



TASK TEAM 4: Student Support

Definition of Student Support

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MEMBERS OF TASK TEAM

Convenor: Dr J Heydenrych

ODL Coordinator: Dr P Prinsloo

DCCAD: Dr WA van Schoor

Admissions and Registrations: Mr R Harding

Sound, Video and Photography: Ms L Schultz, Mr R Mauries

CHS: Prof A Phillips

CHS: Mr T Mays

DCLD: Ms H Wilson

Regions: Prof DV Roberts

TSDL: Mrs MM Molatlhegi

Library: Dr J Henning

Editorial: Ms R Negota

CAES: Prof J Hendrick

DSPQA: Dr E Johannes

CSET: Prof I Basson

Student Development: Ms I Mohasoa

Student Funding: Ms S Primm

Student Social Services: Ms L Le Roux

TSDL: Mrs N Tshaka

CLAW: Prof JM Kruger; secundus Prof Montesh

SRC: Mr S Mavuso

SRC: Mr R Chauke

CEMS: Ms R Wessels, Mr M du Toit, Mr A Jordaan

ICT: Ms H Botha

Planning and Coordination (study materials): Mr E Blignaut

IODL: Prof A Minnaar

RMC: Ms A van der Westhuizen

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1. THE NATURE OF ODL

Open distance learning (ODL) aims to bridge the time, geographical, economic, social, educational, 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-centredness in the belief that all students can succeed.

1.1 EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY INFORMING STUDENT SUPPORT

Social constructivism supports students' interaction with their materials, the construction and building of knowledge, and the testing this knowledge through interaction with others. It is assumed that most students do not learn efficiently in isolation with only the learning package that they receive. In addition, a broad base of skills and attitudes 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, multiply constitutive 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.

1.2 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 as academic and non-academic. In order to consider support for students dealing with these factors, it is important that the institution as well as students should be 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 what support is included in their fees. Students are also provided with a menu of *additional* services for which they can register or apply at *additional* costs (if applicable). Unisa's student support can therefore also be structured according to individual needs. The support Unisa offers is intentionally designed to address specific needs and specific student populations at different times in their learning journeys.

In applying the aforementioned, the comprehensive nature of Unisa needs to be considered. Any initiative to ensure the proper provision of student support should make provision for work-integrated learning. We need to prepare the student 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.

1.2.1 AN INTEGRATED APPROACH

Different divisions within the institution are responsible for supporting certain 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 support at all stages of the learning experience in an integrated way:

- Application (career and study guidance and selection; longer term career planning)
- Registration (administrative support)
- Preparation (academic skills and understanding ODL)
- Orientation (opening the learning package and making a good start)
- Studying and learning (assistance with optimising time and effort)
- Formative assessment (preparing the assignment)
- Summative assessment (preparing for the examination)
- Reflecting on summative assessment
- Career planning and coaching towards lifelong learning (entering the labour market and updating skills)

1.2.2 *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 reference should be made to underprepared learners and struggling learners.

Tutoring, 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 (identifying students at risk 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 so that there is a continuous cycle of replanning, implementation and review.

1.2.3 *ADDITIONAL FORMS OF STUDENT SUPPORT*

There are different forms of student support that can be introduced or expanded in ways that will make provision more affordable:

The support challenge can be addressed to a large extent from within students' respective communities:

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

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 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 lecturer 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 ensuring and sustaining both student *and* institutional success. The community of learning and practice could include lecturers, tutors, other students, workplace-based mentors and supervisors and/or 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:

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 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 and 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 students can access at their own convenience (administrative support included).

Student support therefore includes:

- 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)
- Career guidance and counselling
- Remedial interventions such as responsible open admission programmes to help underprepared students achieve success (academic skills development included)
- 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)
- Intelligent support as part of well designed, integrated and structured learning experiences promoting dialogue between lecturer and student
- Computer skills training, technology access, library services, and training in web access
- Tuition support in the form of detailed, individualised and timely feedback to formative assessment
- Regional tutorials (discussions, practicals, demonstrations, etc)
- Peer and community support (self-help and mentoring from fellow students and community members)