UNIT 12 LEARNER SUPPORT SYSTEM AND SERVICES

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12.0 INTRODUCTION

In pursuing your course of study through open and distance learning mode, you might have experienced the problems associated with absence of a classroom situation, the quasi-permanent separation between the learner and institution/teacher. In order to minimise the negative impact of the problems of this physical separation on the one hand and to provide the learner an opportunity to come closer to the teacher/institution psychologically as well as academically on the other, various support services have been devised and provided for in the distance education system. The very purpose of these support services is to make you feel that you are not alone or helpless during the period of your study. You are a member of a well organised institution which is ready to help you whenever you need help in order to complete your studies successfully.

In Units 10 and 11 we have discussed how the support service components of counselling, tutoring and continuous assessment of student learning will help minimize the gap between distance teaching and learning, i.e. between expected and actual learning. For effective implementation of these support services, among others, require proper learner support system as an integral part of the broader institutional structure or mechanism.

In this unit, we therefore discuss different types of learner support services required for distance learners and functional sub-systems of management of ODEI that form learner
support system for providing different learner support services and factors affecting provision of these services.

### 12.1 OBJECTIVES

After working through this unit you should be able to:

- explain the concept of learner support services in open and distance learning;
- justify the need for student support services;
- identify different types of student support services;
- understand different sub-systems of ODEIs related to student support system; and
- analyse the institutional bases and factors involved in organization of student support services.

### 12.2 LEARNER SUPPORT SERVICES

We know that learner support services play a crucial role in ODE. In the conventional system of education the teacher provides academic as well as non-academic support to his/her students and they enjoy even the opportunity of interacting with his/her peer group about various issues/services. Contrary to this, the distance learners have to study on their own in an entirely different situation using the self-leaning material. Secondly distance learners besides being separate from each other, they have intra- and inter-group variations in terms of their age, interests, background, needs, experiences, and so on. They all require suitable support services for their smooth progress through their study and successful completion of their programme. How are the learner support services conceived?

#### 12.2.1 Concept

As mentioned above, the distance learner’s situation is quite different from their conventional counterparts. As you know the distance learner, who is learning independently, may feel deprived of required support from the teacher/institution and his/her peer group and may feel isolated, helpless and even de-motivated to drop out, particularly where he/she faces a problem in learning or there is lack of administrative or non-academic support service at crucial times. The main purpose or objective of support services is to motivate the students to be on the right track and to encourage them to make use of the facilities provided for promoting their learning.

Different distance educators conceive support services differently. Learner support services are described as: the elements of an open learning system capable of responding to a particular individual learner (Thorpe, 1988); support incorporated within the self-learning materials, the learning system and assignment evaluation or marking (Hui, 1989); and the essential support services required to ensure the successful delivery of learning experiences at a distance (Wright, 1991). Further, some conceive learner support services as integral part of the course, others conceive it as a supplement while some others include in it the administrative and delivery operations related to the course (Robinson, 1995).

With this clarity about the concept of learner support services, we will now try to understand the need for these services.
12.2.2 Need

The need for learner support services in ODE can be understood from the point of view of the characteristics of distance learners, the characteristics of learning material and the learning strategy. Let us discuss them in brief below.

i) Characteristics of distance learners

We have discussed in detail the characteristics of distance learners in Unit-9, which might have provided you an understanding of the nature and type of problems they face in their learning. We may recall and sum up the distance learners’ special characteristics which reflect the diversity in their background and learning abilities.

- Distance learners are more mature, working and have a lot of personal, professional as well as other experiences.
- They lack teacher as well as peer association, as there exists a quasi-permanent separation between teacher/institution and learners.
- Their attitudes toward learning are different from those of the face-to-face learners who often simply follow their peers, teachers or obey their parents’ wishes while choosing their courses/programmes.
- The distance learners may have discontinued their formal education for economic or environmental or circumstantial reasons. Some of them may be school dropouts with an incomplete education.
- They are second chance learners but not second rate students. They approach their studies tentatively and with little confidence because of their inadequate educational background and lack of resources.
- They have to learn from the written word (specifically through well designed study materials) instead of word of mouth (face to face teaching as in the conventional system).
- They may need assistance in solving the problems related to their study habits, time management, motivation, academic guidance, etc., as they do not have the opportunity of interacting frequently with the teacher.
- Some of them understand and learn more quickly than the younger people if they are experienced and mature enough to take decisions.

From the above characteristics we can understand that the learners are heterogeneous and can be divided into different groups. Koul, et. al. (1989) categorises learners into three categories: i) learners who have confidence in their learning ability to work on their own; ii) learners who actually need talking to someone to seek help in solving their problems; and iii) learners who are really sitting on the wall, i.e. when they run into intractable problems they approach the counselor for help. The second and third categories really require support services when they really need them.

Thus, the diversity of background characteristics and their varying abilities to learn in isolation, establishes the need for learner support services at different times of their learning.

ii) Characteristics of learning material

We have discussed in Unit-8 of Block 2, in open and distance education system, sel-learning is promoted through specially designed and developed course
materials called self-instructional/learning materials (SIMs/SLMS) and predominantly the self-learning print materials (SLPMs). These materials are designed and developed by specialist course writers so as to:

- help the individual learners to find their way into and around the subject by reinforcing the content;
- tell the students what they need to do before tackling the material;
- enable them to understand clearly the specific objectives beforehand and what they should be able to do on the completion of the material;
- encourage the students sufficiently to make whatever effort is needed in coming to grips with the subject;
- acquaint them with various exercises and activities so that they may work with the subject matter in depth and independently;
- give feedback to the learner on these exercises and activities enabling them to judge for themselves — whether they are learning successfully; and
- help the learners to sum up their learning at the end of the unit.

You may ask: if the material is designed in such an effective manner why does the learner need support? The answer is that the distance learners are the second chance learners with diverse background and learning abilities/skills, but these materials are same for all learners. They have spent so many years studying in conventional face-to-face system and due to this they are conditioned to learn with the help of teachers. While learning through self-instructional/learning material they have to de-condition themselves from their earlier learning habits and this is not an easy task. Therefore, they need help from the teachers/institution in coping with the new learning culture. Various support services like counselling at the study centres, teachers’ comments on assignments, audio-video programmes, books, etc may prove helpful to improve the condition of the learners to work through these specially designed learning material.

iii) Learning strategy

The distance teachers prepare self-instructional/learning material with the help of a course team, at Headquarters. To make the distance learner more self-reliant, independent and self-confident in learning through these materials, distance tutors (teachers) or academic counselors are provided in the system, and are spread across different study centres. The academic counselor/tutor checks assignment responses and gives suitable comments to help the learner improve his/her responses to assignments, and also organises counselling sessions to provide the facility of face-to-face interaction at the study centre. Thus, in this system, main emphasis is on making the learner able to learn himself/herself independently.

In fact, the distance learner, while studying at home with the help of self-instructional/learning material without having regular assistance of a teacher the learner may face lots of academic problems (besides personal problems). Therefore to assist distance learner in his/her independent study, the student support services are devised to perform the following services:

- To respond to the dialogue initiated by the student in his/her written work, i.e., assignment responses and to asses that work to foster further academic discussion;
- To respond to students’ queries and/or confusions about the course material;
Learner Support Services in ODE

- To assist students to plan their study/schedule properly and help them to develop sound study skills appropriate to distance learning/education; and
- To encourage and support students when they reach barriers to learning or points of decisions.

From this sub-section you must have understood the need for learner support services in ODE.

Check Your Progress

Note:  
a) Write your answer in the space given below.

b) Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit under “Answers to ‘Check Your Progress’ Questions”.

1) Explain the need for support services for distance learner.

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We will discuss different types of learner support services in sub-section 12.2.3.

12.2.3 Types

You will appreciate the fact that the students need help and support in many different ways apart from tuition. You might like to recall your experiences and think about different kinds of support you might have received as a student in your previous studies, or that you as a teacher have provide to your students (after you entered the teaching profession), and now that you received or are receiving as distance learner through this course.

Student support services can be categorized into the following three broad classes explained with possible examples.

Table 12.1 Broad categories of support services

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sl. No.</th>
<th>Category of support</th>
<th>Activities</th>
<th>Possible examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>Teaching</td>
<td>Tutoring</td>
<td>Giving a lecture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Feedback</td>
<td>Offering comments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Grading</td>
<td>Marking an assignment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II</td>
<td>Administration</td>
<td>Action</td>
<td>Arranging transport for a student with a physical disability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Advocacy</td>
<td>Giving a reference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Assessment</td>
<td>Testing if someone has the right qualifications for a course</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III</td>
<td>Counselling</td>
<td>Informing</td>
<td>Telling someone about a university regulation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Advising</td>
<td>Advising someone on the best way to study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Counselling</td>
<td>Helping someone choose the right course for the future</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Block 3: Counselling. DE-4 Student Support Services, IGNOU, New Delhi, 1993, pp.9-10.
This categorization may appear rather arbitrary if you have probably thought of an action that either does not fit into any of the above three classes, or fit into two or all the three. Nevertheless, you will find it helpful to keep these broad distinctions in mind about student support services and whilst you are at work, stop and ask about yourself occasionally. You may also reflect upon activities you performed at different times and ask yourself whether you are a teacher, administrator or counselor. It provides you an idea of the range and nature of support services. These support services are required to the learners at different stages – pre-admission, during the course and post-completion of course.

Geographical distance of learner from the teacher/institution should not matter much if the teacher/institution provides the mental, emotional and academic support through various means and sources. The idea behind student support is that there must be a real dialogue between the teacher and the learner as it can enhance self-learning and also build confidence among the learners. Therefore these services must be diverse and comprehensive enough to provide different types of assistance to the learner who is geographically far from the institution/teacher to overcome the problems related to learning, among other things. These service need to provide the following kinds of support.

- Material support
- Monitoring support
- Information support
- Guidance support
- Tutorial support
- Counselling support
- Media support
- Library support
- Administrative support
- Assessment and evaluation support

These support services become possible only through established institutional mechanism. Student support services are provided through a large network of study centres which are linked with the headquarters/main institution through the regional centres. These services are, of course, interlinked with and dependent upon certain operational units within the broad institutional mechanism. We will discuss these details in Section 12.3.

### 12.3 MANAGEMENT OF SUB-SYSTEMS FOR LEARNER SUPPORT: ISSUES OF COORDINATION

Though a variety of functional units operate in a distance teaching/education institution, its major activities centre around course design and development, development and production of media materials, registration of students, provision of student support services, and continuous assessment and term-end evaluation. These activities are carried out by a variety of functional units in the institution, operating as sub-systems. In the following sub-sections (12.3.1 to 12.3.5) we discuss these sub-systems in greater detail, which would provide you broader understanding of learner support services.
12.3.1 Course Design and Development

The course design and development exercises are mainly handled by the teachers and academics. In IGNOU, for instance, the operational units involved in course design and development are called ‘Schools of Studies’. The in-house faculty is largely involved in designing of academic programmes using the expertise received from faculty outside IGNOU, i.e. other institutions. In most cases, the course units are largely written by subject experts of different institutions. But, in some cases, the faculty have substantially contributed to the development of course units in terms of either writing units themselves, or editing substantially the units written by others, or wherever necessary, even rewriting completely the course units contributed by outside experts.

A team is involved in the course development activity. Course development is a team process involving usually the programme and course coordinators (and the faculty of the discipline instructional designer, course writers, content, language and copy editors, graphic artists, media producers, and the printer. Each one has an assigned role to play and is accountable for it. The courses are developed based on certain models (like course team model, writer-editor-faculty model, etc.), and the outcome is the self-learning print and non-print packages. Management of the entire process is a difficult and tedious one, and requires specialised skills for bringing out effective learning materials.

A course passes through many stages before it gets printed finally. Statutory bodies, external funding and collaborative agencies (if any involved), in-house faculty and market research suggest the kind of programme to be developed. The concept paper is developed by the programme coordinator or discipline / inter-disciplinary area coordinator. It is normally discussed in the School Council, Coordination Committee, School Board, Expert Committee, Programme Advisory Committee, Planning Board, Academic Council, etc. for giving a final shape or design. The ‘concept paper’ gives the rationale, objectives, level, structure, media components (like print, audio, video, practical, counselling, teleconferencing, etc.), medium of instruction (i.e. language), course design, strategy of course development, programme delivery, evaluation strategies, and procedure of certification.

The role of various functional divisions and units, including regional centres, study centres and other units are chalked out beforehand, as a part preparation for launching of the programme. These include ensuring availability of printed and other study materials for distribution by the concerned units and readiness of other operational units.

12.3.2 Student Registration/Admission

The preparations for registration or admission of students to various programmes actually start much before the commencement of the academic session. Decisions about minimum eligibility criteria, fee details, students intake, mode of admission (online / offline or both) whether based on entrance test or general merit list (without entrance test) to different programmes, etc are required to be taken in consultation and coordination with concerned academic units, statutory bodies and officers, among others. Finalisation of admission booklet / prospectus, issuance of admission notification, monitoring and processing of applications, finalization of admission procedure, etc are important operations pertaining to student registration/admission which involve methodical execution of various relevant activities. Maintaining the databases of each batch of students on roll for each academic session/year for programmes of two years and longer duration is highly demanding service requiring utmost accuracy. Further,
change of courses/electives, change of medium of instruction, correction/change of addresses, transfer / change of students from one Study Centre / Regional Centre to the other, etc requires very careful handling of data. In case of mega-universities the tasks involved are herculean. For instance, in IGNOU, Student Registration Division is responsible for monitoring of registration of students and maintenance of database of students of different programmes offered by the University. These operations require thorough coordination with different operational units at different levels of the system at different times. For providing effective support services, timely registration/admission of students for different academic programme for different academic sessions/year is very essential.

12.3.3 Educational Media

Educational media in a multimedia self-learning package may include audio, video, radio, television, teleconferencing, interactive multimedia, and the like. Use of media involves the tasks of designing and developing the media programmes, and providing interactive learning experiences to the learners through these media. Development of these programmes involves scripting, shooting and production, and dispatch/delivery (in packages or live) for actual use at the learner’s end or at designated study centres or media centres. In IGNOU, for example, these activities are carried out by Electronic Media Production Centre.

A decision on the quantity and strategy of media use is taken at the stage of developing the concept paper for the course, and subsequent discussions on it at various forums. Once a decision is taken on the nature and the extent of media use, preparation of academic notes, academic scripts, production scripts, leading to actual programme production (in that order) will take place along with the development of printed course units either simultaneously, or at a later stage. Another decision concerns the media choice/policy: supplementary, complimentary or integrated. These decisions do affect the design and development of media materials. Managing a media production crew and adopting an academic-producer collaborative approach to development of media materials requires sufficient experience and patience. At times, for instance, it may so happen that off-line editing and preview of programmes continue for indefinite period, giving greater strain to the producer, the academic and the exchequer. In the process, the material may get too delayed to be used by the learners. Effective involvement of instructional designers, formative evaluation, and quick decision-making usually help the timely production of good quality programmes that can be very useful to the learners.

12.3.4 Student Support Services

Coordination of activities for timely admission of students, despatch of study materials and all communications to learners, proper conduct of counselling sessions, efficient handling of turn-around time of assignments and their reliable evaluation, maintenance of a continuous feedback and communication system require competent and committed functionaries with specialised skills. In IGNOU, for instance, Regional Services Division plays crucial role in these matters, among others, requiring maintenance of various student support services.

Management of student support services involves: interaction and coordination with the Schools of Studies and other service units of the institution; management of regional centres, study centres, work centre, web centres, etc.; management of material distribution and other communication to learners; management of assignments (continuous evaluation) and counselling; training of support personnel; liaison with outside
society and institutions, and management of the provision of individualised support to learners.

Tutors and counsellors (i.e. Academic Counsellors) are the most crucial agents of distance teaching-learning; they act as subject experts, feedback providers, mentors, assessors, and information providers. Management functions of these roles include setting the role, monitoring and supporting the role, and evaluating the role for their continuing professional development.

Sometimes, slow learners and below average learners may need extra support. This involves strong and sustained mentoring. Further, the learners may need extra workplace support and guidance. Workplace learning skill development, workplace projects, workplace log books and diaries are important mechanisms which need to be managed properly to provide extra support to such learners.

Management of support also includes the support of self-help groups, and peer groups. In case of programmes having low enrolment, the students require special care and support, especially when the support centre mechanism is inadequate due to various reasons.

**12.3.5 Learner Evaluation**

Evaluation of distance learning involves continuous and final (term-end) evaluation. Continuous evaluation requires assessment of tutor marked and computer marked assignments, individual and group projects, experiments, and hand-on on-line tests, among others. The final evaluation is done through term-end examinations. Decisions need to be made regarding the procedures and formats of the assessment, what tests to give, when to give, how frequently, the level of testing, and the workload involved in preparing, conducting and responding to such tests. Management of computer-based tests needs alertness, immediacy, on-line response system, on-line updating, individualised pacing, and flexibility regarding the timing of these tests. Multiple-choice questions need to be generated and validated for on-demand and on-line assessment and immediate feedback.

Management of assessment of assignments, and examinations is very complex and difficult to handle due to wide geographical distribution of learners, and individualised pacing of learning. However, learners need to be constantly informed about the evaluation activities so that they can make appropriate decisions at appropriate time. At IGNOU, Student Evaluation Division looks after all these operations in coordination with concerned Schools of Studies and Regional Services Divisions, among others, as may be required.

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**Check Your Progress**

**Note:**

a) Write your answer in the space given below.

b) Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit under “Answers to ‘Check Your Progress’ Questions”.

2) How do you distinguish the management of course development from management of student support services?

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In section 12.3 we have discussed different sub-systems of ODEI that constitute learner support system. In Section 12.4 we will focus on organization of learner support services.

12.4 ORGANISING SUPPORT SYSTEM AND SERVICES

Organising student support services within the system requires thorough consideration of institutional basis as well as the factors that affect organization of these services. We discuss these in the following sub-sections.

12.4.1 Institutional Basis

The type of institution within which the distance education system operates can greatly affect its effectiveness. In some cases distance education departments are established within conventional universities where they adapt or modify existing courses. But this can lead to problems, if the faculty and staff of the traditional departments are reluctant or uncertain about their different roles in the distance education system of the institution. Very often the distance education system is seen to be of inferior status when in fact it is different but just as valid. On the other hand, some very effective distance education systems operate in ‘mixed economy’ institutions and may flourish if they have high degree of autonomy and have an essential commitment to distance education as their main or only activity. In such a case, the institutional staff have a clear primary involvement in the success of a distance education system.

It is therefore important to note that the student support system cannot be seen in isolation from other parts of the system of an institution through which distance education is provided. If the course material is inadequate or obscure or is delayed by maladministration, extra demands are made of those supporting the students; likewise, if, for example, assignments are inadequately commented upon by academic support staff (tutors / academic counselors) this limits the effectiveness of the course material. Thus the quality of support service provided depends on the institutional basis and orientation, involvement and commitment of its staff.

12.4.2 Factors Affecting Provision

Many factors contribute to the design and development of learner support system. No learner support system can be designed in isolation. The factors that need to be considered while designing and developing learner support systems are: the aims and resources of the organization; the instructional strategy and package employed for the delivery; the target audience; the socio-economic, academic and educational culture in which it operates; and the level of availability of media at the homes/workplaces of the target audience.

Main concern is of students for whom the services are provided with a view to help them sustain their learning through the course/programme. Then we concern ourselves with the institutional factors that facilitate and/or constrain the means of support to students. These are considered under locational factors, media constraints and cost factors. In other words, students needs, location factors in the institution (e.g. course preparation, administration, decision making, material dispatch, etc at Headquarters; devolved administration of support services at Regional Centres and study centres level including face-to-face support services, media constraints and cost factors affect provision of learner support services.
12.4.3 Organisation

For effective organization of learner support services, we would expect the institutional headquarters to:

1) carry out overall planning and policy making of the student support sub-systems;
2) organise and run this system;
3) supervise the staff working within the student support system; and
4) provide and disseminate information through the institution.

Some of the functions of 2) and 3) above might be devolved to Regional Offices. Local support centres/study centres are best placed to provide:

a) face-to-face sessions related to course material and practical workshops;
b) academic and non-academic counselling;
c) aspects of advisory services.

This provides you an idea of the gamut of organisational of learner support system and services.

12.5 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have seen that student support services are very important for distance learners. We have known that distance learners have some specific characteristics and the learners have to learn independently with the help of specially designed self-instructional/learning materials. In order to work through these learning materials smoothly distance learners need assistance of different kinds at different times of learning that takes place through ODL mode. You will agree that we cannot ignore/avoid student support services in distance learning, as it is the only way to avoid loneliness, helplessness and danger of demotivation and dropout among distance learners. We have thus discussed different sub-systems of learner support and the aspects and issues related to organization of the support system and services as a whole.

12.6 ANSWERS TO ‘CHECK YOUR PROGRESS’ QUESTIONS

1) The distance learner studies on his own using the self-leaning material and does it in isolation. Besides being at distance from his teacher/institution he/she is also separate from fellow learners. Further, the distance learners have intra- and inter-group variations as far as their age, interests, background, needs, and experiences are concerned. The distance learner’s situation thus is quite different from that of their conventional counterparts. The distance learner, who is learning independently, may feel deprived of required support from the teacher/institution and may also feel isolated, helpless and, at times, he/she may even get de-motivated to dropout, particularly when he/she faces a problem in learning or there is lack of administrative or non-academic support service at crucial times. Student support services are therefore essential for distance learners.

2) In the case of course design and development, academics are involved, and the exercise is largely academic in nature with little logistical decision-making, while in student support services the exercise is largely logistical and managerial/
administrative in nature guided by academic concerns. In the latter, though the teachers are involved in the evaluation of assignments and in presentation of counselling sessions, the management by coordinators of Study Centres and of Regional Directors of Regional Centres largely involves administrative and managerial decision-making. However, in both the cases, the concern is to facilitate and improve student learning.

12.7 REFERENCES


Suggested Readings


12.8 UNIT END EXERCISES

You may write brief notes or full-length answers to the questions given here in your own interest. Such notes or answers might help you during your preparation for term-end examination.

Unit End Questions

1) What do you understand by learner support services? (250 words).

2) Justify the need for learner support services in ODE (500 words).

3) How do you categorise learner support services? (250 words).

4) What are the different sub-systems required for learner support in ODE? Discuss different issues involved in managing these sub-systems? (1000 words).
5) Discuss different aspects of organizing learner support system and services. (500 words).

**Questions for Critical Reflection**

1) Success or failure of ODE system solely depends on the quality and efficiency of its learner support system and services. Critically examine the statement.

**Activity**

Write a critical report of the learner support services that IGNOU promised to you as the student of BEd programme and the quality with which these services were provided to you during the course of your study from beginning till date. Cite your experiences as anecdotes of relevant services.