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# **THE ROLE OF LEARNER SUPPORT IN INSTITUTIONAL TRANSFORMATION – A CASE STUDY IN THE MAKING**

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## **Introduction**

With the democratization of higher education in recent decades has come increased accountability for the performance of universities and a greater focus on their outputs. Students are much more demanding of services and support, and governments and taxpayers want more demonstrable benefits to their investments.

An important component of this democratization has been the rapid growth of distance teaching and open learning institutions around the world. While the issues of student motivation and support are common to all educational institutions, the challenges are perhaps more stark where learners are overtly separated by time and space. From this perspective, campus-based universities have a lot to learn from the experience of distance educators.

A particularly interesting facet of distance learning is the development of a comprehensive and integrated approach to learner support, the term used in open and distance learning (ODL) to describe a full range of activities developed to help students meet their learning objectives and gain the knowledge requisite to course and career success. Learner support includes all those interactive processes intended to support and facilitate the learning process from the student's first point of contact with the institution, including tutoring, teaching, counselling, advising, orientation, administrative services and even peer tutoring and alumni support.

While earlier models of distance education assumed independent and self-actualized adult learners, experience proved otherwise -- retention rates were often extremely low, especially where isolated students were left to fend for themselves, and it was soon clear that open learning institutions could not merely coast on the backs of an elite group of highly motivated adult learners. Now, with 30 or more years of experience behind them, most open learning institutions have developed comprehensive and sophisticated systems of learner support that are based on a strong value system of access to fair opportunity. These can serve as models for campus-based institutions that have long assumed superiority in this area.

Using a case study of a traditional, campus-based university in transition, Canada's University of Windsor, this paper explores some of the lessons learned from the development of learner support in ODL and outlines current efforts to take them into account in the strategic vision for the University's development over the next five years.

## **The Challenge of Establishing a “Learner-Centred” University**

In all western jurisdictions, the most selective and research intensive universities have the highest status and prestige. There is a strong correlation between entering academic averages and reputation, and long-established universities in particular have capitalized effectively on such status. This magnifies the challenge of enhancing the profile and reputation of an institution like Windsor, with its more open approach to admissions and wider range of academic programmes, both driven by the desire to offer enhanced opportunity to students in the local region.

Capitalizing on the success of its strategic plan for 1999-2004, which completely reversed previous downward enrolment trends, reallocated resources to areas of strength and potential, identified pinnacle areas and developed a stronger culture for research, and significantly internationalized the institution, the University of Windsor recently adopted a new plan for 2004-2009 (University of Windsor, 2003).

The hallmark of this plan was to give operational meaning to the notion of a “learner-centred” university, one widely recognized for its stimulating and supportive campus climate and the demonstrable qualities of its graduates. While, at first glance, aspiring to be a “learner-centred” university may seem a tautology, a common criticism of modern universities has been the relative lack of attention given to issues of teaching and learning.

The essence of the changes envisioned for Windsor is to focus on difficult-to-measure “outputs” rather than the more common indicators of success, the “inputs” of entering student averages and demand for student places. A closely related characteristic of the University’s strategic plan is its emphasis on “the degree that works” in its broadest interpretation, reflected in careful monitoring of alumni success in graduate school and employment. These initiatives are in addition to the standard goals of improving the institution’s support for research, community service and internationalisation.

This emphasis on learner support and graduate attributes lends itself well to increased pressures for accountability from government, taxpayers and students, but it also raises major internal challenges for a university. Before discussing the University of Windsor case, it is useful to explore the evolution of learner support in institutions of open and distance learning.

### **What Can Be Learned from the Experience of Learner support in ODL?**

Early notions of the “industrial model” of distance education (see, for example, Peters, 1983) were concerned more with access and availability of learning opportunities than the individual experience of the learner. The underlying assumption was that working through well designed packaged materials, whether print-based or offered through other technologies, in itself constituted “a learning experience”. Evidence quickly debunked this notion as isolated, unsupported and/or ill-prepared learners struggled to cope with the learning materials with little or no assistance from the institution. With the increased access that open distance institutions offered, enrolments were high, but with so little support for learners, attrition rates were as well (Keegan, 1983), particularly for first-time learners.

Concern about attrition and academic credibility spurred efforts to find ways to promote persistence, mainly through the development of learner support services. At first, these were mainly limited to contact with a tutor or faculty member over course content. However, other forms of support quickly followed. O’Donnell and Daniel (1979) proposed one of the earliest models for student development in a distance education setting, arguing that it could not be assumed that adult students have all the skills necessary to “plan their lives, career and education, set realistic goals and study effectively” (p. 1). In gradual response to such challenges, effective support in the form of academic advising and counselling, regional offices with a variety of administrative services, summer schools, and group tutorials was developed.

The irony is that there has probably been more progress in the provision and evaluation of the impact of learner support in ODL institutions than on mainstream campuses in recent years, perhaps because learner difficulties are more overt when students are more obviously separated in time and place from their institutions. Researchers and practitioners in the field of ODL, whether faculty immersed in their own discipline, counsellors, administrators, or other learner support personnel have had a lively and continuous dialogue about how to help learners overcome these barriers. As such, there is a rich history and literature in learner support in ODL to draw upon. Many of the same issues of isolation and lack of support have long prevailed on university campuses but they have been far less evident or acknowledged until recently.

Sewart (1993) describes mass higher education at campus-based institutions, noting that there is an attempt to address the shortfall between a one-to-one teaching and learning process and the depersonalized system of the generalised lecture with “...an assembly line method in which all the parts are fitted to the whole by a series of specialists” (p. 4). He refers to content tutors such as graduate teaching assistants, career counsellors, academic advisors, and other support personnel. Rumble (2000) discusses the response of large campus-based institutions to a rising consumer orientation of students and the decline of the central role that post-secondary education once played in their lives, observing a tendency for such institutions to become more bureaucratic and, paradoxically, more depersonalized for individual students. He compares this to the practice of student support in ODL, and notes that

...distance educators have already had to think through some of the issues raised, and in many ways are ahead of the game...We have always had to think through our support services, trying to find the best delivery mechanism for students who will never come on campus because the campus, in the traditional sense, does not exist (p. 218)

In ODL, learner support has been a central issue of interest to distance educators for the past two decades as practitioners and researchers have tried better to understand the experience of the distance learner, what holds learners back, and what contributes to persistence and success in the learning process. Hence, the development of learner support in ODL has paralleled and reflected the change in conceptualization of education as transmission of pre-packaged knowledge to that of a dynamic transformative process, focusing on developmental constructivist models of teaching and learning and findings ways to engage the learner as an active and central participant in the learning process.

Sweet (1993) focused on the implications for a changing role of learner support as distance education evolved from the more passive industrial model to new, more interactive forms of learning. He envisioned a closer alignment between traditionally distinct advising and tutoring tasks in distance education to promote more interaction between students and instructors through either mediated or face-to-face means (p. 1). A central figure in the development and management of the decentralized learner support model at the UKOU, Sewart (1993) emphasized the importance of context in the development of learner support services, taking account of such diverse variables as student needs, the educational ethos of the institution and region, the dispersal of and generic differences within the student body, and relative levels of resource.

Brindley (1995) built on these notions to recommend building a service model based on the particular mission and goals of the institution and informed by research findings. Its goals should be to develop learner support services that are more responsive to learner needs, contribute to learner persistence and success and, of particular interest to this paper, to play a key role in the strategic positioning of an institution or distance education service (p.118).

Tait (2000), identified three primary functions for learner support in ODL – “cognitive”, “affective” and “systemic”, all of which are crucial to student success. Cognitive support facilitates learning through the mediation of the standard and uniform elements of course materials and learning resources for individual students; affective services provide an environment which supports students, creates communities and enhances self-esteem; and systemic support services establish administrative processes and information management systems which are effective, transparent and student-friendly (p. 289). Tait emphasizes the essential and interdependent nature of these functions that work together to create “... an environment where students feel at home, where they feel valued, and which they find manageable” (p. 290).

Simpson (2002) moves away from a systems approach, instead providing a typology of learner support categorized by activity (e.g. advising, advocacy) rather than by specific personnel or department. Thorpe (2003) takes the crossover in functions a step further in addressing the need to rethink learner support in the context of the online environment. She defines learner support as “...all those elements capable of responding to a known learner or group of learners, before, during and after the learning process.” (p. 201). This definition appropriately blurs the traditional distinction between learner support and course production. In online learning, course materials may consist only of a syllabus and a list of required readings, with the content being created through interaction among learners and between learners and instructor. Thorpe’s conceptualization recognizes this important evolution and describes the cross-functional, interactive, responsive, and individualized nature of learner support.

Anderson (2003) notes that pressures for access and availability of net-based telecommunications are both forcing and offering the opportunity to re-examine the most effective use of finite and valuable faculty time. He stresses the need for evaluating all types of interaction (learner-learner; learner-instructor; learner-content) by their contribution to the learning process. This premise can be extended to other learner support professionals. Kvavik and Handberg (2000), in describing the transformation of student services at the University of Minnesota, discuss the need to reconceptualize the role of student service professionals as “...generalists who serve as facilitators and navigators in an information-rich environment that is shared by provider and client alike” (p.31). These writers

illustrate efforts to use learning support resources (human and technological) strategically to promote desired learning outcomes within the context of institutional mission.

It is apparent from the literature (e.g. Granger and Benke, 1998) that practitioners and researchers in ODL have become increasingly clear about the role of learner support in helping students become more independent, collaborative and effective learners. Administrative systems are designed to be transparent and give students maximum opportunity for control and self-help (Kvavik, R. B. and Handberg, M.N., 2000). Interactions with teaching staff are intended not only to help students master content but to build the skills needed for independent and collaborative learning (McLoughlin & Marshall, 2000). Librarians go beyond information access and retrieval to helping students become information literate -- to develop research questions, think critically, and navigate and evaluate the reliability, validity, and usefulness of the overwhelming amount of information available to them (Canadian Library Association, 2000). Advisors and counsellors help students to acquire the skills necessary to engage in self-assessment, plan, make sound decisions, study effectively, and to overcome barriers to academic and career success (Potter, 1998). Interfunctional collaboration provides a transparent and seamless system where learners can get the type of support they need easily and when required.

As technology has allowed, ODL learner support has become increasingly sophisticated with the introduction of online classes with both synchronous and asynchronous communication, online registration and advising and library services, e-mail support, chatrooms and bulletin boards, interactive web-based counselling, and around-the-clock help desks (Krauth and Carbajal, 2000, provide a comprehensive guide to good practice in online learner support). Kvavik and Handberg (2000) discuss the transformation of learner support services from a "...public utility role to strategic contributors to the management and growth of university instructional programs" (p. 30), and note that learner support can play a central role in meeting the institution's strategic academic and economic objectives.

Robinson (1995), in a review of learner support research in ODL, points out that more theory building and systematic studies that build on existing knowledge are needed. She also notes the difficulty of reconciling the needs to address pressing local issues with a broader research agenda for the field of learner support, and acknowledges that small contextually based studies (characteristic of the ODL literature on learner support) form valuable contributions to our knowledge base. Other writers have pointed to the need for more evaluative studies so that the positive impact of learner support can be clearly demonstrated and investment justified. Mills (2003) states, "We need to demonstrate the added value of student support if we are going to convince the managers of institutions that it is worthwhile allocating resources to this aspect of distance learning" (p. 111). At the same time, Mills, a long time leader in the field of ODL, quite clearly believes in the "added value" of learner support. In the same piece, he argues that "...by planning learner support as an integral part of a teaching and learning programme, rather than an afterthought which can be excised when times get difficult, institutions can demonstrate a recognition of the link between income generation and learner support (p.104).

Although not all institutional budget allocations may reflect it, learner support is now seen as not only a legitimate, but a very necessary part of distance education practice regardless of the mode of interaction with students. As such, it requires sustained research and evaluation activity in order to continually test assumptions and theories, and to measure the effectiveness of practice. Although there is no recent comprehensive review of research on learner support, one might suspect that the state of the field has improved since the publication of Robinson's article. A major factor in this is technology, and the very positive impact it has had on our ability to gather data and share it. There is the potential to have much better student record systems, analyze data more easily, and gain access to sources of research such as online journals. For a number of years, there have been peer reviewed journals reporting research results and addressing issues of practice and evaluation in ODL. Applied research units within ODL institutions such as the UKOU Institute of Educational Technology are engaged in investigating the nature of learning at a distance, and how to increase retention and provide more effective learning environments. As Ryan (2001) notes:

In institutions with a distance education mission, learner support has involved systematic investigation and research into how student can learn in a non-classroom environment, how best to substitute for the informal and incidental learning that occurs on campus and the vast range of what Rumble (2000) calls 'consumptive service benefits'. Guidelines have evolved. The

Commonwealth of Learning, for example, has published a toolkit, “Learner Support in Open and Distance Learning” (see [www.col.org/newpub.htm](http://www.col.org/newpub.htm)) (p. 74).

In summary, for ODL institutions that take learner support seriously, there is vast literature, a wealth of expertise, and a rich history to draw upon. Learner support can be a central part of the mission of ODL in offering access and opportunity—not just to a place in the educational system, but to a supportive learning environment that offers the best opportunity for academic success. Effective learner support in ODL is characterized by the following essential elements:

- a) Responsiveness:** It personalizes the learning process so as to be responsive to different individuals and groups (rather than relying on fixed elements such as a course syllabus).
- b) Interactivity:** It encourages and facilitates interaction among and between student(s), faculty, tutor, institutional support persons and academic content.
- c) Context Specificity:** It exists to further the goals of a particular institution and serves the needs of its learners within its specific context.
- d) Learner Development:** It both facilitates learning within courses and addresses broader issues of student skill and personal development.
- e) Openness to Change:** Learner support systems evolve continuously to accommodate new learner populations, educational developments, economic conditions, technological advances, and findings from research and evaluation.
- f) Integration:** Effective learner support involves a high level of inter-functional collaboration and is seamless to the learner. Perhaps most fundamentally, the previous separation of cognitive, affective and systemic learner services in distance education has increasingly been replaced by the recognition that an integrated approach to all three is critical to learner and, therefore, institutional success.

While it has always been assumed that there was much more integration of such services in a traditional university where students lived right on campus, it is postulated here that many of the same separations have long prevailed but have received less attention until very recently because they were less evident and less recognized. The University of Windsor is a useful case study in pursuing this assertion.

### **How the Windsor Plan Addresses the Major Issues of Learner Support**

While the Windsor plan addresses a number of key areas for development, its central tenet is to give real meaning and impact to the notion of a “learner-centred” campus. The relevant components of this initiative are the following:

- 1. *Emphasis on Learning Outcomes:*** This envisions a major process whereby each faculty specifies the attributes expected for each of its graduates, and outlines how these will be achieved, measured and evaluated.
- 2. *Teaching and Learning Initiatives:*** Building on a recent *White Paper on Teaching and Learning*, the plan supports 30 specific initiatives across a wide range of issues designed to improve the quality of teaching and learning on campus.
- 3. *Library Services:*** The rapid evolution of high speed electronic technologies has transformed library services with Windsor and other Ontario universities leading the way. The impact has not only been to equalize accessibility to materials and journals across all institutions but to provide for stronger leadership from the Library in helping students to develop their research and analytical skills.
- 4. *Campus Community:*** The plan places an important emphasis on the development of a vibrant and supportive campus culture, one that encourages much better integration of programmes and services and the academic and social sides of university life.
- 5. *Faculty and Staff Training:*** This recognizes the need for an integrated approach to faculty and staff training and support to encourage better cross-campus communications and a common sense of mission in the process.
- 6. *Flexible Learning:*** The plan emphasizes enhanced support for different styles of learning, instructional design and distance education, as informed by independent reviews of Windsor by two notable ODL practitioners, Ian Mugridge and Tony Bates.

**7. Faculty Reward System:** The importance of more encouragement and support for faculty initiatives in teaching and learning is central to this initiative and builds on a previous task force's recommendations for changes to this end.

**8. Co-operative Education and Internships:** Work experience, voluntary internship programmes and other activities designed to assist students to integrate theory and practice across a wide range of disciplines is integral to the University's emphasis on "the degree that works" and learner outcomes, building on what is already one of the largest per capita co-op programmes in Canada.

**9. International Focus and Diversity:** A key to a learner-centred campus is an emphasis on diversity and exposure to many different ways of looking at the world. This is a central objective of the University's extremely successful international recruitment programme which has resulted in a campus that has more than 10% of its students coming from overseas, notably South Asia, very high by Canadian standards.

**10. Celebrating Success:** The plan emphasizes celebrating faculty, staff and student success to encourage the highest standards of achievement and the development of genuine campus pride, both central to the enhancement of the University's profile and reputation.

Through these measures in particular, the Windsor plan addresses all of the elements from the above review of the ODL literature on learner outcomes:

a) **Responsiveness:** By requiring each academic programme to specify the learner attributes it expects for its graduates and build corresponding learner support, it is responsive to the needs of individual groups of learners.

b) **Interactivity:** It envisions the integration of all aspects of teaching, learning and student support in ways which encourage dynamic interactivity among them.

c) **Context Specificity:** The plan is based on environmental scans which identify its learners, current context, and key challenges and opportunities for the future.

d) **Learner Development:** All initiatives are driven by the primary goal of reaching prescribed graduate outcomes, making learner development the central orientation of the University.

e) **Openness to Change:** Each initiative is tied to clear objectives and efforts to measure and evaluate outcomes, with services and programmes being adjusted regularly on the basis of such research.

f) **Integration:** Central to the plan is the recognition that all levels of learner support are essential to student and institutional success.

## **The Challenge of Implementing Cultural Change on Campus**

While the Windsor plan goes well beyond most campus-based universities in its emphasis on graduate outcomes and learner support, the challenges of implementing the plan are significant if it is to have real impact on the activities and success of the institution.

While there is widespread support for the initiatives in principle, there is considerable concern about the pressures of time and the implications of the exercise for faculty workload. When resources are fewer, demands greater and technology has increased the pace of our lives, faculty and staff are understandably resistant to new obligations, especially if unsupported by additional resources.

In response to widespread recognition that faculty reward systems are overwhelmingly research driven, most universities have significantly increased their recognition of and encouragement for good teaching. However, there is so much pressure on new faculty to establish their research, obtain external grants and publish in appropriate journals that it is very difficult for them to give the requisite attention to innovative teaching and strong learner support, at least until tenure has been attained.

Resistance is even greater among faculty for whom such initiatives pose major philosophical or cultural issues. Academics have resisted such terms as "customer" with its implication that the student is always right and some find it insulting that it would even be necessary to speak of a "learner centred" approach in an university, worrying that it implies spoon-feeding or pampering students too much. As well, few professors are trained for teaching and learning, most taking their cues from the way they were taught in university in a kind of apprenticeship system.

The majority of faculty are products of an earlier era of university where a much smaller percentage of the population had access and where significant dropout rates were seen not as a mark of failure but as

indicators of high standards and intellectual rigour. Today's students represent a much broader base of the population and many see higher learning as a right rather than a privilege. This creates an atmosphere where students are much more demanding for service and support and exhibit an unprecedented sense of entitlement.

The difficulties of implementation notwithstanding, there is growing recognition that our universities need to be more responsive, more adaptable and more comprehensive in their approach to teaching and learning, that faculty cannot merely replicate the way they were taught, and that a separation of the cognitive from the affective and systemic is both artificial and counterproductive. The irrefutable evidence of the value of post-secondary education, both to the individual and to the society, has placed a strong onus on all stakeholders to ensure that our institutions of higher learning are very responsive to the diverse needs of different groups of learners.

### **Assessing the Impact of the Windsor Plan**

It will obviously take some time to assess the effectiveness of the new Windsor plan. Its immediate priority is to mobilize faculty and staff to develop clear graduate outcomes for each programme. While this may be more readily realized by professional programmes such as Engineering, Nursing, Education and Law, it may be even more important for broader academic areas like the liberal Arts and Sciences, if only to make more apparent what is already known -- for instance, that their graduates have just as high employment and salary rates as alumni of programmes more overtly oriented to employment preparation.

Once these graduate outcomes have been identified and catalogued, a second level of assessment is to determine their impact on alumni success in employment and in graduate school. Finally, there is the much longer term issue of the impact of these changes on the profile and reputation of the University. The most ambitious part of this planning exercise is the determination to differentiate and build the profile of the institution on the basis of its commitment to learner support and graduate outcomes, especially at a time when all universities are promoting themselves as learner-centred.

Perhaps the most encouraging outcome of all these deliberations is their very existence and intensity. Western universities have long been accused of smugness, resistance to change and even arrogance. Times are changing quickly and "academic management" is no longer an oxymoron. Strategic planning is central to every institution's development and effective university leaders are openly embracing enhanced learner support, aspiring to much greater heights, and welcoming transparency and accountability.

Fifteen years ago, Paul (1988) decried the tendency of ODL institutions to cut back vital student services in difficult times, but the same institutions today offer much more comprehensive and integrated learner support than ever before, with demonstrable impacts on their success. Campus-based institutions have much to learn from their pioneer work and their leaders are well advised to pay more attention to the ODL literature. From this perspective, Windsor should prove a fascinating case study!

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