

6 Student support

Student support services are an essential component of e-learning provision. Students' retention, success and satisfaction are their main objectives.

Institutions should develop policies and strategies for the design and provision of student support services. Although the delivery of student support services may vary between institutions, some aspects of student support should be taken into account in all e-learning programmes.

Summarizing, support services for e-learning students should be designed to cover the pedagogic, technical and administrative aspects that affect the online learner:

- Clear and up-to-date information and advice about courses should be provided to enable students to make informed choices.
- Information and advice about technical and administrative matters should be easily accessible.



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- Guidance, resources and activities should be provided to support students on their journey through university, including induction, pastoral support, the development of generic study skills and e-learning skills, and career advice.
- Staffed helpdesk and advisory services should be provided at times appropriate to students' needs.
- Online library services should be provided to e-learning students. Study centres may be appropriate for some courses.
- Students should be supported through online communities.

Quality student support services depend on adequate numbers of professional staff. Students should be provided with identified academic contacts responsible for providing feedback and support. Other supporting roles and services should be also available.

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 Social media opportunities are provided in order to

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- build and support student communities. This may be achieved using the institution's VLE or through external social media, as appropriate.
- 34 Students have access to support services including technical helpdesk, administrative support and course choice advice.
- 35 Students have access to learning resources, including online library access, study skills development and a study advisor, and they receive guidelines and training in using these resources.

6.1. Student support organization

Organising student support at an institutional level, perhaps as the responsibility of a unit or department, is key to the quality of support that a student receives. This requires a holistic approach with student support planning based on previous analyses of students' needs and demands, taking into account different learner groups and the specific characteristics of lifelong learners. Institutional planning should integrate different types of resources, coordinating staff to give support in academic, technical, administrative, and other relevant areas. Promotion of student success, satisfaction and retention should be the main objectives.

Support services encompass all those aspects of the university experience other than the specific teaching and learning elements of a course. This covers administrative, technical and pastoral aspects, and includes induction, course choice and careers advice. Some generic academic provision can also be considered under this heading, particularly library facilities and support for study

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skills such as digital literacy. Teaching support is better considered as an aspect of *Course Design* (Chapter 3), even when a devolved model of teaching is used that uses tutors or mentors.

6.1.1. Institutional student support planning

The institution should have a holistic and proactive approach for the delivery of student support services, developing specific policies and programmes that integrate specialised support units and expertise across the institution.

Indicators

- Specific student support policies are developed.
- The institution has specialised support units for the design and provision of academic, technical and administrative support services.
- Expertise on student support is found and promoted across the institution. Development of general support services, resources and materials is allocated to departments or working groups with expertise (e.g. the library may have responsibility for information literacy).
- The institution provides all students with access to professional guidance, including career advice and pastoral support services.
- Student support services for e-learning programmes are available through a range of channels (online and face to face, synchronous and asynchronous, using mobile technologies, etc.).
- Student support services are integrated into the quality

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assurance system of the institution, and students can give their feedback on these services online.

At excellence level

- Learning analytic data is used to target student support.

6.1.2. Support needs for different learner groups

The institution should monitor the needs of its students in order to inform the planning of support services for e-learners. The institution should consider the needs of different learner groups, including prospective and new students, and students with special needs (such as disabled students or those in prison). The demands of each course, and likely prior experience of the students, should be considered. Ways of delivering more personalised support should also be addressed where possible.

Special attention should be paid to offering adequate support to lifelong learners, as many higher education e-learning students are adults with professional and personal responsibilities, who are studying part-time and working to flexible schedules.

Indicators

- The support needs for the main learner groups or profiles are analysed and addressed.
- Prospective and new students receive specific support such as induction programmes, using a cross-institution

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approach where possible.

- Course entry requirements and recruitment information are realistic and matched with the prior skills and knowledge of most prospective students.
- Support for students who lack required skills and knowledge is provided by appropriate online or blended-learning courses and materials, for example OER resources or MOOCs.

At excellence level

- The institution has a proactive approach to student retention, progression and success. Research is developed to promote retention.
- Learning analytics approaches are used to develop strategies for student success and more personalised student support measures.
- Support for students with special needs is analysed and addressed.

6.2. Support staff

The nature of higher education and the breadth of responsibility that institutions carry for the educational and personal development of their students require significant human intervention, and specialised interventions in programmes that are delivered predominantly through e-learning.

E-learning students should be provided with access to human support delivered online, via telephone and/or face-to-face. The

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support may be course-specific or generic in nature. The roles may include tutors, mentors, counsellors, librarians and advisors. Institutional policies should define the service standards for this support. The expected level and frequency of academic 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 and training in order to carry out their functions effectively.

Staff need to be aware of the range of support services available and be able to guide students accordingly.

6.2.1. Human resource planning

The requirements for particular types of human interaction and intervention for delivering student support should be part of the institution's planning process, and incorporated within curriculum and course design.

Indicators

- Analysis of the human support functions needed for successful operation of e-learning is included in institutional planning.
- Planning encompasses human support for mentoring, tutoring, coaching, counselling, assessment, management, advice and guidance services, and includes academic, professional and other specialist staff inputs.
- There are mechanisms in place for the training and development of staff undertaking student support

functions.

At excellence level

- Staff workload is managed carefully, to ensure that supporting e-learning and e-learners does not create unreasonable demands on staff.
- 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.

6.2.2. Support role definitions

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

Where there is a transition to e-learning from either face-to-face teaching or an earlier form of distance 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.

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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 student groups. It should be clear to staff in what situations their intervention will be required, and this should also be conveyed to students.

Indicators

- The job descriptions for staff contain specific references to responsibilities for learner support.
- The scope and function of all the student support roles are clearly specified.
- Student information and materials describe the roles undertaken by those staff categories engaged in student support activities, and the levels of support that can be expected by students.

6.2.3. Administrative support

The majority of administrative functions can be delivered online. 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. Online guides to administrative systems should provide students with a clear indication of the services available and how to access them.

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Students may require access to human intervention in some 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 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

- Information and guidance about administrative procedures and regulations is available to students online.
- Students can carry out many administrative tasks online, for example registration and payment.
- There is provision for human intervention in administrative processes and these interactions are appropriately initiated and delivered.
- There are clear online procedures for complaints and for handling and resolving any difficulties or disputes that may arise.

At excellence level

- Information and guidance is available in a range of media, for example video guides.
- The administrative system is proactive, for example providing reminders of submission deadlines to students.

6.3. Technical support

Students will expect to use the institution's online learning environment at any time. They may need technical support to do this. Students should be aware of the nature of services available and the means of accessing them.

6.3.1. Online services availability

As e-learning students are likely to adopt flexible study patterns, the technical infrastructure should operate to a 24x7 schedule. This has impact on the technical aspects of operation (maintenance, upgrading, etc.) and on the provision of helpdesk and other advisory services.



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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 is performed as quickly as possible, and at the time of lowest student demand, with all users clearly notified in advance.
- Students are made aware of any technical incidents causing a loss of service.
- Students and prospective students are clearly informed about the personal equipment they require; what technical support is available; and when and from whom it can be obtained.

At excellence level

- Online services are available on mobile, small-screen devices.

6.3.2. Professional management of technical support

The management of the institution's online systems should be the responsibility of professionals, who operate the system to standards equivalent to those in the commercial customer service sector. Comprehensive documentation of operational procedures should be evident; logs and other routine record keeping should demonstrate whether the standards set are being achieved.

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Indicators

- Technical support services are delivered by IT professionals at the institution or by external ones.
- Technical staff at the institution receive initial and updating training.

6.3.3. Online technical support system availability

Students should be provided with access to a technical helpdesk service. This service should cover both the technical aspects of the online learning system and, wherever possible, any problems that students might encounter with the use of course-specific software.

The provision of technical and helpdesk support should be managed by IT professionals or staff specially trained to deliver technical support to students.

Indicators

- Guidance and information, including FAQs, about technical issues is available to students.
- A technical helpdesk is provided.
- Support service opening hours are arranged to suit the needs of students.
- The helpdesk staff have access to comprehensive documentation of operational procedures, and record

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technical incidents and solutions given to students.

At excellence level

- There is a 24 x 7 technical helpdesk.
- Helpdesk staff are able to use remote access to diagnose and solve student IT issues.
- A strategy is in place to overcome technological barriers for disadvantaged groups (disabled students, those in remote rural areas, those who are socio-economically disadvantaged etc.).

6.4. Pedagogical support

Support for learning is at the core of student support. While studying at university, students are expected to acquire a range of generic transferable or key skills such as numeracy, information literacy, presentation and communication skills. While many learning opportunities may be provided within course teaching, an institution-wide approach to support learning and study skills development brings clear benefits.

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 the development of self-regulated, active and collaborative learning in blended and online environments.

Student support

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

6.4.1. Advice and guidance on study skills development

The provision of relevant pedagogical advice and guidance is an integral part of the course or curriculum planning process, primarily organised to support students.

Students should be informed prior to registration about the skills they will need to develop and the study skills support available to them. 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 provided to help students develop 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

- There is an analysis of the specific demands of each course and likely prior experience of the student population, in order to design specific learner support services.
- Guidance materials are based on previous analyses of potential students' needs and characteristics, and aim to promote self-directed learning in online environments.

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- The quality of study materials and guidance documents is reviewed by experts to check that they are suitable for self-directed e-learning.
- Materials to support the acquisition of required learning skills are built into courses, or are available to students at institutional level when needed.
- Students are clearly informed about the kind of pedagogic support they will receive in each course.
- Tutoring of each course is carefully planned. Guides about tutoring activities are available to students and tutors prior to the course.
- Feedback and responses to students' concerns and questions are delivered within a short period of time.

At excellence level

- Advice, guidance and tutoring are supported via asynchronous and synchronous online tools (e-mail, forum, chat, videoconference, etc.).
- Students have access to learning skills advisors to augment or reinforce their learning skills.
- Students have access to recordings of synchronous sessions, to be used because they could not attend or for reflection and revision.

6.4.2. Support for e-learning skills development

Though there may be variation in learner needs from subject to subject, there is likely to be a core of common skills development that is required to support learners' development in online environments, for example digital and Information literacy, and skills for online collaborative work.

Different student groups may display differing experience of relevant technologies and learning methods. Although younger students may be more experienced with technology, they will nevertheless need support in using technology to best effect for learning. New students may need targeted support.

Support can be offered through a variety of means: materials and activities such as OER, MOOCs, seminars, online courses, video-tutorials, blended-learning courses, etc.

Indicators

- Prior to the start of their course, students are informed of the e-learning skills required.
- Opportunities are available online for students, prior to the start of a course, to assess their preparedness for study and to undertake preparatory study as necessary.
- Well-designed online guides/ webpages/ video-tutorials for the IT tools required for students' e-learning studies (virtual campus, software, virtual tools, etc.) are available.
- New students are offered specific online support for the development of required skills and competences for e-learning.

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- The preparatory skills development materials and activities are subject to regular review and updating.
- Tutors have available to them support materials for use with students and receive institutional training for this role.

At excellence level

- Opportunities are available for students to self-test their skills prior to the start of a course and to undertake preparatory study to refine these skills as necessary
- Online taster experiences are available to prospective students. Examples of VLE resources and study materials are available online.

6.5 Support resources

Many aspects of student support can be provided via online access to information and advice resources, materials and services. Since a wide range of support services will be available to students, they will need additional guidance to navigate these; clear information should be provided about what services are available and how to access them.

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

- Course choice advice and guidance

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- Online library resources
- Resources and systems to facilitate the development of online learner communities.
- Study centres for face-to-face teaching as part of blended provision
- Careers advice.

6.5.1. Course choice advice and guidance

The institution should provide students with clear advice and guidance on course choice prior to registration, taking into account their personal characteristics and time available for study. 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. E-learning students are likely to use online access to investigate programme availability. Curriculum guides and advisory notes should be available to potential students from programme launch.

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

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.

Indicators

- The website provides prospective students with all the information they need to make decisions about their

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studies. Information is provided about the institution, faculties, degrees, courses, registration procedures, academic and assessment calendars, etc. Navigation is easy and clear.

- Each study programme and course has a full description of its learning objectives, credits, content, requirements, learning and assessment methods used. This information is freely available for prospective students.
- Navigation through possible course combinations is facilitated by online curriculum guides.
- Advisory notes are available informing students of the consequences of particular choices.
- Advice and counselling over choice of courses and progression through a programme is provided.

6.5.2. Library resources

The library service is an aspect of resource provision that is widely available to campus students; extension of the service to online students (via an e-library service) is essential for effective delivery of e-learning. 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 students and staff.

Indicators

- Online library resources are available to all students.

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- Online library resources are accessible 24 x 7.
- Resources are available for delivering training to students in digital information literacy.
- The institution offers clear and detailed information that serves as an introduction to library resources and other services.

At excellence level

- The institution is able to provide an equivalent library service for its e-learning and its campus-based students.
- There is a close collaboration between academic and library staff in planning for library resource provision as part of a course design.

6.5.3. Learner communities

Creation of online communities of students is important as it reduces the isolation often associated with traditional modes of distance education and encourages social and 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.

Learner communities can stimulate the creation of a sense of community amongst online students, fulfilling a number of academic and social functions particularly giving students the opportunity for mutual support.

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Online community spaces, such as discussion forums, allow staff to respond and interact with students. Dialogue between students and staff is an important part of building community in a course context. However, this can require considerable input of staff time. They also provide one way to gather informal feedback on students' experience of a course.

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 also formed by students (or staff) on external social media, such as Facebook, Twitter 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 social media.
- Online learner communities support learning interaction between individuals and within groups, social interaction between students and feedback on students' experiences of their programme. Adequate group sizes are taken into account in the different learner communities.
- Arrangements for the organisation and management of online student groups are clear to both staff and students.
- To support communities of learners, the institution offers

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to students both asynchronous tools (e.g. discussion forums, wikis, blogs, social media) and synchronous tools (e.g. video-conferencing, real-time chat).

- The institution makes clear where participation in collaborative activities is encouraged or required.
- Participants are clearly informed about the use of Netiquette and codes of behaviour online. A clear statement is made about the code of behaviour that applies to students on external social media.
- There is a process for the resolution of contentious issues and for handling complaints.

At excellence level

- Formal and informal online mentoring and peer-to-peer help and learning are promoted, and students receive institutional guidelines for a proper development of these processes.
- Social media, such as Facebook or Twitter, are used to offer dynamic interactions with students, in order to give them relevant or interesting information, as well as to engage and motivate them.
- The institution monitors and surveys the effectiveness of online community groups to inform future policy. Examples of good practice are disseminated across the institution.

6.5.4. Role of study centres in student support delivery

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 at study centres.

Institutions may operate a network of study centres which they regard as outposts of the institution and which serve multiple purposes, e.g. regional recruitment and administration centre, local library, teaching centre, assessment centre, etc. Using these study centres for the specific functions noted above should therefore be straightforward. However, 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 centres in its provision of e-learning and has plans for the required update, resourcing and management of the centres for blended and e-learning programmes.

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- Programme designers make appropriate decisions on the use of study centre resources in programme plans, and communicate these clearly to students.
- Students receive clear and detailed face-to-face and online information about the locations of study centres, the facilities and support they offer, the conditions for their use, the occasions during their programme at which they will have to attend a study centre, the type of staff in attendance and their hours of attendance.
- Staff at study centres understand the contribution that they are expected to make to informing prospective new students, supporting student progress on registered courses, and student community development.
- Staff at the local centres are trained in the e-learning services of the institution and are aware of the e-learning policies.
- Study centre opening hours are arranged to suit the needs of students.
- Students can express a preference for allocation to a particular centre for face- to-face events.

At excellence level

- Good Internet connections and specialised equipment or software is provided at all study centres.
- Videoconferencing facilities are available.
- Students are free to use the technical facilities in any study centre.