Chapter 35
Components of Student Support in Blended and Online Learning

Tabitha Rangara-Omol

Monash University, Australia & Princess Noura University, Saudi Arabia

ABSTRACT

For every student cohort that registers for an online program, some will persist through to graduation while a good number will drop out. Studies continue to investigate the phenomena of persistence and dropout without consensus to the solution. However, student support has been shown to impact positively on a student's decision to stay for the duration of the program. Students of online/blended learning formats lack the advantage of socio-physical motivation. Therefore, they require support that constantly reassures them of peers, teachers, and university presence throughout the duration of the program. At every stage in the life of the program, the student will require specific support which are herein referred to as components of student support. They include student support during recruitment, registration procedures, registration requirements, orientation, study skills training, technology, learning materials, counselling and mentorship, communication and interactions, feedback, regional centers, library, students' association, and representation.

INTRODUCTION

Student satisfaction in online/distance learning is a complex and complicated issue due to the widely assumed range of socio-cultural and contextual issues. Even though some socio-cultural and contextual issues are not easy to identify and articulate. However, these issues are believed to influence student satisfaction and by extension, a student's decision to persist in the program up until graduation. This chapter describes support structures that should be implemented throughout the student journey from registration to graduation. Although support is required all through the journey, there are critical identifiable stages when support should be intensified. The types of supports that should be provided for at the critical stages are herein, referred to as components.

Student support components also arise in response to the need for organising university processes, student needs and student characteristics. For example, an institution registers a prospective student based on his/her academic standing as relates to the institution's entry requirements. As a support framework to optimise the recruitment process, it is within best practice that the institution provides adequate information so that the prospective student can successfully match his/her needs and capabilities with the attributes of the chosen course/ program. A student who makes the right choice of programs increases his/her chances of persisting to completion (Torenbeek, Jansen, & Hofman, 2011; Tyler-Smith, 2006). In addition, the components aim at supporting quality education experience for students who register into online / distance learning formats. This chapter also argues that within the support components are silent drivers that back the need for student support. These include: Persistence, progression, retention and success rates.

STUDENT SUPPORT: CRITICAL STAGES

The student's academic journey from registration through to graduation is referred to as the student walk/ student life cycle/academic journey (Subotzky & Prinsloo, 2011; UNISA, 2010; Ryan, 2004). Some universities have critical points / stages at which support is provided, others scaffold the services transitionally within the academic program without stops, while others make a blend of the two approaches. Whichever, the approach, critical stages are acknowledged (Ryan, 2004). They include; the time when the student is thinking of possibilities for study, questions on the credibility and integrity of the institution, program information, self-evaluation, decision-making and career choices, enrolment and registration, payment and funding options, preparation for study, technical coaching and help, studying, motivation, re-registration, course progression, teaching and learning, contact sessions, technology student services, support and feedback strategies, graduation and alumni. Qakisa-Makoe (2005) and UNISA (2010) categorize the stages/phases of student support into three:

1. Entry phase support also referred to as the pre-course phase;
2. Teaching and learning support phase also referred to as the during-course phase and;
3. Exit support phase also referred to as the post-course phase.

Within these phases, numerous activities that provide student support should be integrated (UNISA, 2010);

- **Preparedness:** Preparing prospective students for challenges in online/distance learning. This is in recognition that these learning formats have numerous challenges, which the student will need overcome. It also recognises that online/distance attracts a diverse community of students (disabled, gifted, foreign, national, rural, school leaving adults, working adults, disadvantaged women and men) who present diverse needs and characteristics.
- **Career Guidance and Counselling:** This begins when the course is being marketed at the pre-course phase. During this time, prospective students are provided with career guidance and counselling so that they are able to identify courses that fit their profile, strengths, interests and life goals. One of the factors that positively impacts on student retention and success is making the correct career choice (Subotzky & Prinsloo, 2011). Once an informed choice is made, career

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