Learner support: a South African Programme Perspective

Introduction

In 1999, the South African Institute for Distance Education (SAIDE) undertook a research study into learner support practices in South Africa.

The research was motivated by SAIDE’s own interest and various national policy documents calling for more and better learner support.

In many ways the study responded to two earlier publications and represented the continuation of an ongoing dialogue on learner support practices. In 1993, The Commonwealth of Learning published a series of case studies which offered insight into learner support services within institutions in southern Asia (Sweet, 1993) and in 1998, the University of South Africa (UNISA) published a series of case studies which offered insight into the forms of learner support offered by member states of the Distance Education Association of Southern Africa (Nonyongo & Ngengebule, 1998). The SAIDE study continues the debate at the level of individual South African programmes.

The guiding principle in the research that underpinned the study was to try to draw out useful lessons of experience from actual South African practice. The overall finding was that learner support is now seen as an integral component of DE provision and should be included in all planning and budgeting right from the start.

1. Background to and rationale for the research

Various policies converge on the centrality of learner support and it is broadly agreed that it is necessary to provide learner support in most educational programmes but in distance learning programmes in particular. It has consistently been argued that ensuring learners have access to educational opportunities will not promote equality of educational opportunity unless learner support is also offered.

While it may be valid to claim that distance education has provided more access to groups who for a number of reasons cannot, or choose not to, enroll in traditional educational institutions, it is important to dispel the myth that access into educational institutions is synonymous with equal opportunities (King, 1994): it is not adequate to simply enroll learners in courses and then not to offer them the support which could change access into success.

In the South African context, a high percentage of learners are unlikely to succeed if they are admitted to distance education institutions but are not provided with adequate support. This is because of the poor quality of basic education for the majority of the population, which has been well documented. Paul (1991) found that an open admission policy without learner support is insufficient to respond to the needs of disadvantaged learners in particular.

Although politically and legally the scenario in South Africa has changed, a large number of South Africans are still under-prepared and disadvantaged in relation to educational attainment, and the throughput rate for learners in distance education institutions has tended to be very low. Glennie (in Tait & Mills, 1996) sums up the reasons for the high failure and attrition rates by noting that:
Many learners undertaking distance education programmes at secondary and tertiary level do so on the basis of very negative experiences of education. Their schools have operated sporadically, their educators have often been alienated, unmotivated, and authoritarian, and rote learning will have been the norm. The prospective learners are likely to lack many essential learning skills, and, in general, are underprepared.

In light of the above, it becomes clear why learner support should be seen as an integral part of any well functioning distance education or ‘flexible’ learning programme. Learner support has been perceived as one way of creating optimum conditions for success and enhancing the quality of educational provision. It is seen as a critical factor in the transformation of the education system and the notion of learner support is located within a clear commitment to equality of opportunity and the paramount importance of the needs of the learner.

Both in South Africa, and internationally, learner support is increasingly being seen as integral to effective distance education courses. Tait (1995) observed that despite the financial limitations faced by distance education providers, institutions have demonstrated an increased awareness and commitment to the importance of providing learner support. Indeed, learner support is seen as a critical factor in the transformation of the education system. Haasbroek (1995) reported that based on his extensive study of the literature, most successful distance education institutions throughout the world offer an element of support, usually involving interactive tuition and counseling.

Although there is also a policy commitment to learner support in South Africa, very little has been documented about the degree to which learner support has in fact been implemented. Furthermore, while policy offers an environment for planning, effective learner support needs to be planned and implemented at the level of pedagogy and practice. Current policy documents do not venture into this domain, which SAIDE believes needs to be informed by on-going empirical research that can serve to sharpen legislation and policy.

2. Research methodology

The research undertaken for this study was mainly empirical, and was informed by a literature review. The research presented is qualitative in nature and case study based in order to provide rich descriptions of learner support activities. We believe that through these detailed descriptions of learner support we have uncovered a range of innovative strategies and variations in support that respond to learners’ different biographies, learning styles, prior knowledge, social motivation and other factors (Cole & Coats, 1988).

These descriptions offer valuable lessons and can lay a sound foundation for scenario planning of learner support across institutions and programmes. They provide ideas and guidelines for those who are in the early stages of setting up learning support arrangements in their own institutions. However, they can also offer experienced practitioners ideas for refinement and improvement as a result of reflecting on the practice of others (Dolan & Castley, 1998).
As illustrated above, the case studies were compiled using a triangulation of data gathering strategies: review of documentation, observation of contact sessions and interviews with learners and staff. Lessons of experience were then derived by exploring what had been discovered within the framework of an understanding of more general DE practice gained from an extensive review of the literature.

Case studies of five programmes form the core of the study. These are:

- **ACCESS Distance Learning and Tutorial College’s Early Childhood Development:** Reception Year Certificate Course targeted at educators or learners needing pre-primary, reception class or school readiness qualifications, junior primary educators and entrepreneurs wanting to establish or run crèches and day care centres.
- **UNISA Institute for Adult Basic Education’s Certificate in Adult Basic Education and Training** targeted at “anyone who is a trainer or who would like to become a trainer of adults”.
- **The University of the Orange Free State Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences’ Bachelor in Management Leadership** targeted at working adults in business and other organisations (including government) who do not have prior formal management and leadership training and who need to develop leadership skills as they function in a variety of leadership positions.
- **The University of Pretoria Faculty of Medicine, Department of Nursing Science’s B. Cur (I et A)** targeted at learners who have completed basic initial training, as well as registered nurses with a diploma or degree.
- **The University of the Witwatersrand’s Further Diploma in Education** targeted at working senior primary and secondary educators with a three-year diploma who wish to specialise in teaching English.

### 3. Towards a definition of learner support

The term ‘learner support’ has been used very broadly and has been used in relation to a range of diverse activities. The following list (based on Siaciwena, 1996; Nonyongo & Ngenebule, 1998; Mills & Tait, 1996; Lockwood, 1995; Back, Cheng & Lam, 1993; Sewart, 1993) illustrates the broad range of activities which are offered to distance learners and which are listed under the broad rubric of learner / student support:

**Related to learning and teaching processes/needs:**
- pre-course study skills training
- learning and teaching contracts
- network of learner support centres
- compulsory residential schools
• practical sessions for professional training, e.g. nurses, educators; for artisan training, e.g. access to workshops, etc.; for natural scientists, access to laboratories, etc.
• academic advising, tutoring
• tutor marking and feedback and quick turnaround time on assignments
• orientation and ongoing training of tutors to ensure provision of quality support
• supply of high quality learning materials
• pre-examination counseling
• administration of examinations
• peer support/study groups
• technology enhanced learning, e.g.
  - radio broadcasts to promote live discussion of issues and problems
  - audio and/or video tapes
  - telematics
  - newspapers (internal and mass media)

**Related to access and information processes/needs:**
• record management
• information on admission and registration
• information on administrative procedures and regulations
• bookshop services
• library services
• personal timetables
• information on fees and financial support
• access to information technologies
• career guidance

**Related to social and personal needs:**
• pre-course registration counseling
• counseling in person and by letter, telephone and email
• internet and email support
• peer support/study groups
• disabilities support
• minorities support
• adult learners support
• ESOL and languages teaching unit
• multicultural education coordination
• social events.

While lists such as the above are useful, they are descriptive rather than analytical and conceptual and they offer no insight into how these strategies are used, in line with the underpinning educational philosophy and its associated learning and teaching practices.

In addition to lacking in conceptual rigour, many definitions of learner support are too broad to be of practical use. For example Northcott (1986: 6 cited in King, 183) defines learner support very broadly as “the attempts made by educational institutions to meet the perceived needs of their students and prospective students”.

Without a conceptual understanding of learner support, research is difficult, as the term cannot be operationalised.
The lack of a shared definition also inhibits the development of a framework for the collection of comparative data. It is therefore necessary to work towards a more practically useful definition of the term.

While the tendency in the past was to group all activities offered to learners as learner support, recently educators have started to grapple with a more focused definition. The most recent definitions of learner support see it as those elements of the system which are responsive to the individual needs of learners as opposed to the standard and mass produced elements of a course (irrespective of medium) that are distributed to all learners.

Support systems, which most likely vary more than packages of materials are: ... those activities which are individualised or delivered in interactive groups (whether face-to-face, by telephone, electronically or in some other medium), such as tutoring and counseling, in contrast with the learning materials prepared for a mass of users without any actual individual or group in mind. (Tait, op cit. p59)

Tait argues that those activities which are traditionally classified as elements of learner support, namely tuition, correspondence and interacting in their various forms should have as a key conceptual component the notion of supporting individual learning. This provision he says stands in direct contrast to features traditionally associated with distance education, namely printed course materials, audio and video materials, etc. Hodgson (1985) in her review of the literature on distance education found that learning programmes were considered to consist basically of two components: the learning materials and the support systems.

Similarly, Bailey, Kirkup and Taylor (op cit, p.139) argue that

Support systems are usually conceptualised as that range of resources – human, technical and administrative – available to learners, which are complementary to centrally produced, possibly multi-media, materials. (our emphasis)

3.1 Learning materials and learner support

While Tait’s distinction (cited in Leach 1996: 104) between “mass-produced materials [which] are provided for students regardless of prior experience, personal needs and preferred learning styles” and learner support activities which are not standardised but tailored to the unique needs of the individual learner, is useful, it can be argued that learner support does also include prepackaged learning materials. For example, Fage and Mayes (1996) have argued that materials can be a form of support through activities and self-diagnostic tests. Rowntree, in a number of publications, also describes how support can be built into interactive materials.

Thorpe (1994) however, distinguishes between the interactive devices used in a text to support learners and those features that respond to a “known individual”. The former, she sees as effectively contributing to the learning process but not replacing the latter, which she refers to as “learner support”.

Tait’s definition of learner support focuses on support which is tailored to the needs of the individual, however, many institutions make use of generalized support, e.g. general tutorial letters with generic feedback on common problems after an assignment, a pamphlet about study skills, a video, audio cassette or radio programme.
A useful distinction has been made between support that is based on “predicted responsiveness” and support that is based on “direct responses” (UNISA, 1998). All pre-prepared materials, such as print, radio, video, are called predicted responses as they are aimed at a specific target group. As the term implies, direct response is in direct response to a specific individual learner, and would fit more readily into Tait’s definition of learner support as geared towards meeting the needs of the individual learner. However, many learner needs cannot be met individually and it may be appropriate to have strategies that are aimed at meeting the needs of groups of learners rather than the individual learner.

3.2 A working definition of learner support

Realising the complexity of the issues at hand, but needing to set parameters for the research, we adopted the following definition of learner support:

- Learner support is the “interface between the institution and its students” (Sewart, 1982) as such; it is developed for a particular population of learners within a particular context (unlike other elements of course production which are largely context independent, e.g., production of a textbook which might be used for several different purposes).

- Learner support includes activities or interventions other than those that are mass-produced and pre-packaged learning materials designed for a general audience. (Interactive devices (Thorpe, op cit.) that are built into printed learning materials are an essential component of good distance education practice. However, given the wealth of material already available on effective course design for printed materials, these forms of support did not form part of the definition of learner support applied in the research.)

- Learner support activities may take place through a range of activities, a variety of mediums, a range of support staff, and at a range of places as well as at varying stages (pre-course, during course and after course).

- While there are many central activities that are integral to a well functioning distance education system, learner support activities are aimed at meeting the unique needs of the individual (although this may occur in groups) and have as their specific goal counteracting disadvantage and ensuring maximum opportunities for success and a quality educational experience.

4. The needs of distance learners

Three key but interlinked areas have been identified in relation to learner support. These are learning and teaching issues, personal or social concerns and access to information and resources.

4.1 Learning and teaching

As noted previously, many distance learners experience a range of academic problems. They may lack the study skills necessary for successful study and/or may have inadequate subject knowledge. They may also not be fluent in the medium of instruction, which is usually English.

The nature of the old race-based education provision is widely regarded as a major cause of the academic problems faced by many learners at a tertiary level.
The problems of apartheid education were not reviewed as they have been well documented elsewhere (Kallaway, 1984). Suffice to say that much public schooling has produced approaches to learning that actively limit learners’ preparedness for further education (Miller, 1992). Furthermore, even those learners who have had access to privileged education are not likely to be Knowle’s (1990) self-directed learners. In fact, Paul (1988) questions whether any new distance education learners can really be independent/autonomous learners.

4.2 Personal and social problems

There is a body of research that has focused on problems which may affect academic performance but which are technically not academic (Kraft, 1991). Many learners are faced with problems relating to studying and family and work commitments. Learners who have not studied for a number of years may lack confidence. Smedley (1993) makes a useful distinction between “generic role strains” related to the role of being a learner and “minority stresses” which among other factors may result from poor socio-economic status and may contribute to poor performance.

4.3 Access to resources and information

A further reality faced by many learners in South Africa is lack of resources and inadequate living and studying conditions.

Although in the South African context very little literature exists on the impact that material factors such as lack of funding have on academic performance, it is self evident that having to cope with adverse conditions combined with a poor educational background contributes to poor performance and there is an increasing awareness that many distance learners experience problems of a non-academic nature. Distance learners may also feel isolated from the institution and from fellow learners.

5. Literature review

As noted previously, the research was informed by an ongoing review of the literature available. We found it helpful to use as a framework of reference the general observations made by other researchers based upon their own detailed analysis of learner support theory and practice. For example, Sweet (1993) concludes his introduction to the COL case studies with the following useful observations:

- Distance education institutions are moving away from the traditional industrial model of design, development and delivery of learning packages towards a model more concerned with the way students both interact and come to understand the idea studied.
- This approach is based on an altered concept of the learner, who is seen to engage the ideas in a field of study and make sense of this knowledge in a personally meaningful way.
- Instructional design increasingly includes interaction as a defining characteristic of distance learning and not as a supplemental attribute of the system.
The roles of advisor and tutor need to merge. The primary responsibility of the resulting academic counselor is to pursue a learner-centred approach to instruction.

Co-operative goal structures can facilitate the development of effective learning strategies. Collaboration is possible in both mediated and face-to-face settings but its successful conduct requires that significant changes be made to current instructional design and implementation practices. The roles and responsibilities of both student and academic counselor must reflect these changes.

The above recommendations seem as pertinent today in South Africa as when they were first published. In addition, Robinson (in Lockwood, 1995) found that:

- Learner-institution contact, such as regular contact with support staff, appears to have a positive effect on learner performance and persistence rates;
- Factors which correlate positively with course completion rates include the use of course assignments, early submission of the first one, short turn-round times for giving learners feedback, pacing of progress, supplementary audio-tapes or telephone tutorials, favourable working conditions in the learner’s context, the quality of learning materials and reminders from tutors to complete work;
- Multiple interacting factors (personal, environmental and course variables) are at work in determining learner success; some institutional interventions can assist if appropriately targeted;
- Learners value contact with support staff and other learners, though do not always use the services provided; learners most often report a preference for face-to-face tutoring compared to other media, though where face-to-face meetings are not possible, other forms of contact are rated as acceptable or valuable;
- What happens in the early stages of recruitment and enrolment affects later success or failure;
- Personal circumstances and lack of time are the most common reasons given for withdrawal from study.”

Finally, it is helpful to reflect upon the requirements outlined by Kember (1995) for an effective model for learner progress:

- Ownership by learners of the tutored study group
- Use of course materials which actively discourage rote learning
- Ongoing assessment strategy which encourages an integration between theory and practice
- Support for learners by enthusiastic and committed part-time tutors
- Support for tutors by a committed full-time coordinator
- Effective administrative support.

6. Lessons of experience

There are so many variables involved in the provision of an effective and efficient distance or ‘flexible’ learning programme, that inevitably any research that is undertaken will present only a limited perception of a complex whole.
Nevertheless, we feel that the five case studies presented in the study, when taken together, represent a significant sampling of learner support as conceptualised and operationalised by providers in South Africa.

We therefore feel, that whilst it was difficult to draw out lessons of experience and to make recommendations on practice for each individual case study, when they were taken together, a number of interesting and useful lessons of experience did begin to emerge.

Due to the limited time available, we will report on only some of the issues relating to one of the questions that the research set out to explore.

**What is the learner support strategy and purpose of the strategy?**

Learner support is seen in all five case studies to be an integral part of the programme rather than an “add-on” option. The providers involved in the case studies did not give the same emphasis to the concept of individualised support that came though in the analysis of current literature and in the working definition that guided the study.

As a result some “pre-packaged” forms of support were mentioned in the case studies and feature in the discussion that follows. In all five cases, the general strategy has been to offer a wide range of learner support options, which are usually not compulsory. The purpose of the strategy can be summarised as being “there to answer questions and queries and act as an ear to problems of learners” with a view to ensuring that learners are able to complete the programme successfully. It is important to note that for all the case studies where information was available, the programmes have very high retention and success rates.

The following list offers a summary of learner support strategies that were mentioned during the research into the five programmes. The list indicates not only the strategies employed, but also potential strategies that were mentioned as possible or inappropriate:

- Contact lectures
- Contact group discussions
- Contact for individual tutorials
- Email
- Family support
- Fax
- Feedback on assignments
- Financial support
- Orientation prior to registration
- Orientation after registration
- Peer groups
- Practicals
- Previous learners
- Radio
- Study centres
- Tapes: both audio and video
- Technology training
- Televised interactive lectures
- Telephones
- Website
- Workplace support.
One of the striking features of this list is the fact that in all five programmes, a wide variety of different support options are made available. There is an important lesson of experience here for providers of distance and flexible learning programmes: the more open the access to the programme, the wider the range of needs and interests of the learners and the wider the range of types of support that will be needed to address individual needs. As Nonyongo and Nengebule (1998) observe:

“organisations need to realise ... that some of the key strengths of distance education provision are that it offers learners the flexibility to take responsibility for their learning and for making decisions about the type of support they require and for determining when they wish to get such support.

Usage of services should thus be determined by learners’ needs and in most cases resources play an important role in accessing the services. As practitioners of learner support services one principle that we need to constantly aim at achieving is the development of a broad range of support services from which learners can choose according to their needs and the resources available.”

A second striking feature of the list is the way in which different support services have evolved to meet the different needs of varied target groups. For example, only one programme, makes extensive use of email, as most learners on the featured programmes do not have access to the appropriate information technology. Although an institution may have such a service, it may not be accessible to the type of learners on a particular programme and therefore cannot be used as a key form of support.

The need to respond to the needs of a target group of learners who work shifts and cannot easily take time off to attend contact sessions is partly addressed in one case by making use of televised interactive lectures and DSTV broadcasts (which can be received in some hospitals and learners’ homes), backed up by video recordings of the broadcasts. On the other hand, a programme for teachers is able to take advantage of school holidays to provide residential sessions, something which it would not be possible to do for other professions.

A third striking observation from the list is the omission of some activities associated with learner support as outlined previously which do not feature as they did not come up in our interactions with programme stakeholders. These omissions could mean that the programmes concerned do not have these forms of support or that some of them may be there but are not seen as contributing to learner support, or that they are simply taken for granted.

The omitted activities are offered here for reflection as possible areas of need that may still need to be explored or prioritised: record management; learning and teaching contracts; newspapers (mass media and internal); career guidance; support and provision for disabled learners; support and provision for minority sub-groups; support services linked specifically to helping adult learners who may never have completed a formal programme of learning or who may have been out of a formal learning situation for some time; support for speakers of languages other than that used as the medium of instruction (usually an ESOL consideration in South Africa); sensitivity to acknowledging cultural diversity among learners and the organisation of social events.

A fourth interesting observation is that all of the strategies listed came up in discussions with stakeholders about learner support, but not all of them necessarily tie in with the emphasis on support for the individual, which we noted in our exploration of the concept of learner support earlier.
In fact, repeated reference was made to the support embedded in the pre-packaged, particularly printed, learning materials. In the discussion that follows, we will need to explore the extent to which the strategies mentioned could be tailored to meet individual needs as the literature, and our working definition, suggests.

Whilst the list offers an insight into the range of strategies employed, it does not offer any insight into how these different strategies are implemented. From the list alone we cannot determine how the form of mediation is linked to the academic, social and personal, and access needs of learners.

Neither does it illustrate the extent to which the transactional distance concerns raised by Moore (in Keegan, 1993; with Kearsley, 1996; with Thompson, 1997) with regard to the need for dialogue, flexibility and learner autonomy, are addressed by the particular combinations of strategies or the ways in which the strategies are implemented. The interaction between the SAIDE researchers and the programme stakeholders in compiling the case studies suggests that, in general, practice is not underpinned by DE theory in quite this way. None of the interactions really elicited the distance learning theoretical basis on which support strategies were chosen and implemented, which suggests the need for more debate and investigation in this area.

6.1 Direct human contact

All five programmes make use of some form of direct human contact.

Generally speaking, this form of support is operationalised in three broad ways in the wider distance-learning context in South Africa:

- Lectures
- Small group discussions
- Individual tutorials.

None of the programmes reviewed make use of traditional lectures. However, all five programmes make use of direct human contact in the form of small group tutorials. Such tutorials offer opportunities for the following kinds of interaction:

- Interacting with materials, dealing with problems and exploring ways of approaching them
- Discussing preparation for and feedback on assignments
- Sharing ideas and drawing on experiences
- Providing social support and building confidence
- Providing opportunities for the application of theory
- Encouraging a network of shared values
- Opportunities for debating issues
- Opportunities to ‘talk the language’ of the subject.

A high level of importance is attached to this form of direct human contact in all five case studies, with these sessions enjoying a high level of attendance.

However, there are some potential difficulties with this form of support in that, even with decentralised contact venues, attendance at the sessions usually involves additional cost for the learners in the form of transport, and sometimes also for accommodation.
In addition, the learners on the featured programmes are all adults, many of whom have family commitments, which can make a long absence from home problematic. Where such sessions are needed, it is vitally important that they are planned well in advance and that the dates, topics, venues and times are clearly communicated. It is also important for learners to be able to see a clear link between the contact session and the materials and that the methodology supports the agreed outcomes – for example, if the contact session is supposed to foster the sharing of ideas, then the tutor needs to adopt a facilitating role and encourage group interaction and the exploration of divergent viewpoints. Clearly, the value of the contact session depends largely on the tutor who needs to be able to elicit group needs and encourage active participation. This suggests the need to offer tutors a guide to the structure and outcomes for these sessions as well as some facilitation guidelines.

Two of the case studies suggest innovative alternative approaches to some of the above problems. One approach is to enter into partnerships with other service providers to avoid duplication of services whilst still providing a network of support centres that take the programme closer to where the learners are.

Another approach is for learners and tutors to negotiate times and venues. This approach means that arrangements can usually be made that suit most of the participants. However, it is still not always possible to accommodate everybody’s needs so there are still some problems such as contact sessions which occur on a Sunday (sometimes the only time when everybody is available) when transport is scarce; a clash of interests which was not foreseen, such as the return of boys from an initiation school; and the fact that some venues, whilst being accessible, are not optimal for learning.

A third option for contact support is the individual tutorial. However, learners interviewed indicated that in general they find it more convenient to telephone rather than visit the tutor and that most of their queries relate to administrative matters. As indicated above, the cost and difficulty of transport is an important militating factor. However, even at contact sessions, learners make very little use of the opportunity for a formal one-to-one interaction. One tutor makes the important point that for individual support to be effective a personal relationship needs to be developed and so speculates that “if learners had more contact and exposure to the same lecturers . . . learners would make more use of individual support.”

It is interesting to note that in all the programmes, even where specific times have been scheduled during contact sessions, the initiative for seeking individual support is expected to come from the learner. The fact that the learner is responsible for initiating individual support is complicated by a number of factors related to logistics and perceptions, as suggested by tutors who indicated the following possible reasons for the limited use made of individual support:

- Not enough time
- Lack of transport
- No or limited access to telephones
- The course is ‘self-explanatory’
- Unavailability of tutors (especially those who teach)
- Perception that tutors are “too busy”
- It is part of the culture of the learners not to ask for help
- Learners are too shy to ask for help
- Second language speakers do not have the “right tools” to talk about their problems.
If these observations are valid, they suggest the need for tutors to take a more proactive role in initiating individual support by identifying learners at risk and inviting them to meet for support at a mutually convenient time and venue. Lewis (in Lockwood, 1995) identifies key stages in the programme cycle when this more pro-active role might be needed:

- Before the course
- Entry to the course
- Early days of the course
- Mid-course
- Examination/leaving point
- After the course.

This issue points to one of the many inherent tensions that need to be managed: in this instance the tension between providing support and respecting/nurturing autonomy. Such issues might be addressed if providers entered into learning and teaching contracts with their learners in which expectations and roles could be clearly spelt out. Evans (1994) suggests that most learners will have had a didactic experience of education and will not necessarily be ready for complete independence, although the issue of independence is often an important reason why adult learners are attracted to distance education approaches.

He notes that:

“The challenge is to develop and maintain approaches which enable students to have their voices heard and for the open and distance educators and their institutions to be able to listen to and understand the practical implications of what is being said. Learners should also recognise that they are part of a diverse body of people whose interests need to be voiced.”

Bernath and Fichten (1999) point out that educators will need to become much more adaptable if they are to rise to the sort of challenges outlined above:

“In so far as ‘independence’ on the part of the learner’s side is respected, and a higher level of learning skills is aimed for, adaptation as a concept is of growing importance. In this context, the following analysis of the tutor role can be made:

If the goal for learning is to recall hard facts, models or theories, the teacher’s/tutor’s role is to closely follow the study material to help deepen the learner’s knowledge;
If the goal of learning is to search for meaning and relevance, the teacher/ tutor takes part in the analysis and discussion of the study material in order to clarify the context to students;
If the goal is to apply the contents and solve problems, the teacher/ tutor will take part in the application of the contents of the study material and in developing approaches towards problem-solving with students.”

**Peer groups**

All of the case studies indicate peer group learning, in which the learners themselves become increasingly self-directed, as a form of support. Learners identified a number of advantages and disadvantages of peer group work:

**Perceived advantages**

- it creates a platform to share and exchange ideas
- it enhances understanding of materials
- it helps each other fill gaps
• it improves communication skills
• in the groups they can motivate each other
• learners share costs by sending one person to visit the lecturer for queries

Perceived disadvantages
• geographic distance makes it difficult to get together
• some people dominate
• negative criticism of some group members
• withholding information due to competitiveness
• not keeping commitments to partners or members of the group
• some come unprepared for discussion
• discussion of irrelevant issues which waste time
• differing study needs which can lead to a clash of interest.

Peer group work needs to be well managed to ensure that it does not contribute to a possible loss of creativity and individual contribution and that peers do not simply reinforce the weaknesses in each other’s study strategies or interpret a group approach to assignment preparation as meaning that everyone should submit exactly the same work. Clearly, if institutions see group work as a central learning mechanism, they will need to provide guidance on how to set up and sustain groups, how to manage group dynamics, how to overcome the logistical constraints faced by learners outside of sessions and they will need to foster a clear understanding of the purpose and benefits of group interaction.

Assessment criteria will also need to be adapted to reflect the emphasis on cooperative and collaborative learning strategies as opposed to the traditional model of a learner working alone. It is worth noting that this applies to full-time programmes as much as to distance learning programmes.

De Jager and Wasserfall (1996) make the important observation that for peer support to work it must be built on respect, genuineness and empathy, which are attitudes that will take exposure and time to develop. Gunawardean and Boverie (in Tait, 1995) found that in programmes with a high degree of group interaction: “… in both traditional and distance classes, satisfaction with the group, and satisfaction with group processes were the best predictors of overall satisfaction with the learning experience.”

Encouraging peer group work, during and between contact sessions, is a way to fulfil the social and personal support needs of learners whilst encouraging dialogue and greater learner independence from the institution. Ideally, peer group discussions will increasingly determine the direction of, and perhaps even come to replace, tutor-led contact sessions.

6.2 The use of new technologies to provide learner support

The TELI report found that most technologies, both old and new, still tend to enhance the role of the traditional educator in the way they are used in South Africa. The case studies conducted for this study confirmed that considerable effort is required to ensure that the potential of various technologies to facilitate interaction and two-way dialogue is actually realised.

As a complement to direct face-to-face interaction, the following technologies can be used to provide individualised support:
• Email
• Fax
• Printed letters
• Radio
• Tapes: audio and video
• Televised interactive lectures
• Telephones
• Websites.

In the interests of time and to avoid possible duplication with another keynote address, we will not explore these issues further in this paper.

6.3 Feedback on assignments

All of the programmes involved in this research indicate that feedback on assignments is an important form of learner support. A turnaround time of one month or less and substantive feedback designed to:
  • show learners where they went wrong
  • help with further study
  • encourage and motivate
are important indicators of usefulness for both learners and tutors.

It is important for most learners that the institution makes provision for interaction between tutors and learners on assignment preparation and feedback and this is indicated as an important feature of contact sessions.

The quality of feedback on assignments is an important indicator of their usefulness but not all institutions provide tutors with formal training or guidelines on how to use feedback on assignments as a teaching tool.

In addition, few institutions have a formalised process of quality control for assignment marking, which seems otherwise to be left largely to the discretion of the individual tutors concerned.

Few learners have had experience of quality feedback, and so most seemed content with the service and more interested in the marks awarded. However, some learners are clearly aware of what can be done as illustrated in the following comment from a learner:

“With feedback I get for my assignments, I can not get any further because if I got 50% there is no elaboration on how to improve. I sometimes think of scoring up to 80% but I can not get that mark because feedback is not enough.”

Tutors offering feedback need to walk a fine line between not offering enough feedback for learners to be able to see how they can improve, and offering so much feedback that the learner is discouraged. This fine line can be managed well if tutors and learners have the opportunity for interaction on the assignment both before and after it has been written.

The following useful indicators for good practice emerge from the study:
• the importance of clarity on the purpose of an assignment, the marking process, assessment criteria and the purpose of feedback
• the opportunity to resubmit once the learner fully understands what is required
• the importance of providing a mechanism for learners to respond to feedback.

Efficient and professional administration of assignments is as important as the quality of feedback provided. Learners need to receive feedback on one form of assessment before they must submit the next or write a related test, otherwise they have no opportunity to effect improvements. In addition, a learner’s individual performance is a confidential matter between learners and the institution and support staff working with assignments need to be trained to respect this confidentiality.

The above requirements indicate the need for careful planning and monitoring of the assignment handling process and the need for deadlines for various aspects of the process.

To allow for some compromise between efficiency and deadlines and openness and flexibility, institutions should give consideration to providing for extra-ordinary forms of assessment where learners have valid reasons for missing deadlines.

To encourage a formative approach to assessment, institutions might experiment with a model of optional and compulsory assignments or a model of feedback, interaction and resubmission.

### 6.4 Other forms of support

Of the other forms of support mentioned in the study, the provision of study or learning centres proved to be an important issue for all stakeholders interviewed.

Although most of the programmes involved in the research offer decentralised contact sessions of one form or another, these do not always take place in a formal study centre. Such sessions are often held in a government school or a church and are therefore frequently poorly resourced with no support service being available outside of the contact sessions. The location of study centres has implications for the quality and extent of the service that can be provided as well as their accessibility for learners, most of whom are usually dependent on expensive, unreliable, even unsafe public transport.

According to Nonyongo and Ngengebule (1998), Mills (1996) and Tait (in Lockwood, 1995), ideally a study centre will provide the following facilities:

- adequate space for tutorials, group discussion and quiet reading
- a library with basic and course specific reference materials
- office/administrative space for staff
- office/administrative space for learner representatives
- assignment boxes for delivery and receipt of assignments
- sufficient lighting and running water
- recreation space for learners
- facilities to borrow and watch videos and listen to audio tapes
- access to information technology
- provision of information, guidance and counselling to the general public
- access to local guidance, counselling and administrative information, including pre-study advice
- facilities for taking examinations
- telephone, fax and email links to the central office
• laboratories for practical work
• storage and collection facilities for study materials.

In addition to the range of facilities that might be offered, attention should be given to the fact that the study centre should be accessible to learners when they need it, which could imply ultimately that it should be open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week and manned by shifts of workers.

It is certainly the case that a study centre open only during normal office hours during the week would not be of much use to the target learners for the programmes reviewed in the research.

It seems clear from the extensive list of needs indicated above that no one institution will be able to set up and sustain a network of study centres that will meet the needs of all learners. The only way to begin to address this need would seem to be for providers to work in partnership.

In this regard, SAIDE could act as a clearinghouse for information by dedicating a section on its website to providing descriptions of study centres already available, their locations, facilities and contact details. Where no suitable study centres currently exist, several institutions with learners in this area could collaborate to set one up.

Where study centres do exist, institutions could subsidise their running costs by allowing access to the learners of other institutions, perhaps for a per capita fee or on the basis of a reciprocal support arrangement. In the latter scenario, we should, however, take cognisance of some research by Mills (1996) that indicates reluctance on the part of some learners to use the facilities of another institution, possibly because the support staff have not been adequately trained to support all learners equally.

7. Conclusion

In 1994 an international commission into distance education in South Africa concluded that:

"Taken as a whole, distance education’s contribution to the priorities for education and training in the Policy Framework is variously marginal, inefficient and, in respect of the values sought for democratic South Africa, dysfunctional."

The programmes reviewed in this report demonstrate how far some institutions have come in addressing this negative assessment.

We can conclude that the process of opening up educational opportunities cannot be effective unless educational providers ensure that it is accompanied by adequate learner support. This involves the provision of counselling, advice, and relevant information prior to enrolment so that learners can know clearly what they are being offered and the implications of their learning choices. It also entails providing continuing support, advice and counselling throughout the learning process.
Several types of support should be made available to learners: support offered by educators of all kinds on a regular basis both through face-to-face contact and other forms of communication (including telephones, the post, and computer links); the encouragement of interaction between learners on both a group and a one-to-one basis; the provision of any necessary learner support in educational courses (although this should not be mistaken for ‘support’ which does nothing other than encourage learners to move through courses in a particular way prescribed by the providing institutions); and by providing access to the necessary facilities, including a space in which learning activities and interaction between learners can take place as well as access to computers, laboratories, and other resources which might be a necessary requirement within the learning process.

It has not been possible, within the short time available, to present all of the lessons of experience gained from the study. However, a summary of all the key findings and recommendations can be found in the July edition of the SAIDE newsletter, OLTDE, and the full report can be accessed through the SAIDE website (www.saide.org.za).

In addition, to the lessons of experience the findings of the report indicate the need for further research in the following areas in order to consolidate and build upon the great progress that has already been made:

- Guidelines for matching learner support provision to different target audiences
- Guidelines for matching learner support strategies with programme needs
- Adopting learner support strategies which are culturally sensitive
- Learner support provision and the implications for the per capita cost of successful programme graduates
- Making learner support more responsive to changing needs and contexts
- Developing models of learner support for the South African context to mediate the transition from a school system dominated by rote learning and educator-centred transmission styles to helping learners become increasingly independent.

Alan Tait, who was the critical reader for the study, comments as follows in his foreword to the full report:

_It is a great privilege to be invited to write this Foreword to ‘Learner support: a South African Programme Perspective’. It is also a surprise, at least in the sense that 10 years ago South Africa would have been one of the last countries from where a study of such value would have been expected to come. … Unreformed correspondence education, driven by provider needs, and resulting in drop-out that was as devastating for individuals as it was in terms of national educational investment, was the dominant model. From this position there has been considerable if hard-fought change. … Dominant amongst the insights is that learner support has to be integrated in distance education teaching, learning and administrative systems: not invented as an afterthought, or to be disposed of in bad budget years._

As Tait notes, we have come a long way since 1994. There are examples of very good practice available to learn from. The onus is upon us all to see that we take the lessons to heart in our own institutions.
Acknowledgements, bibliography and references

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The references below were consulted for the full report and are available in the SAIDE resource centre:

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