A Framework for Supporting Adults in Distance Learning

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Introduction

In recent years, many 'traditional' Higher Education Institutes (HEI's) have been seeking to increase the participation of 'non-traditional' learners. In the context of this paper, 'traditional' institutions are those which mainly offer programmes on a full-time day basis for school leavers and 'non-traditional' learners are mature learners, returning to education on a part-time distance learning basis. Distance learning can generally be differentiated from other methods of teaching and learning by virtue of the fact that geographical distance separates the learner and teacher with materials and/or various technologies used to deliver these programmes (Smith, 2004). The increase in the number of non-traditional learners calls for innovative and complementary academic and administrative support strategies designed to meet the unique needs of these learners. Typically, learner support services within 'traditional' institutions are provided by a diverse range of offices. It can be argued that the needs of adult learners can best be planned, designed and managed at the level of the programme.

This paper presents a case study of how the features of effective learner support have been implemented by University College Dublin (UCD) in the case of its distance learning business degree programme. The case study presented is of a programme established ten years ago and where the learner support system has evolved becoming increasingly sophisticated in its design over time.

The Centrality of the Learner in Designing Learner Support

One way of conceptualising learner support and how systems might need to change to accommodate the needs of these learners is to acknowledge the learn-

er as the starting point (Tait, 2000). It follows, therefore, that course design, teaching methods, assessment and the overall learning environment must be considered with the learner and their learning in mind. Reasons for providing a range of learner support services of different types and at different stages of a programme include the need to assist with learner recruitment, the need to maximise learner retention, to provide for learners' demands for support, to help in overcoming learners' feelings of isolation and the need to nurture learners who may not have participated in formal education for some time (Mills, 2003; Rowntree, 1992; Simpson, 2002). One of the perceived disadvantages of studying at a distance is the geographical distance between the learners and the institution and the isolation that can be felt by learners as a result. Developing a sense of connectedness between the learners and the institution is a critical success factor for distance learning programmes (Dowling, 2006).

Designing and Managing Learner Support

The development of appropriate learner support systems for those studying at a distance, starting with enrolment, through to induction and beyond has drawn widespread attention in recent years and represents a fundamental ingredient in the success, or otherwise, of distance learning (Kenworthy, 2003; Tait, 2000; Mills, 2003). Tait (1995) presents a framework for the planning and management of learner support which includes an examination of who learners are, what their needs are, how their needs can be met, how services will be managed, how much the services will cost and how the effectiveness of the support services will be evaluated. Furthermore, Rowntree (1992) suggests that distance learners may need support before, during and after their programme.

Overall, learner support can be categorised in two ways: (i) academic support and (ii) non-academic support (Mills, 2003; Rowntree, 1992; Simpson, 2002). Academic support includes, assisting learners with programme content and assessment, managing programme workload, assisting learners in developing appropriate learning competencies and helping learners become independent. Non-academic support includes, assistance with any personal difficulties learners may encounter, helping learners retain interest in their studies and providing assistance with their social integration into the institution and the programme (Simpson, 2002; Tait, 2000). It is recognised that responsibility for the provision of support tends to rest with disparate functional offices (Dirr, 1999). Stark and Warne (1999) suggest that due to the nature of distance learning, it is important that learners have one person they can contact, i.e. their 'anchor person'. How

some of these supports can be integrated into a model of learner support will now be discussed in the context of the Bachelor of Business Studies (BBS) (distance learning) programme at UCD.

Learner Support on the Bachelor of Business Studies (BBS)

The BBS is a distance learning programme delivered through a blend of home study and occasional weekend attendance on campus and was specially designed for part-time adult learners returning to education. The programme was introduced in 1996 and was the School of Business's first venture into distance learning. Special features of the programme's structure include an eighteen-week semester and Autumn repeat examinations, which were regarded as an essential safety-net for non-traditional learners whose studies may be interrupted by diverse life-events. In addition, because of the non-traditional nature of the learner body the provision of supports to help learners cope with the academic demands of third level education was a primary consideration in the programme's early design.

In all evaluations of the programme, the quality of the learner support has been identified as the most significant factor in learner satisfaction. Another indicator of the effectiveness of the programme's learner support is the relatively high learner retention rates for the programme – in 2005/06 a drop out rate of five per cent was experienced across the programme's 280 participants; retention rates have varied over each full cycle of the programme, have never fallen below 60 per cent. Particular features of the programme's learner support framework are examined below.

The BBS Learner Support Framework

The five central features of the Learner Support Framework are:

(i) Day-to-Day Learner Support
A telephone/email/drop-in service with a same day query response policy is operated by personal tutors for dealing with all day-to-day academic and administrative queries. Counselling and advice is available on module content and assessment and this is further supported by the use of a managed learning environment (Blackboard).

(ii) Feedback and Learner Progress
Programme participants have tended to benefit from two types of written feed-

back on coursework, (i) individual feedback for each learner and (ii) general coursework feedback to a class outlining the main strengths and weaknesses of coursework submitted. The timely provision of feedback allows learners make any necessary adjustments to their coursework. Close monitoring of progress is also necessary as is careful attention to the setting of coursework deadlines and the proactive management of learner workload.

(iii) Study Skills Development

Three formal accredited study skills modules are provided at the early stages of the programme. These modules include: planning and organising study; learning from lectures; reading techniques; note-taking techniques; memory techniques; referencing guidelines; preparing for examinations; reflective learning; understanding learning; levels of learning; sourcing and evaluating literature; developing academic writing skills; how to learn creatively and developing critical thinking skills. The modules have been designed and are delivered and assessed by the personal tutors. A critical decision was made to ensure that the modules were not delivered in isolation from other modules on the programme and that the type of assessment adopted was designed to allow learners develop the skills needed to satisfactorily complete the assessment for other modules. Furthermore, the timing of the delivery of study skills is important to ensure that provision is made for progressive skills development at key stages of the programme.

These accredited learning skills modules have allowed learners to quickly develop the main learning competencies needed, develop confidence in their own study skills and understand what is expected from them during the course of their studies.

(iv) Induction and Learner Integration

Initial induction is scheduled over a weekend prior to the official programme commencement date. The purpose of this weekend is to ease the learners transition into formal education. The weekend sessions include: what to expect from the programme; issues surrounding returning to education as a mature learner; an introduction to note-taking; reading and memory techniques; essay writing; the establishment of peer support networks with fellow learners; meetings with past programme participants and the sharing of experiences.

(v) Personal Tutors

An early decision of the programme management was that the programme office would be staffed by personal tutors qualified to masters level in business so that they could provide day-to-day academic advice to learners. The personal tutor acts as the administrative manager of the programme and is responsible for the provision of academic support outside of the class weekends on campus. This academic support is provided in consultation with and in line with the needs of the academic teaching staff.

This personal tutor system allows for the academic and administrative needs of learners to be served through one unifying medium which is managed at a programme-level and also serves as the central interface between the learner and the institution. The personal tutor acts as an intermediary between the learner and the institution and in helping to shape University policy on the provision of support for adult learners studying at a distance.

Reflections

The framework of learner support that has evolved displays innovative and progressive features when benchmarked against the needs and interests of adult learners. It is also a case that provides clear illustration of many of the factors that are influential in determining the success or effectiveness of student learning when applied to the adult learner studying at a distance. But, perhaps, the case is most valuable for the way in which it highlights the importance of delegating a central and orchestrating role to the local programme office, for academic as well as administrative duties, and in policy formulation. The single greatest achievement of the programme has been in providing an effective 'voice' for the non-traditional learner body within a school predominantly geared to full-time day learners. While the framework of learner support outlined in this case study requires a significant financial and time investment on the part of institutions, the subsequent high learner retention rates that can be achieved makes this a very worthwhile investment.

Conclusion

This paper set out to present a case study of how the features of effective learner support were implemented in the case of UCD's distance learning business studies programmes. The paper proposed a framework of support founded upon the 'centrality of the learner', which advances the debate beyond the traditional dichotomy in learner support between academic and non-academic responsi-

bilities. It also suggests that the relationship between the learner and the course/departmental context may be more complex than originally envisaged and that the need for an intermediary between the learner and the institution can be of significant benefit in ensuring that the needs of both are managed, and indeed reconciled, where necessary. Furthermore, the paper suggests that all learner support activities, both academic and non-academic, are best designed and managed at the level of the programme where there is a greater understanding of the unique needs of the particular group of learners.

While the UCD model put forward in this paper has been developed for a distance learning programme, there are many aspects of the model which are equally appropriate and transferable to more traditional programmes. However, this case throws light on the dynamics that can facilitate, or impede, appropriate institutional responses to the needs of non-traditional learners and how institutions can translate student need into learner success. Regardless of the model adopted, it is suggested that success is more likely if the learner and their needs are viewed as the starting point and if the range of supports provided are managed in a coherent fashion by one programme-level function.

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