

## 7. Student Support

Student support services are an essential component of e-learning provision. Their design should cover the pedagogic, resource and technical aspects that impact on the on-line learner. It is presupposed that on-line activity will form the core of the e- learner's experience hence support services should be designed to be accessed in the first instance via the student's homepage or other entry route to the institution's on-line learning system.

As students are likely to be working to flexible schedules, support services should operate, wherever possible, in a way that acknowledges this.

Technical support areas may be required to offer services on a 24x7 basis. In other domains 24x7 may be the target for automated services with human contact/follow up operating to stated performance targets.

Students should have a service map and clear specifications of the services available at all levels.

### **Benchmarks**

29. Students should be provided with a clear picture of what will be involved in using e-learning resources and the expectations that will be placed on them. This should include information on technical (system and VLE) requirements, requirements concerning background knowledge and skills, the nature of the programme, the variety of learning methods to be used, the nature and extent of support provided assessment requirements, etc.

30. Students should be provided with guidelines stating their rights, roles and responsibilities, those of their institution, a full description of their course or programme, and information on the ways in which they will be assessed including e-learning components.

31. Students should have access to learning resources and learner support systems. The e-learning system should provide:

- access to library resources
- support for the development of key skills (including support for e-learning skills, collaborative working on-line and contributing to on-line communities which are key skills in an e-learning context)
- advice and counseling over choice of courses and progression through the programme
- an identified academic contact, tutor and/or mentor who will provide constructive feedback on academic performance and progression
- access to help desk, administrative support and advisory services
- opportunities to provide and receive formal feedback on their experience on the course
- procedures to handle and resolve any difficulties or disputes which may arise
- alumni access

32. Students should be provided with clear and up-to-date information on the range of support services available and how these may be accessed.

33. The expectations on students for their participation in the on-line community of learners are made clear both in general terms and in relation to specific parts of their course or programme.

## 7.1 Technical

Effective operation of the institution's on-line learning environment is the key component of technical support that impacts on students. Continuous availability should be the target.

Students should be provided with access to assistance via a technical help-desk service that is capable of addressing technical aspects of use of the system and of course-specific software.



### 7.1.1 Online 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 help desk and other advisory services.

#### Indicators

##### At excellence level:

The online service is available and fully functioning 24 hours per day, seven days per week over the planned learning period.

Maintenance and up-dating work temporarily preventing use of the online service should be performed at the time of lowest student demand and all users clearly notified in advance.

### 7.1.2 Technical Support and Helpdesk

Support services should cover both the technical aspects of the system and, wherever possible, 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**

Users are clearly informed what kind and level of personal equipment they require, what technical support service is available, and when and from whom it can be obtained.

## **7.2 Pedagogic**

The learning styles demanded by e-learning may require students to acquire new learning skills. Students should be supported in the development and application of these skills through a range of mechanisms and services.

There are benefits associated with an institution-wide approach to pedagogic 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 them to adapt or acquire new learning skills, and how to access them.

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

The institution should monitor the needs of their students in order to inform their planning of support services for e-learners. Different student groups may display differing experience of relevant technologies and learning methods.

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 or programme entry requirements have been confirmed as matching with the prior skills and knowledge of the target students, or the acquisition of these is supported by appropriate preparatory course material.

The support needs for the main learner groups have been analysed and addressed.

### **7.2.2 Pedagogic guidance**

Students should be aware of the range of pedagogical support services available to them and the routes through which they can gain access to these.

Support may be provided through on-line resources, contact with tutors or mentors who have a specific responsibility to support a particular group of students, or through contact with advisory services that may be generic or course specific.

### **Indicators**

Students are informed through course information of the pedagogical skills they will be expected to use during their study.

Preparatory materials for the acquisition of required learning skills 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.

## **7.3 Resources**

Many aspects of student support are provided via access to resource materials and services. The library service is one aspect of resource provision that is widely available to campus based students: extension of the service to on-line students is essential for effective delivery of many HE programmes.

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:

1. Resources and systems to facilitate the development of online learner communities.
2. Resources to develop e-learning skills. These may be provided and maintained by the library or another specialist unit.
3. Maintenance of a network of study centres as means of regional or national outreach. The use of such centres should be designed to support e-learners but there should be recognition that their use may place restrictions in time and place that may detract from the effectiveness of study for some groups of students.

### **7.3.1 Library and information sources**

Institutions providing e-learning courses have a duty to ensure that all students are able to access the information sources necessary for successful completion of the course. While in an e-learning context much of this can be built in to specific course materials, students may require to access additional sources to provide complementary or contrasting materials. The provision of access (on-line or otherwise) to library resources for its e-learning students, and any required training in their use is an institutional responsibility, and institutions should strive to ensure an equivalence of service for on- line as for campus-based students.

**Indicators**

Sufficient library resources are available to all e-learning students either on-line, through an effective system for distribution of physical materials, or other means.

Resources are available for delivering training to students in information literacy and the use of on-line 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 as for its campus-based students.

**7.3.2 Learner communities**

Creation of on-line communities of students is important as it reduces the isolation that may be experienced by many on-line learners. Institutions must identify those "community centred" activities that are essential to the achievement of course objectives and those activities that are essentially social in nature.

The provision of mechanisms for students to give formal feedback on their experience of the course or programme and to receive staff responses to such feedback is an important function.

Devolution of responsibility for the set up and monitoring of on-line communities is desirable but carries with it risks that require sensitive management.

**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 tool.

**At excellence level:**

This functioning supports:

1. learning interaction between individuals and groups
2. social interaction between students
3. feedback on students' experiences of their programme.

This makes use of synchronous (face-to-face, telephone or video conference, whiteboard, etc) and asynchronous (discussion forum, e-mail, etc) interactions as required.

### 7.3.3 Developing e-Learning skills

Support in the development of e-learning skills may be an important contributor to student success. Potential students should have the opportunity to learn what will be expected of them and the services available to assist them in developing 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 and to undertake a preparatory course to refine these skills as necessary.

### 7.3.4 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 via PC 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 at a study centre.

The institution may operate a network of study centres at which the functions listed above can take place and students may access a variety of services. The role of pre-existing study centres or outreach centres may require adaptation to meet the needs of e-learning students depending on the mode of delivery and anticipated student personal access to equipment and connectivity.

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 particularly in study centres whose existence pre-dates the introduction of e-learning programmes. Developing this aspect of their operation may supplement other mechanisms for community development for both students and staff.

### **Indicators**

The institution has a clear policy regarding the role of study centres in its provision of e-learning and has plans for resourcing and management of the centres.

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 centres, 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 centres understand the contribution that they are expected to make to student progress on registered courses and student community development.

### **7.3.5 Navigation**

Modular programmes may be difficult for students to understand at the outset of their programme, hence the institution should make every effort to ensure that students are in a position to construct a programme that addresses their needs.

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

E-learning students are likely to use on-line access to investigate programme availability, a curriculum map and advisory notes should be prepared by the curriculum design team and be available to potential students from programme launch.

### **Indicators**

Navigation through possible course combinations is facilitated by on-line curriculum maps and advisory notes are available informing students of the consequences of particular choices.

### **7.4 Staff Resources**

E-learning students may be provided with access to human support delivered on-line, via telephone or face to face dependent on the approach adopted by the institution.

The support may be course specific and/or generic in nature.

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

Institutional policies should define the service standards to which staff will provide the human interventions for student support.

Staff providing student support will have defined job descriptions and access to information sources that allow them to carry out their functions effectively.

### 7.4.1 Resource planning.

E-learning students should be provided with access to human support delivered on-line, via telephone or, on occasion, face to face, depending on the approach adopted by the institution. The expected level and frequency of student-tutor interaction during a course or programme should be made clear to students and staff.

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

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

#### **Indicators**

The institution's planning process includes a clear and informed analysis of the human support functions needed for successful operation of the e-learning programme. This covers requirements for mentoring, tutoring, coaching, counselling, assessment, management, advice and guidance, and covers 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.

### 7.4.2 Role Definitions

The institution should have clear definitions of the student support activities conducted by its various categories of staff in both academic and administrative divisions. 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. The support staff resources on which students may draw, the roles undertaken by different staff and the levels of support available should be made clear to students at the start of their course or programme.

Arrangements for the organisation and management of student groups (*e.g.* for small group tutorials or for larger regional or national discussion groups) need to be clear to both staff and students. Tools should be available for the organisation and management of student groups and staff should have available models of the situations in which their support will be required.

**Indicators**

The job descriptions for all staff contain specific references to responsibilities for learner support.

Student materials describe the roles undertaken by those staff categories engaged in student support activities.

**7.4.3 Administrative support**

It is envisaged that administrative systems are designed to ensure that the majority of administrative functions are fulfilled on-line without the need for direct human intervention. Online systems should cater for: registration on programmes and courses, payments, study timetables, access to student records, study centre schedules *etc.* All systems should operate at appropriate levels of security to ensure confidentiality and financial security. 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 on-line systems.

There should be mechanisms for appropriate levels of intervention from routine error correction in records to personal support for major difficulties.

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.