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EdTech *notes*

A topical start-up guide series on emerging topics on Educational Media and Technology

Student Support Services
for Success in

Open and Distance Learning



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Introduction

Introduction - Why Student Support?

Open and distance learning has been a great success in the latter half of the twentieth century. However there is what Woodley et al (2013) call 'an elephant in the room of distance education' - its dropout rate. Figure 1 shows the graduation rates for a number of distance institutions compared with the UK full-time rate.

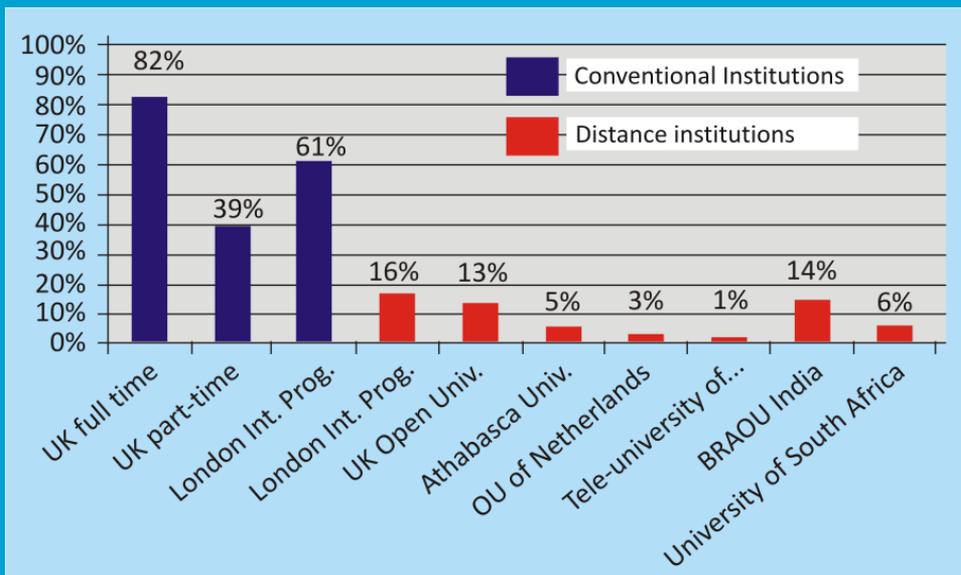


Figure 1: Graduation rates at a selection of distance institutions compared with the UK conventional university average graduation rate (Inkelaar et al, 2015)

It can be seen that distance institutions tend to have much lower graduation rates than the UK full time average - the so-called 'distance education deficit'. The London University International Programme is a particularly good example of this deficit as its degrees are presented in two different modes, one reinforced by face-to face support at local institutions, the other entirely at a distance. The course content and examinations are identical in both modes, but the supported option is better by around 61% to 16%.

The main reason for this deficit is probably distance students' isolation from their institutions, their teachers and other students - what Moore (1990) calls the 'Transactional Distance' between all parts of their learning environment. They will also have the disadvantages of studying part-time and juggling family and job demands.

In distance learning the basic teaching material has always been in the form of some kind of text, whether that has been in print or online, or presented via podcasts or radio and television broadcasting. But many distance institutions recognised that the distance education deficit required some other forms of provision or back-up apart from a text. That back-up is generally called 'Student Support'.

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Defining Student Support

'What qualities and skills do students need to succeed in a distance learning environment?'

I've put this question to groups of distance educators from different cultures around the world and the answers usually contain most of the following:

- ✓ Intellectual ability
- ✓ Good 'learning' skills
- ✓ Motivation to learn
- ✓ Ability to deal with stress

- ✓ Self-confidence as a learner
- ✓ Sense of humour
- ✓ Time management skills
- ✓ Ability to balance demands of family, job and study

I think that these qualities and skills fall into three main areas - cognitive, emotional and organisational (Figure 2):

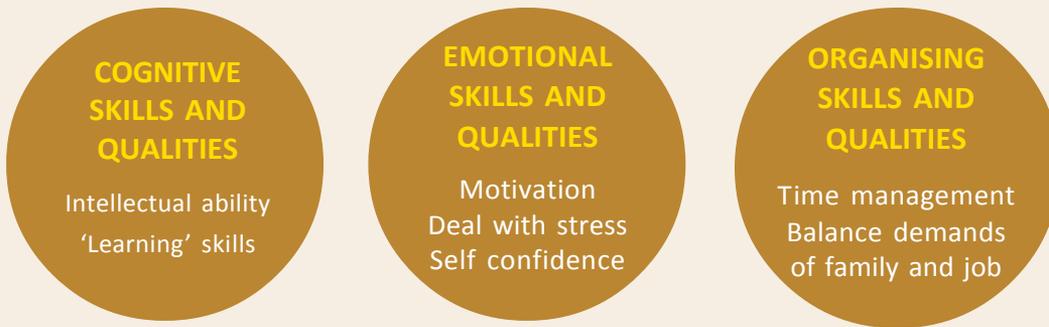


Figure 2: Qualities and skills needed by the distance student

This suggests to me a model of a distance student as needing three kinds of support (Figure3):

Thus distance student support falls into three basic categories - cognitive, organising and emotional support.

(i) Cognitive(or 'Academic')-support is to do with developing a student's learning and cognitive skills. It involves not just teaching but helping students develop learning skills together with the important skills of assessment and feedback - see Figure4.

- 'Teaching' includes activities such as like defining the course territory, explaining concepts, demonstrating, giving examples, and monitoring student progress.
- 'Assessment' includes not only formal assessment but also informal feedback to help students reflect on their strengths and weaknesses.
- 'Developing learning skills' means helping students with numeracy and literacy skills

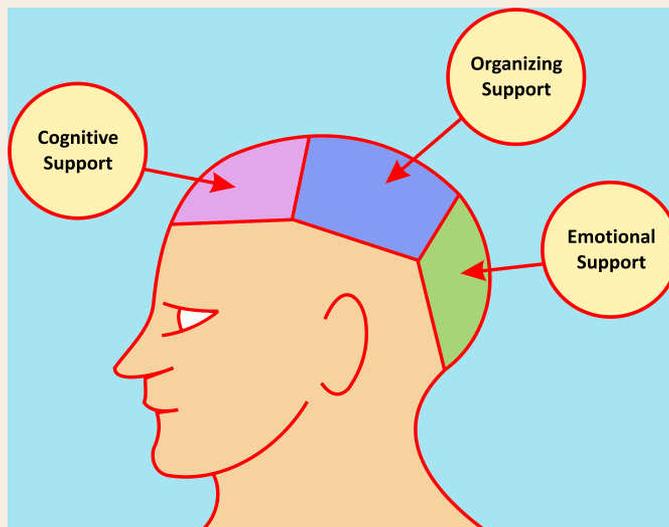


Figure 3: The Distance Student Support Model

Distance student support falls into three basic categories - cognitive, organising and emotional support.

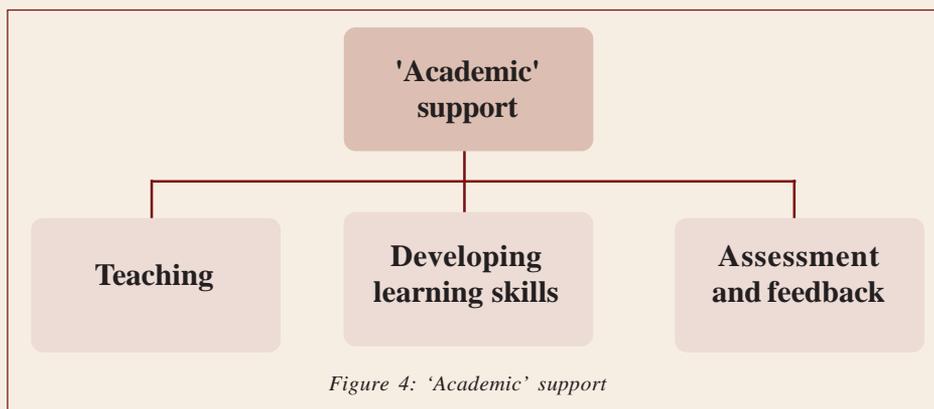


Figure 4: 'Academic' support

Organisational and emotional support together are often called 'Non-academic' support (Figure 5):

(iii) Emotional support - is about helping students deal with the emotional side of their learning. It includes helping students:

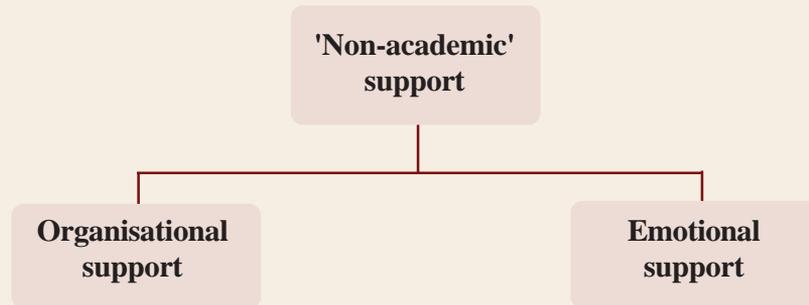


Figure 5: 'Non-academic' support

(ii) Organisational support - is about helping a student with the management of their studies. It includes helping students:

- manage their study time effectively,
- keep up with the pace of the course,
- find ways of prioritising work and family life and so on.

- develop their learning motivation,
- develop self-confidence in themselves as learners,
- find ways of managing the stress of learning, particularly assessment stress.

Much research and development into distance learning has gone into teaching – academic support. Less attention has been paid to non-academic support which is perhaps the more complex area and needs various ways of describing it.

Describing non-academic support

There are a number of ways in which distance student support can be described or categorised.

1. 'Developmental' and 'Problem-solving' support.

Support can be categorised as to whether it is helping a student develop into a more effective learner or is helping them overcome a problem which is inhibiting their progress (Table 1).

Developmental support	Problem solving support
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Course choice advice • Careers advice • Help with skills development • Identifying and reinforcing motivation • Post-graduation support¹ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Solving problems with the student's institution • Overcoming study problems such as stress, loss of concentration, getting behind and so on • Sorting out personal problems affecting study • Dropout support²

Table 1: Developmental and Problem solving support

¹ It may seem overkill to go on supporting students after graduation, but successful alumni who are well-connected with the institution can be both valuable mentors as well as the best recruiters of new students.

² Support to students who have dropped out is also very important. Often retrieving such students back to study is as vital as retaining them in the first place, since they may not have dropped out for academic reasons.

Support can be categorised as to whether it is helping a student develop into a more effective learner or is helping them overcome a problem which is inhibiting their progress.

2. Support with or for the student.

Sometimes support is with the student directly, but sometimes it may involve doing something for the student (see Table 2 below).

With a student	<p>Informing</p> <p>- Giving appropriate information</p>	<p>Advising</p> <p>Suggesting best ways forward from a choice of options</p>	<p>Exploring</p> <p>Helping a student decide about a problem for themselves</p>
For a student	<p>Action</p> <p>- Practical action to help a student such as finding a grant for them</p>	<p>Advocacy</p> <p>- Making a special case for the student for special treatment or giving a reference</p>	<p>Agitation</p> <p>Trying to change the institution to help students more effectively</p>

Table 2: Support with the student and for the student

Sometimes support is with the student directly, but sometimes it may involve doing something for the student.

Activity

Decide which categories (informing, advising, exploring, taking action, advocating, agitation) the following student queries and problems fall into.

1. "Which courses do I need for a maths degree?"
2. "I can do either course A or course B – which should I do?"
3. "My daughter is seriously ill. Should I drop out?"
4. "I cannot go to the tutorial because I cannot afford the bus fare"
5. "I missed the due date of this assignment because I was ill. Can I submit it now?"
6. "I have got behind because there is far too much material in this course."

I'm sure you will have decided that the categories are somewhat arbitrary and that there are often no clear distinctions between them. But my suggestions are as follows:

1. *Informing* – a straight request for information
2. *Advising* – suggesting a student choose one of several options based on their background and your knowledge
3. *Exploring* – helping a student by clarifying the issues in a choice that only they can make
4. *Action* – you might take action by trying to find some funds to give the student a travel grant
5. *Advocacy* – you might try to make a case to allow the student to submit late
6. *Agitation* – if the student is right you might try to get the institution to reduce the course content

Some institutions adopt the former model and expect students to take the initiative to ask for support when they need it.

3. Instigating student support

Another important characteristic of support is who instigates it. It can be started by a student asking help from the institution ('reactive support') or by the institution taking the initiative to contact the student ('proactive support') as depicted in Figure 5 below:

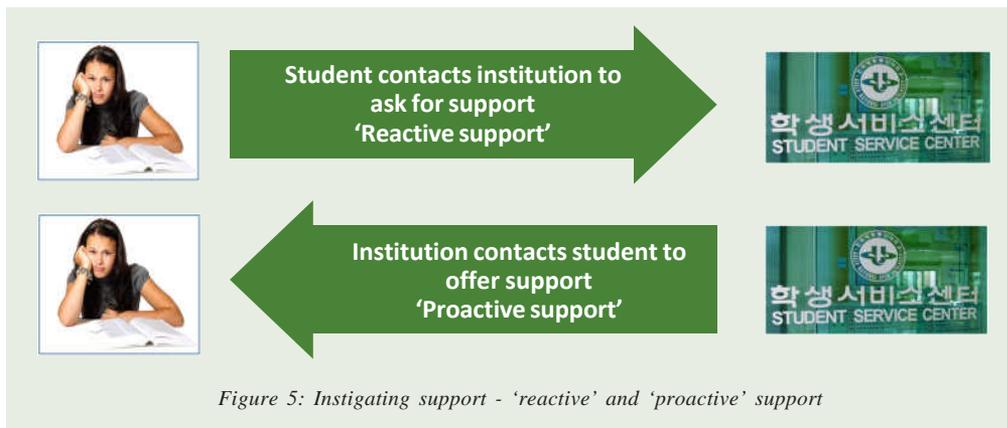


Figure 5: Instigating support - 'reactive' and 'proactive' support

Some institutions adopt the former model and expect students to take the initiative to ask for support when they need it. But as Anderson (2006) says:

“Student self-referral does not work as a mode of promoting persistence. Students who need services the most refer themselves the least.

“Effective retention services take the initiative in outreach and timely interventions with those students.”

Anderson (2006)

There is considerable evidence that such 'proactive' support from an institution can have a retention effect- see for example Gibbs et al (2007).

4. Sources of support

There are sources of support for student apart from the distance institution. In a survey by Asbee et al (1998) UKOU students named various sources of support for their studies in order of the importance to them- Table 3 (over)

For students the two most important sources of support are:

Family and friends. Students rated their family and friends as their most important source of study support. Presumably that support is largely non-academic - organisational and motivational. This finding led to the UKOU setting up a website for families and friends to advise them on how to support 'their' student most effectively - see Figure 6.

Other students. There are various ways in which students can support each other:

- *'Self-help groups'* - students on the same course helping each other. The institution can help distance students link up in various ways by setting up online discussion forums or developing 'study dating' - websites that can put students in touch with each other.
- *Student mentoring* - experienced students helping newer students. There is evidence that this can increase student success - see Boyle (2008).

Importance to students	Source
	From families and friends
	From other students
	From employers
	From the institution directly
Least important	

Table 3: Students' sources of support in order of importance to them

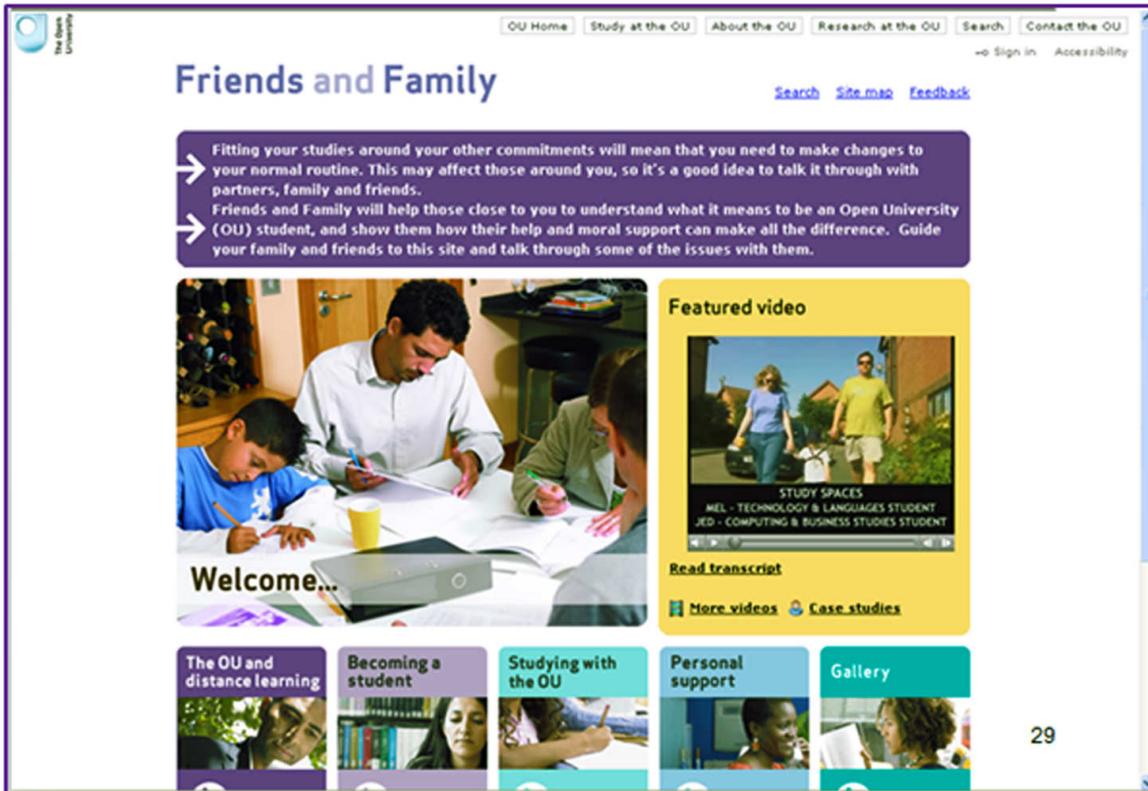


Figure 6: The home page of the UKOU's website for families and friends of students

5. Timing of support

The timing of student support is very important. Figure 7 is a 'rivergram' showing how UKOU students drop out of their first course. The width of the 'river' is proportional to the number of students going on at any time.

It can be seen that dropout occurs very heavily at the beginning of a course. This suggests that support also needs to be heavily focused at the start of a course, and even before the start.

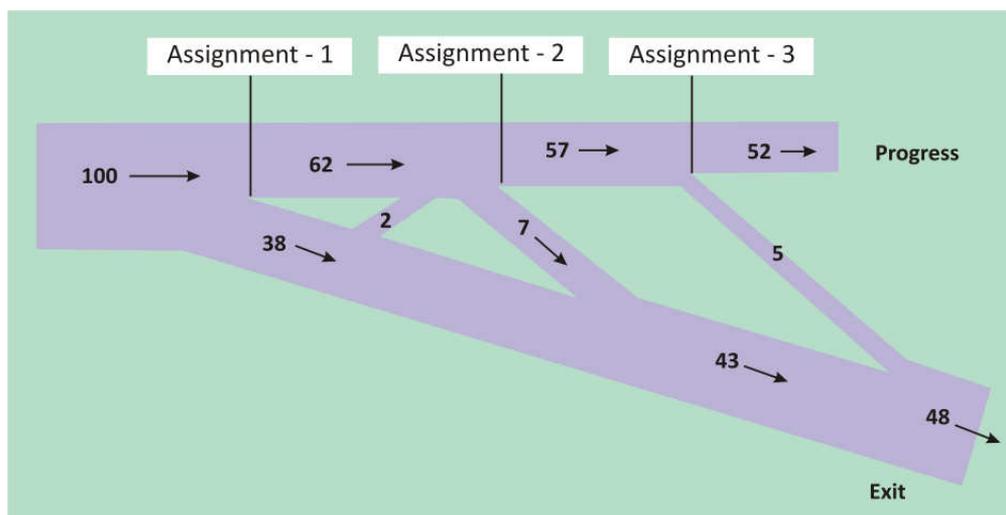


Figure 7: A 'rivergram' of UKOU student progress on a course

This suggests that support also needs to be heavily focused at the start of a course, and even before the start.

6. Media for support

There is a range of media to communicate support to and from students, each with advantages and disadvantages. There is not a great deal of

research into those comparative pluses and minuses so Table 4 is mainly my own guess at them.

Medium		Cost per student supported	Effectiveness
 Face to face	Individual meetings	\$\$\$\$\$	Probably the most effective
	Group meetings	\$\$\$\$	Maybe less effective, but may enhance student-student contacts
 Phone	Individual calls	\$\$\$\$	Still quite effective - see the 'Cost-benefits' section below
	Conference calls	\$\$\$	Little evidence but technically sometimes difficult and quality poor
 Email	Email Individual	\$\$\$	Quick and probably quite effective but can involve much staff time
	Email Group	\$	Very economical but evidence for effectiveness limited
 Text messaging	Individual and Group	\$\$?	Limited to 140 characters but might be useful for reminders etc
 Virtual learning environments on the Web	Group	\$	Little evidence
 Social media - Facebook, Instant Messaging etc	Group	\$	Little evidence

Table 4: Media for support

Notes:

1. Face to face meetings - although there is little evidence for the effectiveness of face to face support it is notable that a number of distance institution maintain it- for example in the case of the Korean National Open University - because they believe that initial face to face meetings overcome some of the inherent disadvantages of purely online support (Simpson, 2015).
2. Email group support - recent researchers have found some evidence for a retention effect of group emails - see for example Inkelaar (2015), Chyung, S.Y. (2001), Huett et al (2008), and Twyford, (2007).

7. Support for different students

Some students may need more support than others - for example students with some kinds of disabilities, particularly remote students, students working shifts and so on. Such students are sometimes called 'Vulnerable' or 'At risk' students.

The field of 'learning analytics' now enables institutions to predict which students are most likely to be vulnerable. For example the UKOU

uses a statistical system which attaches a 'predicted probability of success' to each new student which can vary from around 9% to 83% (most students are between 30% and 60%). This prediction is surprisingly accurate and depends mostly on a student's previous level of education but it takes gender, age and course choice into account as well (Simpson, 2006). The usefulness of such a system is that it enables the institution to focus scarce support resources on the most vulnerable students.

8. Institutional organisation for support

Distance institutions organise their student support systems in various ways. I suggest the criteria for an effective support system should be that there is:

(i) Reactive support - a system which answers student enquiries quickly and effectively.

(ii) Proactive support - a system which systematically proactively contacts students at appropriate critical times, especially to reinforce their motivation.

(iii) Personal support - clarity about who gives that support, how personal and individual it is and over what period of a student's studies.

students with some kinds of disabilities, particularly remote students, students working shifts and so on. Such students are sometimes called 'Vulnerable' or 'At risk' students.

Case study

The UK Open University has used two models for organising support. Up to the year 2000 on a student's first course module both academic and non-academic support was given by the student's part-time personal 'tutor-counsellor'. On subsequent modules academic support was given by a specialist tutor for that module and continuing non-academic support by the student's tutor-counsellor, who, it was thought, would have built up a personal relationship with the student on their first module (Figure 8).

There were various problems with this model (such as expense) and after a period in which there was no continuing tutor-counsellor support for subsequent modules it was replaced. In the new model the first module tutor continued to give academic support, but non-academic support for that and subsequent modules was given by a full-time 'Student Support Team' of anything up to 50 people based in the module's faculty (Figure 9). Each team is monitoring several thousands of students.

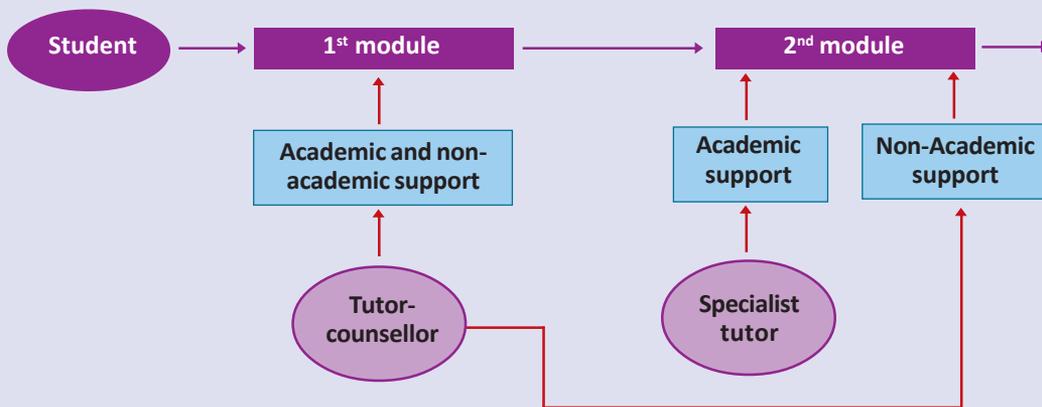


Figure 8: The UKOU student support structure up to the year 2000

For a distance institution student support is naturally an expensive addition to the cost of writing and despatching course materials.

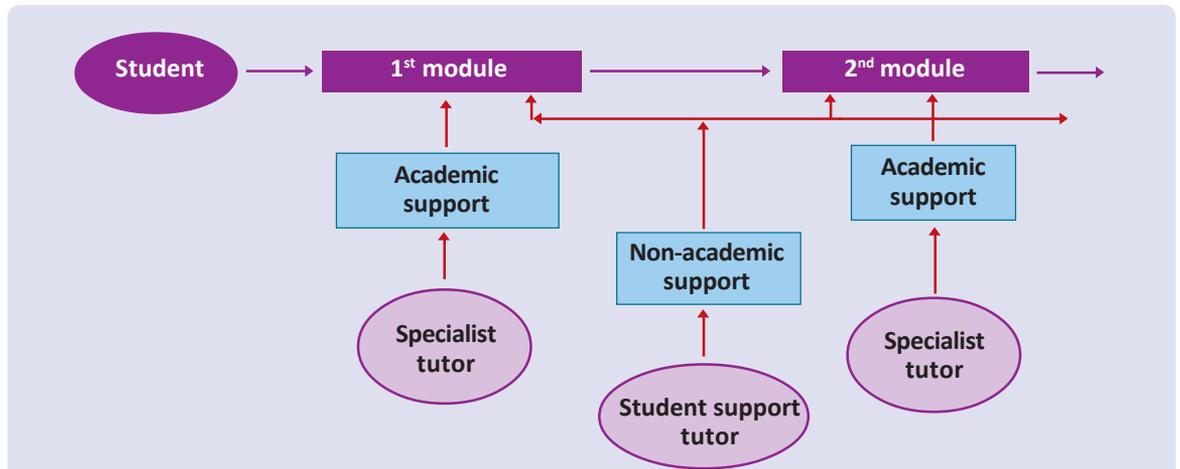


Figure 9 The UKOU student support structure from 2014

The Team model has the virtue of greater systemisation, but at the expense of decreased personalisation. So far it is not clear that this has paid off in terms of greater student satisfaction. A recent report ('Snowball' 2015) on the UK's National Student Survey results

noted that "OU managers will be disappointed that, after the first full year of student support teams, the university rating has slipped 31 places to 136th (out of 157 UK universities) for 'Good advice was available when I needed to make study choices'".

9. Cost and benefits of support

For a distance institution student support is naturally an expensive addition to the cost of writing and despatching course materials. But it is vital to note that if properly organised it can have a positive return on investment - that is the cost of the support can be more than compensated by the extra income it generates to the institution. This income arises because if the support enables more students to continue than otherwise, those extra students will be paying further course fees.

The return on investment for some specific proactive support can be up to 450% (Simpson, 2008), which in the case of a large distance institution can mean a surplus of several£million.

10. Conclusion

Distance student support is a large and complex subject which is only lightly covered in these Notes. Much research is still needed to determine the best ways of enhancing distance student success.

Further reading

Simpson, O. (2012). 'Supporting Students for Success in Online and Distance Learning' Routledge

<http://www.tandf.net/books/details/9780415509107/>

See also the website

www.ormondsimpson.com

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He has given keynote presentations in Mexico, South Africa, Ghana, China, the West Indies, Colombia, Brazil, South Korea, The Gambia, Holland and Papua New Guinea.

His distance education interests are in student support and retention, cost-benefits of student retention activities, ethical issues, learning motivation, e-learning and staff development. He has written several books, the latest of which 'Supporting Students for Success in Online and Distance Education' (2012, Routledge) which has just been translated into Chinese. He has also written ten book chapters and more than thirty journal articles, the most recent of which is "Challenging the 'distance education deficit' through 'motivational emails'" *Open Learning* 2015: 30, (2)(with Inkelaar, T.)

He has a website www.ormondsimpson.com where there are presentations, articles and materials for distance researchers, tutors and students, all which can be freely downloaded.

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