services provided in distance education (Sewart, Kulandaiswamy, Venkaiah, Reid, Tait and Simpson etc).

Sewart (1993) identified these facilities as student support services such as class

teaching at study centres, individual tutorials at study centre or other locations, annual residential schools (compulsory or optional), study or self help groups, social events, counselling sessions at study centres correspondence with tutors and counsellors, telephone contact with tutor and counsellor, group telephone tutorials, radio tutorials, audio cassette correspondence, computer mediated communication and student newspapers.

Kulandaiswamy (2002) pointed out the following mechanisms to be put in place for providing instructional support services in distance education, like, specially prepared self-instructional materials; audio-video cassettes with emphasis on distance method; telephonic contact with the instruction and teleconferences; interactive radio counselling, radio broadcast and telecast; computer-aided instruction; counselling sessions; student group discussions; and hands-on experiences with practical component.

According to Venkaiah (1996) student support services represent the following areas of support: record keeping, information provision, admission and registration, library services, placement information, counselling, audio-visual instruction, electronic mail, student newsletters, hands-on practicals, mobile learning centres, and summer/winter schools.

Reid (1995) enlisted the following as student support services: career counselling, academic guidance, student advocacy, learning support (including study and exam skills, seminars, access to formal study groups, and informal groups), personal counselling, support for special needs, specific course and programme information, financial advice, library service and specific one-to-one tutorial assistance.”

Tait (2000) recommended the following as student support services: enquiry, admission and pre-study advisory services, tutoring,

guidance and counselling services, assessment of prior learning and credit transfer, study and examination centre, residential schools library services, individual correspondence teaching, including in some cases continuous assessment, record keeping, information management and other administrative systems, differentiated services for students with special needs one sort or another, eg. disability, geographical remoteness and prisoners and materials which support the development of study skills, programme planning and career development.

Simpson (2000) considered the student support services consisting of academic support, non-academic support, advising in developmental areas (vocational guidance, course choice, learning skills and general motivation and counselling), problem solving areas (institution related, study, time and personal problems), assessment (giving feed back to the individual on non-academic aptitudes and skills) and action (practical help to promote study).

Pragmatic analysis of components

Practitioners, as discussed above, have touched upon wide variety of components constituting student support services. There are similarities as well as differences in their perceptions on student support services. It shows that there cannot be one unified approach to student support services. However, these practitioners have provided a broad framework for student support services. Based on their perceptions we can consolidate the components of student support services as information support, guidance support, counselling support, support through personal contact programmes, library support, provision for practicals, study centre support and media support services.

Proper dissemination of correct information, right guidance and positive counselling services are essential prerequisites for any sort of student support services in distance

education. Once the student is admitted into a particular programme of study, self instructional materials are to be supplied, face to face personal contact programmes need to be organised and the students have to submit their assignments for evaluation. To meet the library needs of the students, a small library is also provided at the study centres, special arrangements need to be made to conduct practicals. All these support services need to be routed through and provided at the study centres, which are grass-root level organizational structures in distance education system. Media has been extensively utilized for teaching and supporting distance learners. While commenting about the need for student support services, Sewart (1981) felt that "it is the richness and variety, the multiplicity of provision, which attracts and sustains our students. Study centres and what is offered in them are part of this richness of provision".

Technology has greatly influenced the delivery services in distance education. From traditional correspondence education mode, many of the open universities employ eLearning and web based education. Thorpe (2002) looked at the student support services in eLearning learning management systems. She proposed, "The use of computer-mediated communication (CMC) as an integral part of the design of distance taught courses raises interesting challenges to our thinking about course design and learner support. These have typically been conceptualised as two complementary but distinct systems in distance education, characterised by different practices often carried out by different groups of staff. Where CMC is designed as an integral part of the course, with collaborative learning as essential to assessment and study, this separation breaks down. The design of online activities is integral to both learner support and the course content, with new possibilities for open and distance learning as a result. Where the learning group itself is a resource for study and personal development, it also becomes feasible to

orientate courses and programmes towards local teams and communities. Online tutors play a key role and need to develop 'the technology of conversation' and expertise in the design of activities, as part of their facilitator role." According to her, the course content development and student support services are an integral part of an eLearning system.

DIMENSIONS OF STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES

As various practitioners identified different constituents of student support services, it can be classified into four groups. They are individual based support services, academic support services, organizational support services and media support services.

Individual based support services consist of information support, guidance support and counselling support services. They are basically individual based/targeted support services. Academic support services consist of components like help related to self instructional materials, personal contact programmes and support for assignments. They are both individual and group based support services.

Another mechanism of organisational support services is in the form of study centres. These are the focal point centres where distance learners are provided instructional and administrative support in the form of counselling sessions, library facilities, admissions related assistance, examination, organisation of practicals, provision of viewing video and listening to audio media. A counsellor or tutor provides academic guidance to the learners at study centres.

STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES: RATIONALISATION

David Sewart is one of the practitioners who highlighted the human element/aspects of otherwise industrialized form of education. He believed that the crux of distance

teaching is a "continuity of concern for students learning at a distance". The expression "continuity of concern" and "safety net" bring the human element into the forefront (Sewart,1978). While accepting the role of self-instructional materials in distance education, he couldn't agree with the notion that self-instructional materials could perform all the functions of the teacher in a face-to-face education. He believes that developing a "hypothetically perfect package of teaching materials" (Sewart, 1993), is unreliable and argues that just as in most complex bureaucracies an intermediary is necessary to bridge the gap between the individual and the institution. So, in a distance education system an intermediary is necessary between individual student and the teaching package. The intermediary is a part of the system but works for student and individualises their problems when confronted with bureaucracy. Sewart gives more importance to the needs of students learning at a distance and urges for an interactive mode of system to attend the needs of the learners. He believes that the failure to recognize the necessity for support to learner needs has resulted in lack of esteem for distance education systems.

In spite of sophisticated design and versatility of the course material the learner will always need additional human support which alone can match the infinite variety of problems that non-contiguous teaching/learning give rise to. The distance teaching institutions will have to provide this advisory, guidance and counselling support through a human agency which alone can guarantee the continuity of concern for students learning at a distance. The need for human support assumes more importance due to the lack of immediate feedback and near total absence of peer group interaction of distance learners.

Sewart (1981) emphasized the role of human element in distance education because the self-instructional materials are not able to solve, (a) the infinite variety of learner

problems (b) provide immediate feedback and (c) encourage peer group interaction. Hence he strongly advocated the necessity of student support services. While justifying the need for student support services for students in distance education Perraton (1984) found that “learners lack the support from their peers and further lack an easy point of comparison with their peers.”

The human element which Sewart has championed has been put into operation in the form of student support services in open universities. These student support services are provided through a network of regional/study centres in open universities. The academic programmes are delivered through the study centres and they give face value to the open universities. Open universities acknowledge that their students need support beyond what is provided through the self instructional materials.

Proactive and anticipatory strategies have also been recommended by the practitioners to deliver and maintain effective student support (Krause, 2005; Ramsden, 1998; Simpson, 2005; Tinto, 2005; and Taylor, 2005). Contact has also been reported to be an effective student support. Simpson (2004), report that contact can be proactive or reactive. In proactive contact students are contacted either in a teaching or an advisory environment whereas in reactive contact, support is provided during student-initiated communication. Proactive contact with student has been found to have a positive impact on the retention of online learners. Simpson (2004) reported equal significance of proactive and reactive contact, however, he reflects that proactive contact gains more traction because in the absence of contact of students with available systems, they are more likely to drop out.

While stressing the need for student support services, Prasad (1996) felt that there is a need to identify minimum services to be provided to the distance learners. While commenting on development of study skills for distance learners, he highlighted that

“some distance learners suffer from ‘Abhimanyu Syndrome’, i.e. they know how to enter Open University but do not know how to come out successfully. The learners should be clearly informed of what is required from them as distance learners before they join the programme (Prasad,1996).”

The student support services are designed to serve the distance learners keeping in view of their characteristics, the problems they face with an impersonal educational system and the special needs they have. Venkaiah (1996) recalls the need for student support services to “minimize the negative effects of isolation and the lack of regular personal contacts, to achieve tangible results with the introduction of specific services to special need/equity groups, to solve administrative and learning/psychological problems of students, to develop autonomy and independence among students and to help students to overcome limitations of print medium.”

Simpson (2003) advocates the application of 'Proactive Motivational Support (PaMS)' from tutors to the distance learners because "short frequent proactive motivational support can increase student retention over more conventional tutorial based support." Anderson (2003) found motivation as a great factor for student retention. He said, "The best predictor of student retention is motivation – retention services need to clarify and build on motivation and address motivation-reducing issues. Most students dropout because of reduced motivation."

While strongly advocating the student support services, Sewart (1981) expressed that “advise/support function cannot be supplied through the teaching package” in distance education. In this connection it would be interesting to note what Perraton (1991) stated about student support services in distance education... “most of us require some sort of human contact to make our learning come alive, to resolve difficulties with a text, to get encouragement” (p.6). It is

also not out of context to quote what Rowntree (1992) stated regarding the need for student support services and the consequences for lacking support. He stated that “learners without support are most liable to delay their completion of a programme or to drop altogether. They simply have no one to turn to when they run into problems”. It is also essential to know that the institution also has very vital role to play in providing student support services. Perraton (1991) expressed that “if students are to learn at a distance, they need effective educational and administrative support”. Dodds (1983) also consented that “it is the responsibility of the institution to ensure that whatever support or facilities are needed in the course are available to the students”.

The role of institution is crucial to learner success in distance education. Prasad (1996) commented that “in conventional system the students create problems to the institution, but in distance education, institution creates problems to the students”. The performance of distance education institution is dependent on the staff working in them. Prasad categorized the staff into four groups as (1) “the competent, but not committed, (2) the committed, but not competent, (3) neither competent nor committed and (4) competent and committed”. He further felt that there is a need to recognize and encourage the fourth category, remove the third category, train the second category and motivate the first category.

DISCUSSION

Based on the extensive and critical analysis of different writers who espoused different components of student support services, the present study is able to identify different components constituting student support services in distance education system. The identified components are information support, guidance support, counselling support, support through face-to-face personal contact programmes, timely availability of self-instructional material, help in completing assignments, library

support, provision for conduct of practicals, support through study centre and media support services.

For better understanding and analysis of learner perceptions on identified components they are classified into four broad categories of student support services: (1) individual based support services, (2) academic support services, (3) organisational support services and (4) media support services. They are briefly explained below.

1. **Individual based support services:-** They cover all the services aimed directly at individual learner. The components include information support, guidance support and counselling support.
2. **Academic support services:-** They cover the aspects which are aimed for academic socialisation, peer group interaction and two-way communication. The components included are personal contact programmes, self-instructional materials and assignments.
3. **Organisational support services:-** It covers the aspects of support services provided at and through the study centre, which is the grassroots level organisational unit in a distance teaching system. The components covered here are library support at the study centre, provision for conduct of practical's at the study centre and the role of study centre in support services.
4. **Media support services:-** Media plays very crucial role in distance education. Distance education aims to utilise all available media for teaching and supporting students. It covers all media based lessons and support services like audio, video, radio, television lessons, teleconference and radio counselling.

The students in open and distance education system need student support services at different stages of their learning from pre-admission stage to post-completion stage. Student support services are provided in open and distance education system to bridge the gap between the teacher and the

student and to develop different study skills in the students. The limitations of self-instructional materials are also one of the contributing factors for provision of student support services. Since the students are the ultimate beneficiaries for whom the student support services are aimed at and provided at the study centre, critical understanding and analysis of their perceptions will enhance our understanding of student support services in distance education.

Sewart's concept of "continuity of concern" and Prasad's concept of "abhimanyu syndrome" will help in understanding the student support services in proper perspective. Sewart's continuity of concern has highlighted the responsibility of the institution towards the distance learners in providing student support services in varied forms. Where Prasad's abhimanyu syndrome projected the situation of many distance learners who enter the open and distance learning system with enthusiasm and do not know how to come out of it. Here the distance learner needs to be empowered with skills and methods of distance learning. It means student support services should also play the pro-active role in empowering the distance learner with required skills. Both these concepts are equally emphasizing the importance of student support services in distance education.

The administration of student support services is an ongoing and evolving process. There is a great scope for experimentation and convergence. An interesting trend is the transforming nature of students. Presently the student body is also undergoing transformation and behaving like consumers of education. In this process the student support services needs to transform itself to meet the needs of the students. It means, irrespective of whatever mode of operation, it should be learner orientated and aim to maximize learner satisfaction. It implies that the distance education system has to re-orient itself on the lines of service sector.

The service sector always aims to maximize customer satisfaction.

The distance education student is transforming her/him-self as a consumer and even demanding better and efficient services. The administrative units and mechanisms at the regional services and study centre level also need to change according to the changing nature of students and should aim to provide better and efficient student support services. Otherwise it will be considered as a system which creates problems to the students and as a bureaucracy which baffles the isolated learner. Learner orientation to the administration will strengthen the student support services and contribute to learner satisfaction. The role of administration in distance education system is very crucial. The distance education system is dependent on its administration for effectively delivering student support services. Hence, there is a need to put in place a pro-active, pastoral, caring, simple and learner oriented administration for providing student support services in distance education.

CONCLUSION

The views of distance education practitioners have plentifully revealed what should constitute student support services in distance education. These writings have thrown up the need to provide wide variety of student support services to the students in distance education like variety of needs and students. The problems faced by the distance learners also highlighted the need for support services that are to be provided to the students to overcome their difficulties. The different stages identified by different practitioners also emphasize the need to provide student support services at every stage of their education from pre-admission stage to post-degree awarding stage.

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