

SUPPORTING STUDENTS IN A FLEXIBLE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT: CAN IT BE MANAGED BETTER?

Kylie Twyford

**Student Learning Manager, Faculty of Business
Open Training & Education Network**

ABSTRACT

The greater number of students utilising flexible learning has made student support increasingly difficult. The consequences of this are reflected in lower working and completion rates. At the Open Training & Education Network this problem is being addressed through the appointment of Student Learning Managers.

Distance Education

Distance education has established itself as an important part of the education system in Australia, primarily due to Australia being a country with a small population dispersed over a wide area. At the primary and secondary level the introduction of the 'Flying Doctor' service, and in particular, the vast radio network it provided, led eventually to the first School of the Air. Today twelve Schools of the Air throughout Australia are established, servicing over 1,000 students and covering an area of 1.3 million square kilometres (Wilkins 1997). The vocational education and training sector in New South Wales began delivering correspondence studies in TAFE in 1910. The first course being in Sanitary Engineering to address public health concerns arising from the Bubonic Plague and Typhoid outbreaks of the early 1900s. Australia was also a pioneer at the tertiary level in distance education, with the first off-campus degree program being offered by the University of Queensland in 1911.

For many of the students who chose to study in part or full utilising a distance education institution, the barrier to studying on-campus is not the physical distance to the campus but the need to have flexible arrangements. This occurs because time rather than distance seems to be the major element facing their decision to take up tertiary studies (Open Forum 15/10/98). As Hezel & Dirr (1990, 6) stated

students find managing their limited time in view of competing demands from jobs, families, and other responsibilities to be the greatest challenge.

Distance education courses provide a way for adults to meet the needs of other commitments such as work and family, while still being able to gain or increase their formal knowledge and qualifications.

This need for flexibility in learning impacts on the type of teaching and support that occurs in distance education. Utilising media and technologies within distance education that require learners to be at a specific place and at a specific time, such as video-conferencing and audio-conferencing, are only of limited use for institutions. That is not to say that these instructional tools are not valuable within distance education, but for a large percentage of the students delivery essentially needs to be based upon the asynchronous correspondence model (Open Forum 15/10/98). The correspondence model essentially relies on written material - in the form of learning materials - and two-way communication via mail correspondence. The core element of most distance education programs today is still the correspondence model of distance education (Open Forum 15/10/98).

Correspondence education not only benefits the student but is also popular with providers of education, such as governments and business, when compared to conventional face-to-face education. This is due to the possibility of delivering education to a large number of students, who are geographically disparate at a cheaper cost (Lentell 1994). Lentell (1994, 50) realised that distance education is able to do this because, by its nature, it is able to separate 'the production of knowledge - the courses - from the learning of courses. The production of the learning materials and teaching is separate from the learning environment of the student. This facilitates one set of learning materials for a particular course to be able to be delivered, in theory, to infinite numbers of students.

This componentisation of the operations of distance education to achieve the considerable savings has led researchers, particularly Peters (1973 cited in Sewart 1993), to consider distance education a particularly industrialised form of teaching and learning. Rekkedal (1985, 61) believed that

the rationalisation and industrialisation of distance education, which has been necessary to cater for large student groups and at the same time keep down expenses, results in a division of work and a depersonalisation of instruction.

This depersonalisation of the instruction changed the relationship between the teacher and student that traditionally existed in tertiary education. The elements of mass production that developed in correspondence education ended the students having a relationship with an individual teacher.

Potter (1983) decided to investigate student and teacher opinions on the correspondence model - referred to as the home study model by Potter - at Murdoch University in Western Australia. He undertook to assess student and teachers' opinions, through a mail survey, to determine their perceptions on the current modes of delivery and interaction. He then elicited their preferred form of external studies and amount of interaction with teachers.

The overall impression given by 84% of the respondents - both teachers and students - was that the current external studies process at Murdoch University was most adequately described as 'home study'. Home study being defined in the survey as

the course-writer's responsibility was perceived to be the production of a comprehensive package; the tutor's responsibility was to mark assignments; and the student's responsibility to work through the course alone. Interaction between the student and the tutor was acknowledged to be minimal' (Potter 1983, 101).

However, the survey revealed that the preferred form of external studies experience identified by students and tutors was the *distance teaching* mode of external studies. This was described within the survey as

the student is guided through the course by the tutor who supplements course materials with face-to-face and/or telephone-based interaction' (Potter 1983, 101).

This preference for the distance teaching mode of external studies suggests that the preference for a process that incorporated more interaction between the teacher and the student than occurs in home study or more commonly known as correspondence study.

This preference for greater interaction between the teacher and the student, is indicative of the isolation students feel in correspondence study. Harrington (1979 cited in Sweet 1986) suggested that the most frequently stated reason for non-completion in correspondence study was the sense of isolation. Copley & Kahl (1983) found that the consequence of this sense of isolation was that the students were less confident about their ability to complete their studies. Towles, Ellis & Spencer (1993) agreed, saying that without the additional support of the institution, the distance learner is dependent on self-motivation to see each course to completion. Given that correspondence courses are largely self-paced, Towles, Ellis & Spencer (1993, 3) clearly identified that an institution rarely knows in advance that a student may be at risk of not completing.

The problem of students not persisting with distance education courses has not gone unnoticed. Powell (1991) noting that against the worldwide growth of distance education, there remained a major problem with high rates of attrition. The high attrition rates in distance education represent an unsatisfactory outcome for the students, for their teachers and particularly for the organisations concerned. As Scales (1984) identified, from an institutional perspective the wastage resulting from incomplete subjects and courses is a major concern, particularly at times of fiscal restraint. Distance education administrators, hence, are anxious to identify the reasons for students not persisting and approaches that will minimise non-working students and maximise subject completions. It is the management of the approaches to improve persistence in a flexible learning environment that is becoming the focus of student support systems.

Student Support Systems

Student support services are the interface between the institution and its students (Sewart 1993). There are many different student support systems in distance education, with the style of student support system depending on a number of variables such as the market aimed at, the delivery system and the culture in which it operates (Sewart 1993). It is the development of the student support system within the Open Training & Education Network (OTEN), the distance education specialist Institute within TAFE NSW, that is the focus of this paper.

OTEN is an Institute of the New South Wales Technical and Further Education (TAFE NSW) organisation within the Department of Education and Training. The role of TAFE NSW is to provide vocational education and training to a wide variety of industries, and also to provide basic and pre-vocational education. OTEN is the largest distance education provider in Australia, with student enrolments consistently above 30,000 each academic year, and approximately 750 staff, including 140 full-time teachers, 150 part-time teachers, and 610 off-site teachers. OTEN is divided into four (4) teaching faculties which relate to the general course orientation.

At OTEN, the student support system operates in two dimensions. Firstly, there is the Integrated Learning and Equity Support (ILES) department in the Institute. This department is dedicated to the support of students with specific needs, for example students with physical, learning, hearing, or visual difficulties and, through the Integrated Student Support System (ISSS), identifying and assisting working students who are encountering difficulties. ILES is well respected, being recognised as a model of good practice in the area of student support, especially in relation to integrating their services with other personnel and sections within the organisation.

The second dimension of the student support system within OTEN is that which occurs at the teaching level within OTEN. Individual learner support for all students within courses is developed and performed at the impetus of individual teachers or perhaps at a sectional level. Various strategies are devised by teachers, however formal evaluation of the approaches and communication of the strategies has been limited. The consequence of which are two fold; firstly the enormity of the work in implementing and evaluating strategies to increase retention has the potential to have innovative ideas to support students localised at the section, or at the worst, lost to the organisation. Secondly, strategies that had been implemented, if not evaluated properly, may be operating which are not effective approaches to student support for those students or may not be a useful allocation of resources.

This process of student support provided by the teachers has worked well for many years. It is the view of a Process Improvement Group within OTEN however, that the student support services offered to students within the teaching division could be augmented further utilising current physical, human, and financial resources. Research was undertaken on student withdrawals and completion throughout distance education to guide OTEN in its remodelling of student support within the teaching division. The research identified suggestions for OTEN in relation to ways to overcome retention problems of distance education students. These suggestions centred on an institutional approach to achieving student success.

One program of student support investigated that involved an institutional approach was that undertaken at the Mohawk College of Applied Arts and Technology in Ontario, Canada (Grevatt 1992). The student support management system developed was referred to as the Student Success Program (SSP) and was designed with three elements they believed were essential to student retention: (1) institutional research - which involves the systematic collection of student data, including demographic, withdrawal, and performance information, through the development of a student information system; (2) intervention strategies - which involves the systematic implementation of various retention programs across the college; and (3) evaluation - which involves the analysis of the various strategies, with the comparison of retention rates with courses not exposed to specific strategies (Grevatt 1992).

In relation to the first element of the Student Success Program, institutional research, OTEN has the services of a computerised student information system, the Open Learning Management System (OLMS). OLMS has been able to provide extensive information and reports on students and teacher progress for the last six (6) years.

The second component of the Student Support System, intervention strategies, as stated earlier has been occurring throughout OTEN. Various strategies within teaching sections to increase retention have been developed, including orientation sessions, course guides, regular teacher-initiated telephone contact, telephone tutorials, newsletters and fixed assignment submission dates. The promotion and detailed procedures of these strategies has been limited within the faculties. The consequences of this is for the wheel to be reinvented in relation to the implementation of retention strategies.

What was missing from the intervention strategies at OTEN was consistent evaluation procedures, the third component in the Mohawk Colleges Student Success Program. OTEN is not alone however in the need to increase evaluation practices. Grevatt (1992, 7) stating that

Every college no doubt uses various strategies to enhance student retention in their programs. Where many colleges are weak however is in the area of student research and/or evaluation of their strategies.

Martinez & Munday (1998) in the Further Education Development Agency (FEDA) Report concur, asserting that far more attention needs to be paid to the analysis, interpretation and research within colleges.

The Mohawk Colleges' system of student support is coordinated from the Office of Student Success, which maintains a full-time coordinator, part-time statistician, and part-time research assistant. (Grevatt 1992). The coordinator for Student Success liaises with the Consultative Team for Student Success. This team involves a group of volunteers from throughout the college, including faculty, support and administrative staff, who assist in the implementation and coordination of strategies.

This management structure suited Mohawk Colleges' particular circumstances, which includes a student base of 7,500 students. However, as Sewart (1993) pointed out, an institutions particular style of student support is not transferable to another institution, especially between different countries. He believed that an institution's student support system needs to be: constructed in the context of the almost infinite needs of the clients; dependent on the educational ethos of the region and the institution; dependent on the dispersal of the student body, elements of resource and the curriculum or product of the course production subsystem; and dependent on the generic differences in the student body which it has been set up to serve (Sewart 1993, 11). Sewart (1993) acknowledged though, that the principles underlying the construction of a student support system could be utilised. It was the principle of evaluation, highlighted in the Mohawk College's system, which OTEN would utilise more consistently in its revamp of the student support system provided within the teaching faculties.

Student Learning Management

Designing the new approach to the student support system within the teaching faculties of OTEN needed to incorporate a consistent approach to the principle of evaluation. A Process Improvement Group within OTEN viewed that this goal would be best met by having a coordinating role exist within each teaching faculty. These coordinators are termed the Student Learning Manager. They report directly to the Faculty Manager and are coordinated by the Integrated Learning & Equity Support Manager.

The role and responsibilities of the Student Learning Manager since its implementation in 1997 has been evolving. The position currently involves researching various retention strategies and coordinating the implementation and evaluation of these strategies within each faculty. This involves liaison with both teaching and administrative staff to facilitate the identification of appropriate courses and implementation of the strategies. Emphasis is placed on the communication of the success or failure of strategies between the faculty Student Learning Managers, with management and staff so as to inform discussion and assist with policy making.

As time progresses it is envisaged that the role will also include: (1) the formalisation of policy and procedures relating to successful strategies for wider implementation within the Institute; (2) longitudinal studies; and (3) differentiation of strategies based on the course, subject, and/or qualification level. The later two roles being identified by Martinez & Munday (1998) in the FEDA Report as in need of research in relation to drop-out and persistence in educational institutions.

Assessing the success of the Student Learning Management position as a student support service has been on the basis of increasing persistence (measured in terms of working and completion rates at OTEN) within the courses where strategies have been trialed and overall in the faculties. Utilising quantifiable student success rates as the method of assessment is supported by Roberts (1984) who believes that the effectiveness of student support systems will be shown in the reduction of the early drop-out phenomenon. Sewart (1993) agreed believing that the success or failure of student support methods would be through the use of student success rates as the performance indicator.

OTEN's computerised student information system OLMS is utilised to garner reports on student working and completion rates. Comparisons are made within courses with the students not exposed to the strategy to those who had, comparisons are also made against previous years working and completion rates. Based on current measures available on student working rates the Student Learning Management position has been successful, especially in relation to gains made on courses where specific strategies have been tried. For example, the courses which have had students exposed to Orientation sessions followed by faculty-initiated telephone contact have seen a three-fold increase in

student working rates. Other strategies that have been implemented include faculty-initiated telephone contact, non-working students being sent postcards and letters, introductory video to OTEN, virtual tour of OTEN on disk, industry newsletters, and faculty guides.

Concluding Comments

As identified by Roberts (1984) distance education institutions vary considerably in operations, as such, procedures which may suit one particular college will not be appropriate for another. It may be that the system of student support established at OTEN in the form of appointing Student Learning Managers to each faculty may not be appropriate to any other institution. However, ensuring that the principle of evaluation is included in any student support system, especially in these times of economic constraint on educational institutions, would seem prudent.

What OTEN has attempted in appointing Student Learning Managers is to achieve a balance between the teacher's, student's and management's needs in relation to student support. At the teaching level, the Student Learning Manager's role has facilitated increased support of teachers in their implementation of retention strategies and the sharing of this knowledge with other teachers throughout the college. It has also seen the increased awareness of retention strategies with all staff and the importance of increasing working and completion rates. This achievement alone is important for OTEN. At the student level, the position has facilitated the trial of various strategies, which have been effective in helping students achieve their educational goals. The exploration of retention strategies has facilitated a greater level of customer service to our clients, the students. Finally, the increased emphasis on the research and evaluation processes is effective, especially for OTEN students, as it allows for the assessment of appropriate support strategies, and evaluates the impact of these strategies on working rates. This research and evaluation inclusive approach to student support assists in an effective use of resources, which is favourable to management.

The Student Learning Management position success in finding a balance between the needs of teachers, students and management will be evaluated in July 1999. It is at this time that management will determine the future of the position in the organisational structure, and if it continues the formalisation of the roles and responsibilities of the position. Regardless of the outcome of this evaluation it is my opinion that the position has been successful in increasing OTEN's awareness of the necessary role of evaluation in any future student support system.

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Kylie Twyford
Student Learning Manager – Faculty of Business
Open Training & Education Network
51 Wentworth Road
Strathfield, NSW 2135
Australia
Phone: (02) 9715 8417; fax: (02) 9715 8388
Email: kylie.twyford@tafensw.edu.au