

## 6 Student support

Student support services are an essential component of e-learning provision. Their design should cover the pedagogic, resource and technical aspects that affect the online learner. Support services should be accessible in the first instance via the student's homepage or other entry route to the institution's online learning system. Students should be provided with information about their specific courses and the range of generic services available.

Students are likely to be working to flexible schedules. Static information such as course specifications on web pages are always available but help desk and advisory services should also be provided at times appropriate to student need.

Students should be provided with an identified academic contact who will provide feedback and support. Students may also be supported through online communities, through either an internal VLE or possibly via external social networking sites.



### **Benchmarks**

- 31 Students are provided with clear and up-to-date information about their courses including learning and assessment methods.
- 32 Students are provided with guidelines stating their rights, roles and responsibilities and those of their institution. Guidelines of specific relevance to e-learning include provision of hardware, information on accessibility and expected participation in collaborative activities.
- 33 Online social networking opportunities are provided in order to build and support student communities. This may be achieved using the institution's VLE or through external social networking sites, as appropriate.
- 34 Students have access to support services including technical help desk, administrative support and course choice advice.
- 35 Students have access to learning resources including online library access, study skills development and a study advisor.

### **6.1 Technical support**

Effective operation of the institution's online learning environment is the key component of technical support that affects students. Continuous availability should be the target.

As e-learning students are likely to adopt flexible study patterns, the technical infrastructure should operate to a 24x7 schedule.

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This has impact on the technical aspects of operation, (maintenance, upgrading, etc.) and on the provision of help desk and other advisory services.

Students should be provided with access to a technical help-desk service. This service should cover both the technical aspects of the system and, wherever possible, any problems that students might encounter with the use of course specific software. Students should be aware of the nature of services available and the means of accessing them.

### Indicators

- The online service is available and fully functioning 24 hours per day, seven days per week over the learning period, except for planned maintenance.
- Maintenance and updating work temporarily preventing use of the online service is performed as quickly as possible, and at the time of lowest student demand, with all users clearly notified in advance.
- Students and prospective students are clearly informed on: what kind and level of personal equipment they require; what technical support is available; and when and from whom it can be obtained.
- A technical help desk service is provided.

## **6.2 Study skills support**

E-learning may require students to acquire new skills or adopt new learning techniques. Students should be supported in the development and application of new skills and techniques through a range of mechanisms and services. They should also be supported in developing new approaches to their learning. For example, students should be introduced to ideas of self-regulated, active and collaborative learning.

There are benefits associated with an institution-wide approach to study skills support. For example, as new software and communication systems become available, experience in their use can be disseminated broadly across the institution.

Students should be informed about the services available to help them to adapt or acquire new learning skills, and how to access these services.

### **6.2.1 Analysis of support needs for different user groups**

The institution should monitor the needs of their students in order to inform planning of support services for e-learners. Different student groups may display differing experience of relevant technologies and learning methods. Although younger students may appear to be 'digital natives' who are very experienced with technology, they will nevertheless need support in using technology to best effect for learning.

Rapid developments in ICT and software lead to rapid changes in prior experience that may have significant impact on student needs in a period as short as one or two years.

### Indicators

- Course entry requirements match the prior skills and knowledge of most prospective students. Support for students who lack required skills and knowledge is provided by appropriate preparatory course material.
- The support needs for the main learner groups have been analysed and addressed.

### 6.2.2 Study skills guidance

Students should be aware of the range of study skills support services available to them and the routes through which they can gain access to these. Support may be provided through online resources, contact with tutors or mentors who have a specific responsibility to support a particular group of students, or contact with advisory services that may be generic or course specific.

Support should be given to develop the study skills of good academic practice in quoting and referencing the work of others. Helping students understand the issues surrounding plagiarism can result in better learning and reduce the burden to the institution of handling plagiarism issues.

### Indicators

- Students are informed through course information of the study skills they will be expected to use and develop during their study.
- Materials for the acquisition of required learning skills are built into the course or are available to students in advance.

### **At excellence level**

- The provision of relevant pedagogical advice and guidance is an integral part of the course or programme planning process.
- Students have access to learning skills advisors and other resources to augment or reinforce their learning skills.

### **6.2.3 Developing e-learning skills**

Support for the development of e-learning skills can be an important contributor to student success. Potential students should have the opportunity to learn what will be expected of them and what services will be available to help them develop the necessary skills. Responsibility for this aspect may be managed at institutional level by a library or information services division.

### **Indicators**

- Students are informed of the expectations on them in respect of e-learning skills prior to the start of their programme. Examples of study materials are available at this stage.

### **At excellence level**

- Opportunities are available for students to self-test their e-learning skills prior to the start of a course and to undertake preparatory study to refine these skills as necessary.

## **6.3 Resources**

Many aspects of student support are provided via access to resource materials and services. The library service is an aspect of resource provision that is widely available to campus based students; extension of the service to online students (via an e-library service) is essential for effective delivery of e-learning.

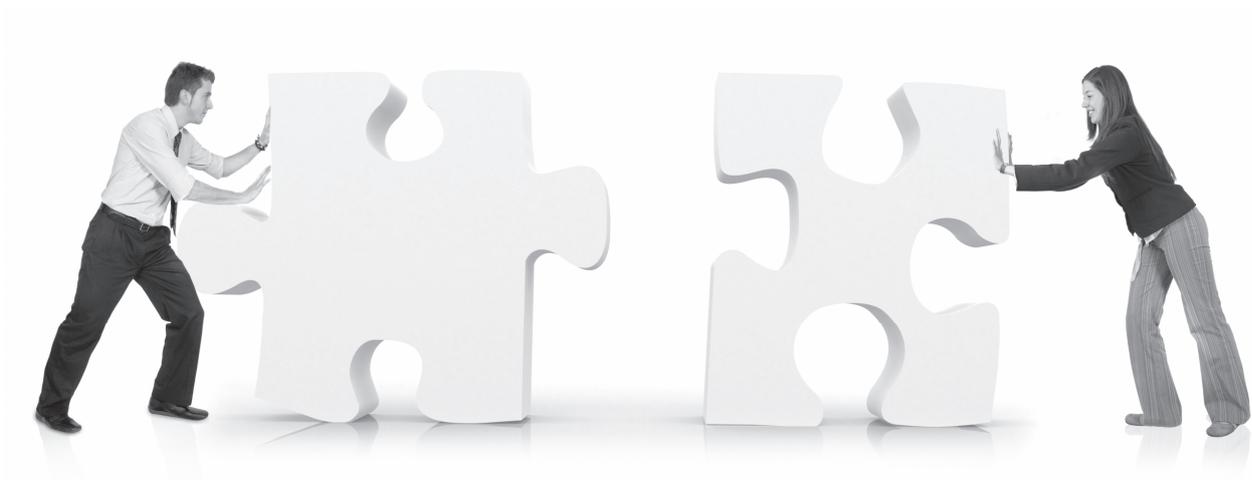
Resource provision is usually managed at an institutional level in order to deliver economies of scale and ensure a consistency of provision and dissemination of best practice. For example:

- Resources and systems to facilitate the development of online learner communities. These might be discussion forums, social networking environments or other collaborative online spaces provide or enabled by the institution. Alternatively, or additionally, the institution may adopt the use of external social networking facilities (such as Facebook).
- A network of study centers for face-to-face teaching as part of blended provision. However, the provision of face-to-face sessions may place restrictions in time and place that detract from the effectiveness of study for some groups of students.

### 6.3.1 Library and information sources

Institutions providing e-learning courses have a duty to ensure that all students can access the information sources necessary for successful completion of the course. In an e-learning context much of this can be built in to specific course materials, for example by providing a 'classroom library' or virtual reference service that provides a customised view of the online library containing relevant links and online databases. However, students may need access to additional sources which provide complementary or contrasting perspectives.

The provision of library resources and any required training in their use is an institutional responsibility. Digital (online) library facilities provide a good solution for e-learners, as well as being useful for campus based students and staff.



### **Indicators**

- Online library resources are available to all e-learning students.
- Resources are available for delivering training to students in information literacy and the use of online materials.
- Library resources are accessible out of normal office hours.

### **At excellence level**

- The institution is able to provide an equivalence of library service for its e-learning and its campus-based students.

### **6.3.2 Learner communities**

Creation of online communities of students is important as it reduces the isolation that may be experienced by online learners and encourages informal learning. Institutions should identify the online communication activities that are essential to the achievement of course objectives and those that are more social in nature.

Online community spaces, such as discussion forums, provide one way to gather informal feedback on students' experience of a course. They also allow staff to respond and interact with students. Dialogue between students and staff is an important

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part of building community in a course context. However, this can require considerable input of staff time.

Devolving responsibility for the set up and monitoring of online communities (e.g. to student moderators) is possible, but carries with it risks that require sensitive management.

Online communities may be formed by students (or staff) in external social networking environments such as Facebook or LinkedIn. Consideration needs to be given to handling any problems that may arise (such as collusion, disagreements among students, privacy issues, blurring of boundaries between social and academic life).

### Indicators

- The institution is committed to enabling the establishment and proper functioning of communities of e-learning students via its VLE or other online communication environments.
- This functioning supports:
  - learning interaction between individuals and within groups;
  - social interaction between students;
  - feedback on students' experiences of their programme.
- The institution makes clear where participation in collaborative activities is encouraged or required.

### **At excellence level**

- To support communities of learners the institution makes appropriate use of asynchronous tools (e.g. discussion forums, wikis, blogs, social networking sites) and synchronous tools (e.g. video-conferencing, real-time chat).

### **6.3.3 Role of study centres**

The primary target for e-learning should be to allow students to interact with course materials, library materials, tutors/mentors and fellow students online, irrespective of location. However, requirements for use of specialist equipment or learning materials, the nature of certain types of tutorial or seminar-type interactions, and the requirement for security of assessment practice may demand the attendance of students face-to-face.

The institution may therefore operate a network of study centres at which the functions listed above can take place. Pre-existing study centres may require adaptation to meet the needs of e-learning students, depending on the mode of delivery and whether students have online access via their own equipment.

The staff of study centres may be regarded by students as the public face of the university. Induction and training programmes should equip them for this key relationship role in addition to their primary functions. The study centre may also provide a focus for student community development.

### Indicators

- The institution has a clear policy regarding the role of any study centers in its provision of e-learning and has plans for resourcing and management of the centers.
- Programme designers make appropriate decisions on the use of study centre resources in programme plans and communicate these clearly to students.
- Students are clear about the locations of study centers, the facilities and support which they offer, and the occasions during their programme at which they will have to attend a study centre.
- Staff at study centers understand the contribution that they are expected to make to student progress on registered courses and student community development.

#### 6.3.4 Course choice

Modular programmes may be difficult for students to understand at the outset of their studies. The institution should therefore make every effort to help students to construct a programme that addresses their needs.

Students should be provided with clear and up-to-date information, including a full description of the study programme, the variety of learning methods used, and information on how they will be assessed.

Curriculum designers should provide guides to their programmes that indicate routes appropriate to students with commonly encountered profiles of prior education and experience.

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E-learning students are likely to use online access to investigate programme availability. A curriculum map and advisory notes should be available to potential students from programme launch.

### Indicators

- Each study programme and course has a description of its content, learning and assessment methods used.
- Navigation through possible course combinations is facilitated by online curriculum maps.
- Advisory notes are available informing students of the consequences of particular choices.
- Advice and counseling over choice of courses and progression through a programme is provided.

### 6.3.5 Administrative support

The majority of administrative functions should be fulfilled online without the need for direct human intervention. Online systems should cater for: registration on programmes and courses; payments; study timetables; access to student records etc. All systems should operate at appropriate levels of security to ensure confidentiality and safety. Online guides to administrative systems should provide students with a clear indication of the services available and how to access them.

Students may require access to human intervention in aspects of administration when difficulties arise that are not catered for adequately by online systems. There should be mechanisms for appropriate levels of intervention, from routine error correction in records to personal support for major difficulties. In order to

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improve administrative processes, institutions should monitor the use made by students of access to their records and the occasions when human intervention is required.

### Indicators

- There is an online student guide to the institution's student administration system.
- There is provision for human intervention in administrative processes and these interactions are appropriately initiated and delivered.
- There are procedures to handle and resolve any difficulties or disputes which may arise.

## 6.4 Support staff

E-learning students should be provided with access to human support delivered online, via telephone and/or face-to-face. The support may be course specific and/or generic in nature. The roles may include tutors, mentors, counsellors, librarians, advisors, and others. The requirements for particular types of human interaction and intervention should be part of the institution's planning process and incorporated within curriculum and course design.

Institutional policies should define the service standards for this support. The expected level and frequency of student-tutor interaction during a course or programme should be made clear to students and staff. Staff providing student support should have clear job descriptions and access to necessary information sources in order to carry out their functions effectively.

### 6.4.1 Resource planning

Planning at institutional, programme and course level should take account of the need for satisfactory provision of support services, whether through course-specific tutors/mentors or through more general services such as counselling, career guidance *etc.*

Estimates of the demand for services should be developed. These should underpin planning activities and should be revised in line with experience gained through operation of services.

#### Indicators

- The institution's planning process includes an informed analysis of the human support functions needed for successful operation of the e-learning programme.
- This covers requirements for mentoring, tutoring, coaching, counseling, assessment, management, advice and guidance, and includes academic, professional and other specialist staff inputs.
- There are mechanisms in place for the training and development of staff undertaking the above functions.

### **At excellence level**

- The institution works to staffing norms and levels of staff resource (*e.g.* staff-student ratios) which are informed by practice elsewhere and adjusted in the light of experience and feedback.
- Staff workload is managed carefully, to ensure that supporting e-learning and e-learners does not create unreasonable demands on staff.

#### **6.4.2 Role definitions**

The institution should have clear definitions of the student support activities conducted by its various categories of staff, both academic and administrative.

Where there is a transition from either face-to-face or an earlier form of distance learning to e-learning, the staff roles should be redefined to ensure that they adequately address the requirements for support of e-learners.

Clear information should be provided to students at the start of their course or programme regarding: the support staff resources available; the roles undertaken by different staff; and the levels of support available. Students should be made aware of how often staff will be available online, and how quickly staff will respond to queries. Students' expectations may need to be managed carefully so that they do not demand immediate, 24-hour attention online.

Arrangements for the organisation and management of online student groups (*e.g.* for small group tutorials or for larger discussion groups) need to be clear to both staff and students. Tools should be available for the organisation and management of