INDIVIDUAL AND INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT IN ODL: HOW THE MACRO MAY BENEFIT FROM THE MICRO

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Summary

Educational support for students in the field of open and distance education is a multifaceted and decisive parameter for enhancing and promoting student engagement and academic progress. This is a conclusion that draws on a number of research findings on the need for effective support for students to make the most of their learning and social backgrounds in a diverse learning and participatory process. Given the growing demand for new skills acquisition and lifelong learning, online education welcomes diverse categories of learners with differentiated needs and levels of online participation. The purpose of this article is to summarize the context of the ongoing research effort of the PENER-16 program of the Hellenic Open University (EAP), emphasizing the need to develop an integrated student support system in the learning community of a distance learning tertiary institution. The paper holds that support services in higher education ought to be organized on three distinct levels, in accordance with the focus lens of the conference, so as to allow for wider participation, coping with new learning solutions, and better provision of skills currently demanded by growing economies. More specifically, (a) on the individual level, support should include needs' diagnostic tests, provide academic skills and offer ongoing psychological support, tailored to the study phase that students face; (b) on the institutional level, support might provide assistance in administrative issues, promote collaborative and community-building skills, extra-curriculum activities that promote digital literacy and enhancement of communication media use; and (c) equally important, on the societal level, support services should consider offering recourses that enhance the cultural sensitivity of learners and institutional agents that eliminate learning disparities and encourage individual and collective learning. As these levels are interrelated in the learning and teaching process, they should also be delivered in terms of support via a holistic system that cultivates cross-sectional and cross-cultural skills, places the individual and the university in the current socio-economic and marketing context and follow the main principles of online instructional design.

Introduction

The issue of educational support strongly occupies the terrain of open and distance learning in recent years since it has become clear that the very stake of successful integration into the educational landscape of the 21st century is largely dependent on how educational institutions recognize and support the particular needs of heterogeneous student/learner groups. This

article documents the necessity of developing an integrated support system that stretched across three levels (individual, institutional, and societal) and is part of the research effort underway at the Hellenic Open University. The research seeks to address the gap between the learning profiles of adult students coming to open and distance universities internationally, and the high academic or technical requirements that they have to meet throughout their studies, without substantial support. This results in grave problems, both for the learners themselves and for the respective educational institutions, such as lack of information and self-management of the study, inability to cultivate cognitive skills data, high dropout rates, low performance, frustration and isolation, etc. We propose that targeted support services on the micro-, meso- and macro-levels of distance learning could greatly assist in the resolution of such pressing issues.

The issue of qualitative support for students, especially at a time with highly sophisticated technical capabilities, has occupied the most important theorists in the field of distance learning (Tait, 2003a; 2003b; Sewart, 1993; Keegan, 2003). In these studies, we can look for historical data related to the definition of support in the earlier stages of development of open and distance education, especially in Europe, and the transformations that the concept has undergone over time, following on the theoretical and technological progress. The emphasis on support has been recognized as a strong priority to distance learning universities, as compared to the conventional higher education (Tait, 2000), but has not always received the attention it deserves. Various student support guides were compiled in this early phase, but they were soon wiped out by leaps and bounds in open and distance learning and technology in recent years. Indeed, the fragmentation of older approaches to student support has recently led to more systematic efforts to investigate the complexity of the given issue which have already begun to provide interesting evidence.

The recent special issue of "Open Praxis" journal (International Council for Open and Distance Education, 2014) emphasizes the critical role of student support and the corresponding theoretical models and applied tools. Topics presented there (digital literacy, sense of satisfaction, sense of belonging, academic tools, quality assurance, etc.) and the reference to corresponding international surveys, as will be shown below, illustrate the breadth and importance of overall student support in the ever-changing terrain of open and distance learning. In addition, issues of wellness and tailor-made support are for the engagement of the individual, but also institutional solutions (such as Course-Embedded Student Support and virtual tutorials) are indicated as suitable solutions for the mid-level. Similar references to research work are also made in the extensive Guide to Good Practices for Distance Learning, issued by the Council of Higher Education (CHE, 2014; pp.42-48), with particular mention of the importance of an effective support in our direction successful training process in the digital age (Ludwig-Hardman & Dunlap, 2003) but also focusing on the quality specifications of the parameters of on- line tertiary education in relation to the ever changing social reality. What is evident from the literature is that support systems need to take into account all three levels simultaneously if it is to be effective and in accordance with current social trends and technical possibilities in distance learning.

The Micro: The importance of pre-entry & ongoing individual support

Students' integration to the new environment has been identified as a major factor in need of support services that plays a key role in the further development of studies. In the study of Dearnley (2003) the proper support of the students was directly related to the success or failure of future study. In particular, there is a need for practical, technical, academic and emotional support before and during the entrance phases, when students are more disoriented and vulnerable. Other studies (Jara & Mellar, 2007) have also linked student support to the quality of content of distance learning programs, focusing on pre-start and academic support both at academic level and at the level of equal opportunities provided to trainees.

The survey of Bird and Morgan (2003; pp.14-15) offers useful information for the guidance, support and advice in the pre-entry stage in adult distance education students. Researchers note that, in addition to incentives, the following topics should be discussed with prospective students prior to their decision to register: managing their fears, creating academic skills through available academic preparation courses (Johnson, 2008), literacy skills, and information technology, anticipating the impact of the study on roles within the family, preparing for change, anticipating the impact of the study on the student's psyche and personality and identifying the support networks related to the student 's needs. Consulting services to meet the emotional needs or health issues, and also meet the need of students to feel socially connected not only with their peers and teachers, but also with the staff of the institution shall complement the investigator proposals for support of students. It is therefore perceived that the process of familiarization and support in this early phase is extremely complex and burdensome for the initial and subsequent course of study. Further research (Brown & Mbati, 2015) reinforce the value of institutional support services that can help students to figure out what is personally realistic during the learning path, already with their entry in institution. However, research findings warn that while some students are open to support services, others are not; hence, a future challenge for distance education providers is to design not only the relevant services that can be made available to students when support is needed but to prevent students from taking a "solitary wolf" approach.

Therefore, on the individual level support services ought to cater for needs' diagnostic tests, provide academic skills (both content-related and technical) and offer ongoing psychological support, tailored to the study phase that students face.

The Meso: Creating a supportive institutional community

Apart from the impact that psychological support has for the individual, it also bears significance for the institution, as it affects both the community building and the dropout rates reported. Approaches from various fields of knowledge, such as motivation psychology, have highlighted the urgent need to set up an integrated theoretical support model for open and distance learning (Simpson, 2008).The factors that seem to help reduce students' negative feelings, especially those who are first required to operate in a distance learning environment, are as soon as possible familiarizing students with distance learning, communication with fellow students and teachers, time organization and management.

According to Sharma (2002), all activities related to providing support to students are related to learning, interaction and effective communication. That is why a support system ought to cover issues of teaching and counselling to solving management issues of the student's everyday life. Along the same lines, the study by Choudhry, Gujjar, and Hafeez (2008), states that the main objectives of a student support system at a distance institution are (a) to help students make the most of the educational package offered to them; (b) provide information on the form and content of studies, (c) reduce the sense of isolation, providing easy access to resources and resources but also opportunities for interpersonal communication. The structure and activities of student support services depend on the diverse needs of students, the ethics of the organization and the distribution of resources and resources of the university. The student support system should contribute to creating an environment that facilitates distance learning, motivating students to continue their education, encouraging student socialization, and promoting teamwork and team spirit in general.

Another central issue that emerges in most studies is the importance of communication and the processes of community-building and sense of community during distance learning. According to Kelly and Stevens (2009), students in an educational environment wish to communicate both among themselves and with their teachers, but in such a way that they feel suits them personally. At the Open University UK, two student support programs were created and implemented, which were applied from the first day of enrolling in the curriculum until the end of their educational course (Learner Support Framework and Personalized Integrated Learning Support). The first was created to support students from the beginning of their learning process, and particularly focuses on dynamic interactive and interactive activities without losing sight of person-driven activities to enhance communication and a sense of participation in the community. At the same time, it focuses particularly on the forums and activities aimed at students with special needs. The second program focuses on the specific characteristics and requirements of study programs and in as much as possible efficient use of technologies in support of a mixed (blended) educational system.

Communication is an extremely important factor in the learning process both in conventional and distance learning contexts. Its use is absolutely essential for the support and success of studies. According to Thormann and Fidalgo (2014), participation in discussions in an online community is characterized as a complex process in which students manage the learning needs as a practical means of communication and interaction. Past and recent studies on the types of digital learning communities illustrate the way that students interact in the digital environment and empirically record their emerging needs (Rumble, 2001), both from the environment itself and from the content hosted on it. Indeed, in the context of support for young students, Pennsylvania State University, a conventional university with a high degree of e-learning approaches enabled through a case study for students to work in an environment with e-learning forums, where the teacher involvement was frequent and energetic. Equally important to strengthen communication and cooperation was the participation of the students that were involved actively in the creation of study guides but also n commentary specific films, who had

to attend after recommendations of teachers so through their involvement learn to comment, interact, evaluate, participate in the community they belonged to (Loyd-Smith, 2009).

The de Moraes, Rodrigues Paz, Lumi Matuzawa, and Jantsch Fiuza (2003) study describes the student support system developed at the Federal University of Santa Catarina in Brazil. A Distance Education Laboratory (LED) was created in order to serve a fast and efficient flow of communication between students and tutors and students among themselves. The support team also provides instructors and students with instructions on how to use the tools and general overviews of the lesson. Other means of use are a support website, a virtual library, and interactive tools used in regularly scheduled off-campus activities and events, discussion forums, collaborative learning spaces, bulletin boards with general information, and a digital "Coffee House" where students can socialize and relax in a virtual environment.

Furthermore, the issue of administrative support and its great importance in institutions providing a "virtual person" through the websites and digital spaces that represent them (Jones & Meyer, 2012) is seen by international experience as another parameter to be taken into account in the design of systems support academic activities KON students (Kishore, 2014).

As it appears from the literature and our own preliminary research findings, on the level of the institution the support nexus needs to include assistance in administrative issues, promotion of collaborative and community-building skills, extra-curriculum activities that promote digital literacy and enhancement of communication media use. As Tait (in ICDE, 2014) stresses, there is a need reconfiguration of support in the Digital Age and he proposes the integration of support with teaching, instead of considering support services as separated structures within institutions. In this way, effective support can be achieved in the intra-institutional level, for students and teachers alike, serving for more sophisticated learning experience on the meso-level.

The Macro: Culturally sensitive learning in a distance-shrinking world

As the world of online education has gradually eliminated all distance through the sophistication of technological interventions, there still remain certain issues in teaching and learning that need to take into account the social and cultural differences among learning communities. As our research purports, for a support system to flexible and effective, it needs to integrate the parameters of cultural sensitivity as well as the social disparities that students increasingly present. In global audiences and national education systems that are called to incorporate transient conditions and populations (e.g. refugee flows), the examples that come from universities from around the world might prove to be essential in designing and implementing support systems.

According to the example of Great Britain (Arnold, 2004), the establishment of flexible learning, which tends to replace distance learning, requires well-designed academic support systems, hybrid and personalized as far as feasible, to create a growing Virtual Environment Learning, through which an extended range of support services can be provided. This would require a shift in education policies from the traditional British regimes and the integration of innovative

elements into a single set of educational and support mechanisms (Arnold, 2004; p.4). This directly addresses the issue of a wider educational policy that frames an open university and the need to harmonize support systems with the historical and cultural evolution of distance learning in the respective country of application. For example, the use of local means of communication and social networking should be studied before the design of support systems, so that it actually serves the participant needs in a way that is neither costly nor intimidating. Such an example is presented in the Brown and Mbati (2015) survey, which notes that various distance learning institutions in Africa have been using SMS on mobile phones since the early 2000s as a simple but a very powerful tool, to communicate easily and on time with large groups of students or even individuals. SMSs have now been fully integrated into most of the learning management systems at the distance learning institutions in Africa.

Another factor is the symbolic meaning that students invest in the role of face-to-face communication and the expertise of the teacher, which greatly depend on the cultural context and educational culture of each institution. India 's Open University presents its own approach to support for students, which gives importance to live support in specialized centres (Dimri, 2015). On a similar not, the Hellenic Open university places special emphasis on Student Support Centres, where students come in contact with their academic advisors but also receive administrative and academic assistance. Another example comes from the University of UNISA (N. Africa), where students have access to the online library, academic and administrative services while operating specialized departments, to enhance student learning, such as Counselling Office, University Office, Training Centres through the Student Support Department, Learning Centres, Financial Assistance Office and Library.

Closing Remarks: Three-level support for a sustainable future

The need for support is highlighted by the different examples that emphasize the importance of the educational and cultural context for the additional effective enhancement of students' skills and participation, making it clear that there are many available tools and approaches to establish support mechanisms at a distance learning level. As Tait (in O'Donnel et al., 2006; p.10) underlines, "there can be no universal plan for student support systems that can be transferred from one institution to the other".

Engaging with the intricate character of support services on the micro-, meso- and macro-levels are the only ways to keep in contact with student needs, to continually enhance their technical, learning and social skills and to keep up with technological and societal changes that usually move much faster that education can afford to notice.

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