

Chapter 17

Understanding Student Support: The Link Between Faculty, Student, and Online Learning

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ABSTRACT

Blended learning comprises of teaching and learning formats that complement online technologies for both on-campus and off-campus students. The disposition of online learning requires the student to exercise autonomy, independence, and self-reliance, and the teacher to engage skills that facilitate, guide, and mentor students. These skills need to be developed through support systems that encourage both faculty and student participation. This chapter examines the concept of student support with the objective of providing a background and justification for its role in online learning. The chapter proposes that student support should be part of faculty training with a double-faceted benefit: 1) faculty will adopt the use of technology while learning online student support systems; 2) a well-designed support system will contribute to best practice through improved student retention and success.

INTRODUCTION

Institutions providing online / blended learning formats have expanded through diverse models, with some mushrooming without comprehensive frameworks. Universities cite various contributory factors for instituting online learning formats. These include; economies of scale, geographical distribution of students, growth of ICT and downsizing of institutional funding and staff (Boit & Kipkoech, 2012; Nyerere, Gravenir, & Mse, 2012). One major factor however, is the rapid global population growth which has surpassed the rate of expansion of physical facilities, necessitating university administrations to implement alternative modes of education that can accommodate the increased demand. The unprecedented rise in population has subsequently increased demand for education surpassing all expectations and projections for national education sectors. With increase in the number of admissions, focus is turning to the question of quality, teaching and learning experiences and student support frameworks.

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Student support is a component of online learning that is frequently overlooked during instructional design. Yet, without meaningful support and with frequent technology changes, the student becomes overwhelmed while faculty gets intimidated. Student support should ideally be integrated within teaching and learning activities through electronic techniques, emails and correspondences, telephone and computer mediated learning, counselling, mentoring and both online and offline administrative services (Tait, 2000; Roberts, 2004; Stevens & Kelly, 2012). It consists of learning resources and processes that are generically designed for specific student cohorts based on general societal trends, perceived within student needs and profiles. Student support is concerned with both the individual and / or cohort of students' interaction with the learning environment, learning management systems and educational processes. Due to the physical absence of the teacher and the institution, the off-campus / online student often experiences less support than the on-campus colleagues. This endorses the need for student support on blended and online learning environments. The boundary between student support and course implementation is often unclear because every stage of implementation from course advertisement, recruitment, academic journey to graduation requires the presence of student support (Thorpe, 2002; Shillington, Brown, MacKay, Paewai, Suddaby, & White, 2012).

Even though, most universities adopting online learning formats have trouble deciding; whether to conceptualise student support structures as a subsystem within or as a complementary addition to course materials. Thorpe (2002) explains that past generations of off-campus learning advanced student support as that which happens after course materials are prepared and the program has been implemented. Student support was considered as a complementary service. However, in the third and subsequent generations, the application of education technology has changed the concept of separation (especially temporal separation) with online transactions. Numerous courses are currently generated and executed online. Therefore, current student support frameworks are embedded in the structure of the course / program. This makes course design and student support inseparable (Thorpe, 2002).

The influence of the internet on education is another contemporary issue regarding student support. The internet as a platform for online / distance learning, is a colossal structure which accommodates an exponential amount of information, unregulated open education resources (OER) and open courseware (OCW) materials. Students are unsure of what, which and how much knowledge is relevant to their study. The internet so significant and yet so amorphous that faculty and institutions are yet to define practical frameworks of how to engage with it. Student support should thus be a significant component of online / distance learning in steering course objectives and student priorities on what, when and how much information should be accessed at any given time.

The goal of student support is to ensure an optimal fit between student aspirations, resources and abilities within the institution's facilities, academic requirements and characteristics. It aims at reducing transactional distance between the teacher, the student and the institution. Faculty needs to understand their role in providing student support by accessing commensurate training and practice. Objectives of student support include:

- Attract and retain a potential student's interest in undertaking a course/program by exposing him/her to the attributes of the program.
- Provide guidance to enable the student to assess his/her capacity to engage in the course/program.
- Enable student growth, engagement and success through the provision of within-reach skills training, guidance, counselling, tutoring and mentoring services.

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