



TASK TEAM 4: Student Support

**CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR
STUDENT SUPPORT AT UNISA**

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1. INTRODUCTION

Strategic Objective 9 of the Unisa 2015 Strategic Plan (Unisa 2005) commits the institution to: “establish service-orientated, technology-enhanced learner support to increase retention and throughput”. While acknowledging that Unisa has been involved in distance education and open learning practices for many years, a new set of goals, a changing environment and a changing student population require that we begin to do some things differently. This document seeks to develop a revised understanding of student support in this context.

As Unisa moves from a product-centred to a student-centred model for ODL, and makes increasing use of pedagogic approaches informed by social-constructivist principles, the central importance of student support becomes even more apparent. The emerging discussion supports the belief that quality teaching and learning is the core business of the institution.

1.1 AN INTEGRATED AND COHERENT LEARNING EXPERIENCE

The core business of the institution is ODL teaching and learning. We understand that quality learning arises from the integration in a cohesive and coherent learning experience of quality course materials, effective and appropriate use of a range of technologies, appropriate assessment and appropriate, decentralised learning support. Each of these aspects of the teaching and learning experience should be informed by the student profile that changes over time. This necessitates that trends be tracked regarding, for example, the demographic profile of registering and graduating students (including aspects such as their socio-economic life worlds, expectations, prior histories in education and their technology profiles).

1.2 UNDERSTANDING THE STUDENT PROFILE – CUSTOMISED SUPPORT?

An understanding of the complexity of the multifarious issues that affect student retention, throughput and experience is the key to successful implementation of ODL (Prinsloo, 2009: 113). This view militates against the notion of a one-size-fits-all approach to student support on the one hand and reinforces the notion of the need to think holistically, on the other. For example, academics and support staff should not wait until a disabled person applies to do a course or tries to use a service before thinking about what reasonable adjustments they could make. Instead they should continually be anticipating the requirements of disabled students and the adjustments they could be making for them.

Non-academic factors are just as important in relation to students’ success and retention as academic factors. In a developing ODL environment the non-academic factors may outweigh the academic factors. Developing an appropriate student support model and

strategy should therefore encompass both academic and non-academic support (eg financial, counseling, community networks, etc).

Simpson (2008) suggests that students' persistence their motivation to succeed in their studies. He suggests that the focus of our interactions with individual students might usefully adopt a proactive motivational support approach that draws upon recent findings in the fields of positive psychology and theories of the self. Such an approach, it is argued, would have the following characteristics:

- It would be individual – it would focus on individual student needs rather than a top-down one-size-fits-all approach.
- It would be interactive – it would allow learners to interact with their support rather than be a take-it-or-leave-it approach.
- It would be motivational – it would be informed by and use both Self Theory and the Strengths approach. (Simpson 2008: 168).

There should be a constant reiterative interchange between generic and planned activities in order to adapt student support approaches and interventions.

1.3 INTERPLAY BETWEEN CURRICULUM PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT, AND STUDENT SUPPORT PRACTICE

Planning a curriculum is much more than just deciding what "content" should be included and what should be excluded. Planned curriculum decisions about teaching and learning also include access and technology support for e-learning.

The focus should be on planned provision that includes well-informed considerations of the requirements of *all* students, including disabled students. There should be clear guidelines of what is available to support the delivery to disabled students. In general, planned and efficient decentralised administrative support should include course choice guidelines, components of the Responsible Open Admission Program (ROAP), automated SMS acknowledgements and reminders, individualised student support in response to performance tracking, and responding to student questions/queries. In future the priority will be upon conjoining the expertise of disability services (ARCSWID) with the distinctive characteristics of academic and support staff in the regions, to create and embed a welcoming and supportive environment for students with disabilities. In this regard the nomination of a staff member is vital to act as a conduit to the disability service and as a point of reference for colleagues and students.

Implicit in the above scenario is that different Colleges, programmes and modules will favour different mixes of student support strategies depending on particular disciplinary needs, contexts of learning and (changing) student profiles. This suggests the need to agree on a basic set of strategies that apply to all modules/ programmes offered and the necessary scope for flexibility to address particular needs.

1.4 THE CENTRALITY OF STUDENT SUPPORT

The discussion in this section proceeds from the premise that the promotion of learning is the core business of an ODL institution; that different conceptions of learning result in different ODL practices and that therefore there is a need to explore notions of learning in order to be able to make informed decisions about learning support.

Learning support is concerned with the range of strategies that can be employed to mediate what Subotzky and Prinsloo (in Prinsloo, 2009) calls the 'fit' between students' transforming identity as learners and the evolving goals and understandings of the institution as a learning organisation. Various forms of tutorial support and learning facilitation, for example, learning literacies, study skills development and peer mentoring are central to this process. Student affairs, on the other hand, is concerned with the ways in which students come to identify themselves as members of a wider community of learning: it is concerned with issues of governance and representation, of wellness and shared values, of ensuring appropriate institutional support for the development of the student as a whole person and not just as an emerging academic. Student support in its broad sense is therefore central to mediating and closing the gap between a social setting that has traditionally been communitarian and oral on the one hand, and the institutional distance learning experience which has traditionally been premised on the individual engaging with the printed text, on the other. Student support considerations underpin all aspects of the student walk and the journey towards building sustainable communities of learning and practice.

2. DEFINING STUDENT SUPPORT

2.1 THE NATURE OF ODL

Open distance learning (ODL) aims to bridge the time, geographical, economic, social, educational, and epistemological and communication distances between students and the institution, students and academics, students and courseware and students and peers. ODL focuses on removing barriers to access learning, supports flexibility in learning provision, and supports student-centeredness with the intention that all students can succeed.

2.1.2 *EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY INFORMING STUDENT SUPPORT*

Social-constructivism supports students' interaction with their materials, the construction and building of knowledge, and the testing of this knowledge through interaction with others. It is assumed that most students do not learn efficiently while interacting in isolation with the learning package with which they are provided with. In addition effective learning depends on a broad base of skills and attitudes that are in place or are developed during the learning experience.

ODL at Unisa subscribes to a social-constructivist learning philosophy that sees learning as a result of several situated and dynamic connections between students and the

curriculum, the resources which support the curriculum, lecturers and tutors, administrative and professional support functions offered by the institution, students' peers who are also studying for the same degrees, other peers, community members and broader society.

2.1.3 THE UNISA CONTEXT

Unisa acknowledges that students' learning journeys are characterised and shaped by many complex and interrelated factors often changing as the academic year progresses. The different factors that impact on students' learning journeys can be classified into academic and non-academic. In order to consider support for students in dealing with these factors, it is important that the institution (as well as students) is clear regarding the support for which the institution is responsible, and support that students are encouraged to provide or source for themselves.

Unisa is committed to provide optimal student support initiatives that are included in the registration fee (students with disabilities receive dedicated support at no extra cost). Students are informed at registration as to what support is included in their fees. Students are also provided with a menu of additional services for which they can register. Unisa's student support can therefore also be structured according to individual needs.

Support should be flexible enough to meet the needs of an individual, whilst maintaining academic and prescribed standards. The support Unisa offers has to be intentionally designed to address specific needs and specific student populations at different times in their learning journeys. More importantly, the course development team should demonstrate that the learning, teaching and support elements of programmes/courses are accessible to all students, including students with disabilities. It is equally important that information regarding course material be available in an accessible format to allow for timely modification into alternative formats.

In applying the abovementioned, the comprehensive nature of Unisa needs to be considered. Any initiative to ensure the proper provision of student support should consider supporting work-integrated learning, work-simulated learning and practical assignments. We need to prepare all students for the workplace experience, placement, mentoring, monitoring, assessment and debriefing. The ultimate objective is to ensure that the student has the opportunity to achieve occupational competence.

2.1.4 AN INTEGRATED APPROACH

Different divisions within the institution are responsible for supporting parts of the learning experience. Effective student support can only be achieved through the effective and strategic integration of the various initiatives employed to equip academics and support staff to create welcoming and barrier-free teaching and learning environments. This is accomplished by anticipating the diversity of students that may enrol, and planning accordingly.

Students need integrated support at all stages of the learning experience:

- (i) Marketing (bringing information on qualifications and the nature of ODL to prospective students)
- (ii) Application (career and study guidance and selection; longer term career planning)
- (iii) Registration (administrative support)
- (iv) Preparation (academic skills and understanding ODL)
- (v) Orientation (opening the learning package and planning the study process)
- (vi) Studying and learning (assistance with the development of learning literacies and study skills)
- (vii) Formative assessment (preparing assignments)
- (viii) Summative assessment (preparing for examinations)
- (ix) Reflection on summative assessment
- (x) Career planning and coaching towards lifelong learning (entering the labor market and updating skills)

2.1.5 *EFFICIENT AND AFFORDABLE PROVISION*

Student support needs to be positioned against the backdrop of Unisa's national and international reach. This implies special attention to regional presence and facilities and international support initiatives. Management systems for all forms of support, including tutoring and work-integrated learning, will have to enable continuous and targeted support according to acceptable standards. Specific provision should be made for underprepared learners and struggling learners.

Tutoring and mentoring in the broad sense, as a more expensive part of student support, encompasses a broad range of teaching, coaching and mentoring activities that guide students through their modules, mediating the packaged learning materials and facilitating the learning process. In the Unisa context the efficient and affordable (scalable) provision of tutoring can be achieved through targeting based on performance or early risk factors (identifying students at risk should happen as early as possible through a tracking system). Courses with low pass rates and throughput need to be researched to identify the problems and a targeted support strategy should be built into the redesign of such courses. Feedback from these targeted interventions needs to find its way back into the next re-design phase to facilitate a continuous cycle of re-planning, implementation and review.

2.1.6 *ADDITIONAL FORMS OF STUDENT SUPPORT*

There are different forms of student support that can be introduced or expanded on that will make provision more affordable. The support challenge can be addressed to a large extent from within students' respective communities:

- (i) Mentors from community (HE qualified people from students' original community or in the communities in which students live while studying).
- (ii) Formalised and planned connections to senior students (same experience benefit – peer assistance).
- (iii) Targeted subject tutoring based on student performance (efficient use of expensive service).

2.2 DEFINING STUDENT SUPPORT

Whereas ODL learning resources and processes are designed generically for a particular student population based on general trends in the student profile, student support is also concerned with how the individual student, or a particular category of students, interact(s) with the learning process and the learning environment.

Transactional distance, from a student support perspective, refers to the inevitable gap between the planned learning experience (generic) and the actual learning experience (individual or a particular group of individuals). Student support is aimed at reducing the transactional distance between the lecturer(s) and the study material on the one hand and student(s) in order to ensure an optimal “fit” between the aspirations, resources and abilities of students and the offering and academic requirements and characteristics of the institution. An optimal “fit” between students and institution at various stages of the student journey is crucial to ensure and sustain student and institutional success. The community of learning and practice may include lecturers, tutors, other students, workplace-based mentors and supervisors, practical and technical support staff depending on the nature of the particular course.

Therefore, student support in its many forms is aimed at enhancing the conversation between the student and the lecturer. It is constituted in the following way:

Firstly, through an institutional commitment to critically understand and to provide for the different life-worlds of our students and the impact these life-worlds have on our offerings and pedagogy; this should serve as the starting point in the design process - rather than being an add-on or afterthought. This means taking the diversity of the learner population into account from the start and building features into the learning materials, environment; and system that allow a broad set of learners to access the learning.

Secondly, by encouraging students to take responsibility for their choices and to acknowledge the impact of their choices and commitments.

Thirdly, through integrated and structured dialogue in learning experiences which include materials, the effective use of different and appropriate technologies and resources.

Fourthly, through additional strategically scheduled and targeted interventions aimed at formative development and demonstration of competencies. These interventions by different stakeholders are optimally aligned and integrated and are designed for maximum impact at specific stages of individual students’ learning journeys and, where possible, groups of students’ needs.

Fifthly, through a number of additional support services that a learner can access at his or her own convenience (administrative support included).

More specifically student support includes:

- (i) Preparation for the challenges of ODL (ODL to support a diverse student population – ranging from disabled to abled, gifted to learning challenged, foreign and national, and urban as well as rural)

- (ii) Career guidance and counseling
- (iii) Remedial interventions based on the assessment of learning tools and/or strategies that can help underprepared students to achieve success
- (iv) Continuous administrative support in the form of timely, accurate and accessible information to assist with all phases of the learning process (from application to graduation)
- (v) Intelligent support as part of well designed, integrated and structured learning experiences promoting dialogue between lecturer and student
- (vi) Computer skills training, technology access, library services, and training in web-accessibility
- (vii) Tuition support in the form of detailed, individualised and timely feedback to formative assessment
- (viii) Regional tutorials (discussions, practicals, demonstrations, etc)
- (ix) Peer and community support (self-help and mentoring from fellow students and community members)

3. THREE PRINCIPAL AREAS OF PLANNING FOR SUPPORT

The student experience is divided into 3 phases (it is possible to use a different number of phases, but this categorisation allows for related services to be clustered together more efficiently):

- 3.1 Entry phase (student is exposed to qualifications and studying through ODL).
- 3.2 Teaching and learning phase (student received materials and learning and assessment takes place).
- 3.3 Exit phase (student is successful and/or graduates, and is guided into the world of recruitment and employment; the student becomes part of alumni community).

The categorization implies that services appear in or fade out of the teaching and learning process depending on where they fit in. The term student support is used as an umbrella term for all support services that students receive/are entitled to whereas learning support refers only to those services that are aimed specifically at the teaching and learning process.

3.1 ENTERING HIGHER OPEN DISTANCE LEARNING

3.1.1 INTRODUCTION

Prinsloo (2009) argues that an understanding of the complexity of issues that affect student retention, throughput and experience is the key to successful implementation of ODL. Subotzky and Prinsloo (in Prinsloo, 2009) developed a model which militates against the notion of a one-size-fits-all approach to student support on the one hand and reinforces the notion of the need to think holistically on the other. The model reinforces the importance of interaction with each individual student.

3.1.2 PROFILED ENTRY SUPPORT

A learning experience, therefore, starts with the students themselves. Profiling students and their needs should inform planning, resourcing and execution of sufficient support services to facilitate smooth student entry into higher open distance learning. This means that when planning of the learning, process starts with the learner profile and by formulation of the learning outcomes that speak to cognitive/knowledge/foundational competencies; affective/attitudinal and value-driven/reflective competencies.

The following are some planning issues related to the successful entry of students into the system:

- (i) Active engagement with students prior to application and registration so that they can make informed choices
- (ii) Orientation of students prior to registration possibly through engagement with diagnostic activities, preview activities, "taster materials", current and past learners' views (Simpson 2004)
- (iii) How to ensure equity of access (in terms of hardware, software, skills development and ongoing technical support), for example, variable course fees dependent on whether or not a notebook is integrated into the study package
- (iv) Consideration for some modules/ programmes of targeted marketing to recruit students in pairs/ teams so that peer collaborative learning is built into the design of the learning experience from the start
- (v) Developing procedures and processes for the recognition of prior learning and experience both prior to registration and within the teaching and learning process
- (vi) Planning for a wide range of support strategies to cater for diverse student needs but balancing this against cost-effective provision – so a high enrolment module/ programme will need and be able to accommodate a wider range of support strategies than a low enrolment module/ programme (the need to be able to respond to diverse learning needs is important)
- (vii) Face-to-face contact (well-equipped and maintained regional offices; mechanisms for the hire of facilities outside of Unisa to cater for decentralised support needs where face-to-face interaction is key to achieving programme purpose and exit level outcomes; this includes the ability to hire laboratory facilities from residential universities to support practicals).
- (viii) Well-functioning technology systems to support the needs of the students and the efficiency of learning delivery and support. An appropriate model should be based on the assumption that the overall system itself needs to be designed for a purpose, and maintained and adapted as needed. Maximum use should be made of appropriate ICTs to maximise efficiency and effectiveness and minimise disruptions and the challenges of manual manipulation. The ICTs used should be sensitive to audience constraints, for example, it can probably be anticipated that young working students will be more comfortable with mobile technologies and digital social interaction; more mature working students will probably be more comfortable with computer-based interaction and video-conferencing; and some student populations may be actively resistant to the use of new technologies for reasons such as the added cost for rural students of getting access and/or

because their profession itself is premised on direct human interaction e.g. teachers and health workers.

3.1.3 STEPS IN THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE:

- (i) Marketing (qualifications and open distance learning are marketed clearly).
- (ii) Application (this includes career and study guidance and selection; longer term career planning; remedial interventions for underprepared students, academic skills development).
- (iii) Registration (administrative support; introduction to student governance and student wellness; linking to peer and community support).

3.1.4 MINIMUM PREREQUISITES FOR ENTRY LEVEL SUPPORT:

- (i) Marketing strategy, brochures and information are clear, correct and informative.
- (ii) Unisa Call Center 24/7/365 – effective, correct and emphatic information.
- (iii) Unisa Regional Centers – well-staffed, trained, emphatic, informed with special access to strategic information points in Pretoria/Florida.
- (iv) Offering of application information through *myChoice@Unisa* and orientation sessions to prospective students in the regions. This orientation includes an introduction to the challenges and opportunities of ODL, balancing work and personal lives, introduction to the different support options, having access to a reliable postal address being emphasized, introduction of myUnisa and electronic support.
- (v) Unisa website has a number of podcasts which describes different aspects of ODL, the registration process, etc.
- (vi) Student profiling on application.
- (vii) Effective application and registration procedures.
- (viii) After application, students' profile and academic status are scrutinised and, depending on an evaluation, they are allowed to
 - a. Register for any number of modules, to a maximum of 10 per year
 - b. Register for a limited number of modules, to a maximum of 4 per year. These students should also be linked to *additional* student support e.g. telephonic support with a mentor/alumni/tutor, counseling services and regular updates by a counselor, peer group helpers, etc.
- (ix) Students select to receive SMS communication from Unisa or to opt out.
- (x) Unisa Production should ensure sufficient study materials. Should study materials become out of stock during registration, the student will be phoned and encouraged to download the most necessary materials from the web at no extra cost at the regional centers. Students have a right to know.
- (xi) Dispatch ensures the effective and timely sending of study materials to students.

3.1.5 ASSUMPTIONS UNDERPINNING THIS PHASE:

Assumption 1: If the student's entry into the system is optimised in terms of administrative support then the student will be more successful during the learning phase as he/she will have confidence in the system and will remain motivated.

Assumption 2: If the student's academic skills needs are addressed successfully at the point of entry, then the student will be more successful during the learning phase as he/she will be better prepared for academic activities and higher learning.

Assumption 3: If the student is made aware of his/her responsibilities in open distance learning and a higher level of awareness and understanding of ODL is established, then the student will be more successful during the learning phase as he/she will be better prepared for independent study.

Assumption 4: If the student is introduced early to the university, student governance and student wellness services, then the student will be more successful as he/she will become part of a community.

Assumption 5: If all forms of continuous support are introduced to the student at an early stage, then it will contribute to a more efficient journey as he/she progresses through the system.

3.1.6 ORGANISATIONAL AND OPERATIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

It is advisable that services categorized in this phase be optimized and the organisational architecture be adapted and made more efficient to enable maximum exposure to all support services (eg from marketing right through to registration and being welcomed into the student community) at the point of entry. This will ensure that a better prepared student entering the teaching and learning phase. Continuous services such as counseling, continuous administrative support in the form of timely, accurate and accessible information to assist with all phases of the learning process (from marketing to graduation) and peer and community support (self-help and mentoring from community members) should be strengthened in relation to student needs.

3.2 TEACHING AND LEARNING

3.2.1 INTRODUCTION

Decision-making about learning support is integral to the design process and it should be possible to see a coherent link between the theoretical assumptions that underpin the programme design and the learning support strategies integrated therein; the concomitant design at the module level; and practice during implementation as evidenced by ongoing critical, evidence-based evaluation planned and budgeted for in the initial design phase.

3.2.2 TOWARDS INTEGRATED LEARNING SUPPORT

3.2.2.1 DESIGN FOR THE STUDENT PROFILE

When planning learning, we need to start by considering the learner profile and formulating learning outcomes that speak to cognitive/ knowledge/ foundational competences; affective/attitudinal and value-driven/ reflective competences and psychomotor/ skills-based/ practical competencies. In this process we need to have both the ends and the beginnings in mind.

The possibility of context-based curriculum design approaches to ensure the curriculum speaks to the lived experiences and aspirations of the students should be considered, as well as the inclusion of fundamental cross-cutting developmental modules such as in learning literacy and basic research (although it should be noted these will likely have little impact if subsequent modules do not actively require and build upon the strategies introduced), and the possibility of including more open-ended exploratory signature modules to help students gain a better understanding of themselves as learners and as active members of a Unisa community of learning and practice. Ways to ensure equity of access (in terms of hardware, software, skills development and ongoing technical support) must be explored, for example, variable course fees dependent on whether or not a notebook is integrated into the study package.

Unisa students come to their studies with at least 20 years of prior learning and experience, are increasingly accustomed to engaging actively with their environment through a variety of media, for example, cell phones, Facebook, Twitter, gaming, web 2.0 etc, are predominantly African and therefore more likely to be predisposed to communitarian inter-personal ways of engaging than perhaps students from Europe or North America, are increasingly more likely to question single viewpoints and established 'authority' and have life commitments outside of their Unisa studies. This scenario will require the following:

- (i) Developing and updating changing learning profiles and ensuring that it is incorporated in curriculum design.
- (ii) Developing procedures and processes for the recognition of prior learning and experience both prior to registration and within the teaching and learning process.
- (iii) There needs to be a process whereby student needs are assessed regularly on all levels and where feedback obtained informs student and learning support – including efficiency in contacting support and teaching staff.
- (iv) Planning for a wide range of support strategies to cater for diverse student needs but balancing this against cost-effective provision. Therefore, a high enrolment module/ programme will need to be able to accommodate a wider range of support strategies than a low enrolment module/ programme.
- (v) ICTs systems for the efficient delivery of materials, contact with the institutions and academic staff, assessment processes and tracking of students at risk and struggling students.
- (vi) Orientation to learning through, for example, online introductions, formation of peer collaborative learning groups during initial contact sessions, establishment of online or mobile discussion fora/ blogging
- (vii) The design of activities for formative and summative purposes that require engagement with other students and/or with the community of practice for which the programme of study is targeted and the logistical support thereof (which may or may not involve a formal WIL component)

3.2.2.2 DIALOGUE AND ENGAGEMENT

The position taken here is that dialogue is at the heart of adult learning (Gravett 2005). Therefore there is need to plan for a dialogic space within which students engage with the national and organizational context and the ideas of others through a variety of media, for example, mobile phone, email and online discussions, activities (talk to a colleague; interview your grandmother), assignments (including the possibility of group

assignments), projects (which could be community and/or work-based), workshops (where applicable to the achievement of the exit level outcomes) in increasingly “complicated conversations” (Pinar 2009).

Any commitment to optimise the conversation and dialogue during the learning experience will be dependent on empowering and resourcing core, centralised and decentralised staff. Decentralised/regional support is key – in the design of ODL courses, designers must constantly give attention to the needs of students in diverse and remote locations. Among other things this suggests the need for complete study packages; open-ended assessment tasks that allow for contextualised responses; decentralised counselling, tutorial support, mentoring and/or peer collaborative learning.

Maximum use must be made of appropriate ICTs to maximise efficiency and effectiveness and minimise disruptions and the challenges of manual manipulation. The particular ICTs selected must at the teaching level be sensitive to audience constraints, for example, it can probably be anticipated that young working students will be more comfortable with mobile technologies and digital social interaction; more mature working students will probably be more comfortable with computer-based interaction and video-conferencing. Some student populations may be actively resistant to the use of new technologies for reasons such as the added cost for rural students of getting access and/or because their profession itself is premised on direct human interaction (for example teachers and health workers).

For students with disabilities, particular consideration should be given to the accessibility of:

- (i) preparing documents for printing, visual display and electronic dissemination
- (ii) group discussions, seminars and tutorials
- (iii) fieldwork, laboratory, workshops and other practice-based environments
- (iv) placement learning/ WIL
- (v) assessment

3.2.2.3 STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

- (i) Involvement of current and graduate students in programme and module review processes.
- (ii) A decision-making process/-heuristic that will help course development teams make appropriate choices about which strategies to use for particular contexts.

3.2.2.4 INTEGRATED LEARNING SUPPORT

The integration of learning support is achieved by very careful and systematic design and development (usually in teams and usually requiring a substantial investment of time and resources up front) to provide structured learning pathways (often multiple) through complete courses and individual activities to ensure active student engagement with the content, with other learners and with teachers as well as the development of a social and institutional support network in ways that remain cost effective for both the institution and its students (Rumble 2004).

The design process must pay attention to what could be called the “storyline” for each module and programme to ensure coherence and progression from in-text activities to formative assignment activities and then to summative assessment tasks (which are not necessarily examinations); and from fundamental, to core to elective module components of programmes. This is to ensure that all the constituent parts build towards achievement of the programme purpose and exit level outcomes and competences and to take cognisance of the *different* support needs in each phase of the learning cycle and at different levels of the qualification.

The academic planning office, quality assurance, academic staff at college, school, department, programme and module level, design, student support, production, ICT, past and present students, as well as external stakeholders, are all involved in team decision-making about changed design, development and delivery of programmes and courses.

Important objectives that design teams need to address are

- (i) Intelligent support as part of well designed, integrated and structured learning experiences promoting dialogue between lecturer and student
- (ii) Tuition support in the form of detailed, individualised and timely feedback to formative assessment
- (iii) Regional tutorials (discussions, practicals, demonstrations, etc)
- (iv) To ensure appropriate use of appropriate media and technologies for appropriate purposes (Heydenrych and Louw 2006).
- (v) Adopt an suitable elearning approach for a particular purpose and context, including informed learning support
- (vi) To integrate outcomes/content/support and assessment in the design stage.
- (vii) To address the link between the assessment strategy, the courseware and the types of support provided.

3.2.2.5 PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

- (i) ODL induction for new recruits and ongoing professional development opportunities and expectations for experienced staff.
- (ii) Training and monitoring of both core, centralised and supporting, decentralised staff
- (iii) Active engagement in communities of teaching and research and the continual building of networks.
- (iv) The recruitment, training, monitoring and ongoing support of online tutors (McPerson and Nunes 2004; Welch and Reed 2005)

3.2.3 STEPS IN THE TEACHING AND LEARNING EXPERIENCE

- (i) Orientation (materials, resources and advice to get started)
- (ii) Obtain additional resources.
- (iii) Studying and learning (assistance with optimising time and effort, study skills, academic skills, counselling)
- (iv) First assignment (diagnostic elements included – assessment administration)
- (v) Practical work (experiments, work-integrated learning, practicals, etc)

- (vi) Second assignment (formative application – learning through assessment – receive support on how to prepare for and complete an assignment – assessment administration)
- (vii) Summative assessment (final demonstration of competency – receive guidance on how to prepare for summative assessment – assessment administration)
- (viii) Repeat summative assessment (only where relevant – provide targeted tutoring and support – assessment administration)

3.2.4 MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING SUPPORT

- (i) DISA to provide a detailed student profile for every module to departments within two weeks after the registration has closed.
- (ii) The *Framework for the Team Approach in Curriculum and Learning Development* is implemented.
- (iii) Departments establish an Academic Help Desk to assist students with enquiries and correct and emphatic feedback. The Academic Help Desk provides telephonic and e-mail feedback to students on enquiries, 24 hour turn-around time.
- (iv) A number of tutor coordinators are appointed per college depending on student numbers. Tutors are appointed and trained by academic departments. The Tutor Coordinators liaise with TSDL.
- (v) Tutors receive tutor manuals from academic departments.
- (vi) Where possible tutors are appointed to also be markers. Some markers may not want to tutor and some tutor may not want to mark.
- (vii) Unisa HR commits itself to an effective and emphatic support to academic departments.
- (viii) Tutors can be either face-to-face tutors linked to a specific regional centre and group of students or be e-tutors. The e-tutors should be linked to myUnisa.
- (ix) Lecturers are qualified assessors.
- (x) Each module has detailed teaching, assessment and learning support plan providing an overview of assessment strategies, use of technologies and range of learning support options.
- (xi) The first assignment includes an orientation to the module and harvest information regarding students' possible risks and potential. General feedback is provided. At risk students get additional feedback/guidance.
- (xii) The second assignment fulfils a formative role and all students should receive general guiding feedback and where possible, specific feedback regarding their assignments. At risk students should get additional feedback/guidance.
- (xiii) Before the exam students receive at least one "mock exam" (which can be a previous examination paper) and guidance regarding where students go wrong, and what they should pay attention to.
- (xiv) All students receive feedback after their examinations. This can be in the form of a general tutorial letter. All students who failed get personal feedback

regarding their performance and guidance on how to improve. These students are also linked to a tele-tutor or e-tutor for guidance/motivation.

- (xv) Students who have to write supplementary exams get extra tutorial guidance in the form of tutor groups, online discussions, peer group helpers. These students are also linked to a tele-tutor or e-tutor for guidance/motivation.
- (xvi) Modules with tutorial programmes in place are encouraged to make optimal use of the tutors in providing guidance/academic support. Academic departments are responsible for the training and guidance of these tutors. In these modules group discussions by lecturers will be discouraged.
- (xvii) Students who are identified as struggling with learning skills, learning literacies or motivation are referred for appropriate intervention and support.
- (xviii) In modules with no tutorial programmes in place due to too small student numbers, lecturers will be encouraged to make use of either video-conferencing or satellite conferencing instead of group discussions.
- (xix) When lecturers make use of satellite transmitted group discussions, these sessions should be recorded and sent to all students.
- (xx) Where the nature of the module and/or the specific needs of students cannot be addressed through a tutorial programme or video or satellite broadcasting, group discussions may play a vital role in supporting students. Considering the cost to students (and Unisa) and the fact that not all students are able to attend these group discussions, lecturers should be encouraged (and supported) to rather/also make use of podcasts which can be made available to all students.

3.2.5 ASSUMPTIONS UNDERPINNING THIS PHASE

Assumption 1: If the student receives sufficient support and guidance to make an early and strong start in a course/module he/she will be more successful in the learning experience.

Assumption 2: If the student receives sufficient support regarding access to required and recommended additional resources, including access to technology, the student will be more successful.

Assumption 3: If the student's problems are identified early and addressed the student will be more successful – the first assignment, including some diagnostic assessment, can guide teaching and support staff in this regard.

Assumption 4: If the student receives proper advice and orientation regarding the successful completion of assignments the student will be more successful.

Assumption 5: Targeted tutoring and learning facilitation should be provided to students at risk and struggling learners specifically rather than just general tutorial support – this will target the tutoring and support where it is most needed.

Assumption 6: Alignment of formative assessment, formative tutoring and guidance with summative assessment will ensure a more successful learning experience

Assumption 7: Additional targeted support for repeaters (summative assessment) will ensure greater success and throughput.

3.2.6 ORGANISATIONAL AND OPERATIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

It is argued that learning support, considered instrumental in bridging the gap in transactional distance be optimised by integrating it into the learning development and design process. This means that any form of additional planned support in terms of tutoring and teaching should be the result of initial integrated planning and design and continuous refinement to accommodate the changing student profile on a particular course/module. The current dispensation at Unisa sees all forms of discussion, tutoring and formal support disjointed in many instances from the academic department and colleges.

It is inconceivable that learning support, integral parts of courses/modules, be coordinated in a disjointed way from the owner departments and colleges. Learning support (including discussion classes, tutoring and work-integrated learning) should be designed, developed, implemented and managed and coordinated from within or close to departments or colleges of origin. Some colleges have already started to set up learning support units due to dissatisfaction with the current dispensation.

Integrated learning support should be coordinated and managed by the different colleges while decentralised regional facilities are equipped to deal with all forms of targeted learning support and other forms of continuous student support. The current tutoring system is being constrained by an inefficient appointment, training and management system. These problems can be addressed by reallocating capacity to colleges for the aforementioned tasks. The role of Human Resources is crucial and a special recruitment and appointment system should be developed as a matter of urgency.

The tracking of students, as they progress through courses/modules, is of paramount importance to the targeting of learning support/tutoring to struggling and at risk students. The institution cannot afford blank assignment of tutors to a number of students by default – targeting tutoring and other formal forms of support will make the system more affordable.

4.3 EXITING HIGHER OPEN DISTANCE LEARNING

4.3.1 INTRODUCTION

A successful graduation is the most visible image of student success, but if it is not a pleasant and proud experience it can send qualified students back into the community and the world of work with a negative attitude towards the institution. A scenario of “I graduated in spite of...” should be avoided at all costs. Students should always feel that they graduate as a result of their hard work and the great support and care that the institution has provided. Students should leave the institution with a wealth of experience and motivation on an individual level that could be harnessed to benefit current students.

4.3.2 FROM SUCCESS FOR ALUMNI

When students complete their studies successfully they should be in a position to prepare for employment and to present themselves as being employable. Affordable and efficient services in this regard should be provided to students to complete the journey to the world of work and career success.

Successful students and students who graduate have a wealth of experience and knowledge about how to study independently through open distance learning. This can be incorporated into the student and learning support model. Alumni (students who have successfully completed their studies) can play an important role in the support of students in general and in the learning experience specifically. It can be worthwhile to strengthen the alumni community in terms of community involvement, stakeholder engagement and social responsibility by supporting others to achieve the same and also be successful in their studies.

4.3.3 STEPS IN THE EXIT EXPERIENCE:

- (i) Successful administration of student performance towards graduation
- (ii) Graduation ceremonies
- (iii) Marketing for engagement in peer support and community involvement towards student and learning support for current students as soon as possible after graduation
- (iv) Alumni recruitment and establishment of Unisa as a learning and support community

4.3.4 MINIMUM PREREQUISITES FOR EXIT LEVEL SUPPORT

- (i) In the final registration period of students, students will be contacted to assess their next steps and to advise them accordingly.
- (ii) Academic departments should identify the elements of graduateness expected of students who graduate from their programmes and ensure that these elements are addressed adequately in their study material or in specially designed modules.
- (iii) All students who graduate will be given access to a special alumni portal as part of *myUnisa*.
- (iv) Students will receive regular updates on news at Unisa and also be requested/encouraged to keep their profile updated.
- (v) This database can be used to link employers to graduates and vice-versa.
- (vi) The database will also provide a rich foundation for finding tutors, markers, e-tutors, and mentors.

4.3.5 ASSUMPTIONS UNDERPINNING THIS PHASE

Assumption 1: A pleasant exit experience will ensure a stronger image for the institution and possible involvement with the student and learning support of current students.

Assumption 2: A pleasant experience and stronger education brand will ensure the need with former students and qualified community members to engage with the institution and get involved with student learning.

Assumption 3: A strong alumni community can support the sustainability of student support initiative part of stakeholder engagement.

4.3.6 Organisational and operational considerations

The links between departments that manage graduation administration, student governance, the student community and alumni should be strengthened with the

deliberate aim of facilitating students' entry into the world of work, as through investment in the form of peer support by successful students in the current student population.

5. MINIMUM GENERAL ORGANISATIONAL AND OPERATIONAL REQUIREMENTS FOR ALL PHASES

5.1 APPROVAL

Senate approval of this conceptual framework for student support

5.2 STUDENT TRACKING

Student profiling during application in place as well as an effective tracking system and institutional response strategy should be place.

5.3 TEACHING AND LEARNING

- (i) Qualified (academic as well as ODL) and well-supported academics
- (ii) Teaching is celebrated as equal to research.
- (iii) Shifting tutoring as an academic priority to academic departments. Tutor coordinators are appointed in colleges to liaise with TSDL and the regions
- (iv) A well-organised teaching and learning network

5.4 MODULE DEVELOPMENT

- (i) A well-organised and committed DCLD is key to the implementation.
- (ii) The Framework for a Team Approach for module course development must be implemented.

5.5 SUPPORT SYSTEMS

- (i) An effective student application, registration and administration, HR, Production, Despatch, Examinations and Assignments
- (ii) 24/7/365 ICT supported networks
- (iii) Well-qualified and supported regional centers
- (iv) Guidelines for the use of technology for teaching
- (v) Guidelines for access to technology for students

5.6 ALUMNI

A reinvigorated and effective alumni department

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1: Profiling of students (as early as application phase) in order to determine the possible needs of students (this can be informed by statistics from DISA) is essential to assist with planning for targeted support and to assist with their performance during the learning phase. A profiling system should provide actionable information regarding students' preparedness for higher education (academic and non-academic), students' location (in terms of distance from regional centers, tutorial programmes), students' connectivity, students' motivation and locus of control, etc.

Factors that necessitate specific assistance to particular groups should be isolated and informed by such a profiling procedure/system. A detailed proposal for the student support that will be offered for targeted groups should be submitted to the STLSC for approval and implementation.

Recommendation 2: An assessment should be done of entry level student support provided by all the relevant departments. The aim is to better introduce students to ODL and to the Unisa system and to ensure that they receive all the help, preparation and support that will enable a strong start to the learning phase. Academic skills needs should receive specific attention. A report to STLSC should make recommendations regarding the improvement of specific areas and the seamless integration of such early services.

Recommendation 3: The apparent "distance" between the current TSDL and colleges does not contribute to an integrated learning support system that addresses the needs of specific students and groups of students with support needs. Tutorial support (capacity, training, and scheduling) should be integrated with college activities (this is a matter of planning and coordination rather than physical presence). A report and integration plan (involving all stakeholders) should be submitted to STLSC for approval and implementation by July 2010.

Recommendation 4: The system for the recruitment, appointment and remuneration of tutors should receive dedicated attention for HR, the Colleges and TSDL. A joint working group should address the specifications and implementation plan for a new system (the tutor model proposed by Proctor and her ODL team should be used as a reference). The efficiency (turnaround) of the system is paramount for a successful tutor system can be greatly enhanced through the use of technology. A plan should be submitted to STLSC for approval and implementation.

Recommendation 5: The training of academics and tutors in the ODL environment should be streamlined and made more effective (this training relates to learning support specifically). Training for both academics and tutors should involve both generic teaching skills (for tutors in general) and for specific disciplines in colleges. A training plan should be drawn up and submitted to STLSC for approval and implementation.

Recommendation 6: Regional capacity and facilities should be assessed in line with the recommendations and plans made in other recommendations regarding the improvement of learning support in the regions. Suggestions for the improvement of regional learning

support and a quality assurance system, based on the actions in other recommendations, should be submitted to the STLSC for approval and implementation

Recommendation 7: The needs for tracking students during the learning phase in assessing student performance and to target learning support to specific students and groups of students should be compiled and submitted to DISA for integration into the current tracking system developments. A report should be submitted to the STLSC for approval.

Recommendation 8: Targeted support cannot be provided to students too late in the learning phase, as they will end up being frustrated with their own performance. The efficiency and value of the first compulsory assignment to all students should be revisited in order to enable a strong start for students in the learning phase and also to diagnose particular problems with students that can be addressed as early as possible in the learning phase. A report for the redesign and implementation of the first compulsory assignment – as it will inform the start of the learning phase – must be submitted to STLSC for approval and implementation.

Recommendation 9: The possible role of alumni, successful students (peers) and community members in the support of current students should be investigated – improvement in this area can assist students and make the Unisa support system more effective and more efficient. A report should be submitted to STLSC for approval and implementation. Alumni and industry partnerships can also inform the entry of successful students into the world of work.

Recommendation 10: The use of technology to facilitate learning support (with student access in mind) should be assessed and a report should be submitted to STLSC for approval and implementation with ICT and the relevant support departments.

Recommendation 11: Guidelines should inform the provision of such support services based on critical points in the learning phase (addressing support before and after assessment and also any continuous support). Such guidelines will also be needed for the integration of tutoring and learning support in the planning, design, development and delivery of all modules. A small task team should be appointed to develop concise guidelines in collaboration with DCLD and colleges (based on the Framework for a Team Approach). The model and guidelines should be submitted to STLSC for approval and implementation.

Recommendation 12: An assessment should be made of continuous support that is provided to students across all three phases - all forms of continuous academic and administrative support should be assessed. For example, academic questions, administrative enquiries and all other forms of communication should be addressed and recommendations be made on how to make it more efficient in terms of resourcing and organisational positioning. A report should be submitted to STLSC for approval and implementation by support departments.

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