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## UNIT 2 MANAGEMENT OF SUPPORT SERVICES

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### **2.0 INTRODUCTION**

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Learner support constitutes an important aspect of the distance education system. Beginning with a simple transfer of study materials to learners by post, the concept of learner support has evolved to a range of human and non human systems which facilitate, guide and support distance learners. The ranges of activities that can be categorized under learner support are varied. The various terms used classify particular areas of activity, which also depend largely on the type of open and distance learning system. According to Alan Tait (1995): “The term student support means the range of activities which complement the mass produced materials which make up the most well known elements in Open and Distance Learning (ODL)”. He further explains that the print and non-print instructional components enhance access to the learner. However, activities like ‘counselling’, (face-to-face or telephonic or through electronic medium) and their organization at learner support centres, constitute learner support. The ODL institutions have to organize these learner support activities or manage these systems.

It is important for distance educators to think about the expectations of learners in ODL systems. In order to cater to the needs, aspirations and individual differences of the target groups, the management of learner support assumes a crucial significance. In view of these it is important to understand the components of learner support, i.e. academic and non-academic, and their effective planning, organization and management by the ODL institution.

## 2.1 LEARNING OUTCOMES

After going through this unit you will be able to:

- Explain the concept of learner support in ODL;
- Categorize learner support into different types and describe its components;
- Discuss the need for developing a cost effective learner support system;
- Identify the different types of records and data that need to be managed for effective learner support;
- Describe suitable and appropriate e-learner management systems;
- Explain the need for a quality assurance system;
- Develop a framework for quality assurance in an ODL system;
- Prepare a list of quality indicators for effective and efficient learner support; and
- Develop learner charters based on expectations of learners in the ODL system.

## 2.2 SUPPORT SERVICES: MANAGEMENT ISSUES

In this section you will learn about the meaning of support services and the types of support services required for learner in the ODL and management issues which are crucial for learner success.

Simpson (2003) categorizes learner support into two broad areas, as “academic (tutorial) support and non-academic or counseling support”. He has explained the sub divisions within each type of learner support category, as shown in Figure 2.1.

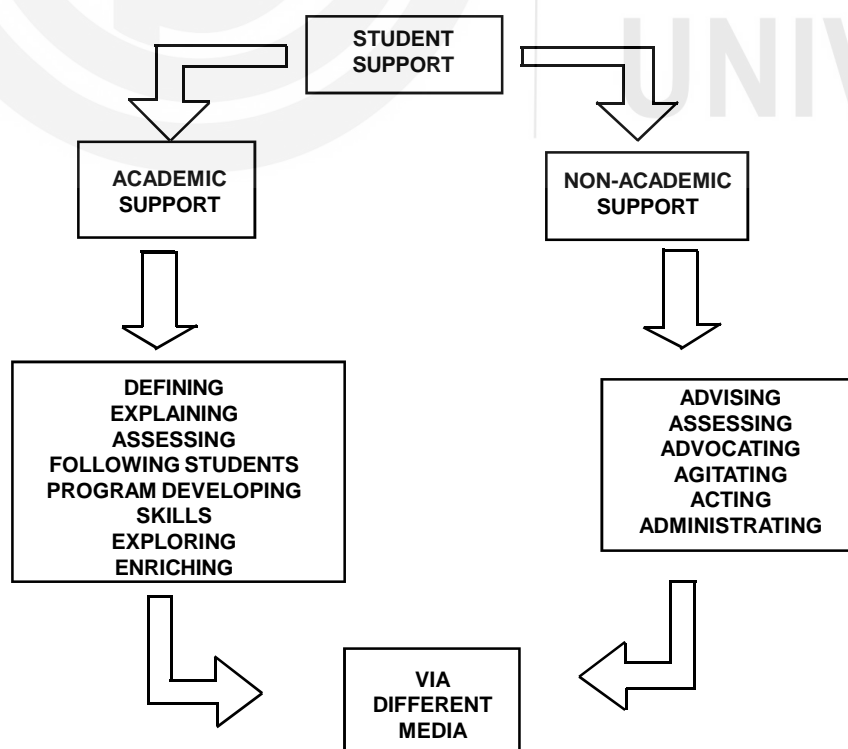


Fig. 2.1: Types of Learner Support in Open and Distance Learning Systems

Source: Supporting Students in Online, Open and Distance Learning, Simpson, O. [2002], pg 7

Academic support is provided by defining, as depicted in Figure 2.1, the course territory, explaining concepts, exploring the course, formal and informal assessment thereby organizing feedback, numeracy and literacy skills, following up students' progress through the course and further enrichment of learning by extending course boundaries. The academic support activities envision a shift in the tutor's role from the 'traditional explicative' to a facilitator using different modes for learning transactions.

Non-academic support as described by Simpson (2002) comprises of:

- Advising, i.e. giving information, listening to problems, suggesting possible course of action/directions, enabling learners to take decisions.
- Assessing the non-academic aptitudes and skills and giving feedback to the individual in this regard.
- Action in the form of practical help to facilitate study.
- Advocacy as in making provisions for funding, recommendations, references.
- Agitation so as to manage changes within the institution for the students' benefit and
- Administration for organizing the student support.

### 2.2.1 Management of Operations/Activities

The function of student support services is to cater to different learner needs and provide academic and administrative support accordingly. Irrespective of the core medium of instruction, i.e. print or non-print, efficient and effective learner support requires a division of labour between the core elements and other services. Tait (1995) has provided a framework for the development of a student support for an ODL system.

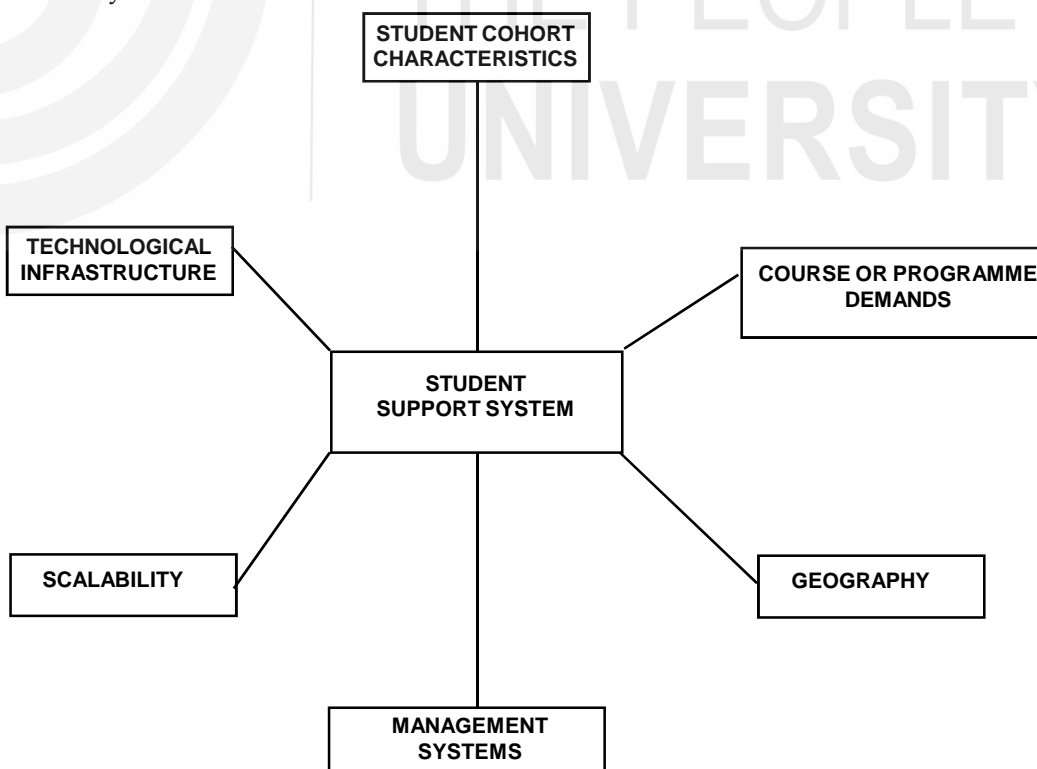


Fig. 2.2: Framework for the development of a student support system

Source: 'Planning and Student Support in Open and Distance Learning in the UK', Alan Tait, 1995.

Let us examine briefly each of these six components.

- **Student Characteristics**

Consideration of student characteristics is central to the development of learner support services. Here the learner's status is taken to be that of a customer or client availing the services of an organization. The latter has to assess the needs, capacities and aspirations of the student while planning the development and its delivery of services.

The student characteristics/qualities that need to be considered are:

1. Gender
2. Age
3. Domestic conditions
4. Status of employment
5. Source(s) of income
6. Geographical situation
7. Language
8. Ethno-cultural background (Tait, A.)

- **Technological Infrastructure**

Tait (1995), considers two essential elements when deciding about the type of technologies. One category is of those technologies to which students have access and other is that the institutions or organizations which adopt new information and communication technologies for their programme delivery and learner support. The institutions will have to make provisions for using alternative technologies depending on the need and suitability of the learners. For example different kinds of communication technologies will be required for reaching out to learners in tribal, rural or urban locations or delivering student support services in geographically difficult terrains. If the programme is designed involving the use of computers, then their availability to the target group must be ensured. Alternatively a programme can be designed based on a specific occupational grouping and support provided accordingly. Social availability of a particular technology is an important factor as also the domestic and work place availability. Careful planning and serious thought should go into the development of student support, particularly in the context of a country like India, characterized by geographical, cultural, ethnic and linguistic diversity. Even if a particular technology is socially available, e.g. use of railways for material dispatch, it may require another technology or system to reach a learner in a hilly terrain, say by trucks or lorries. Assuming domestic availability of a particular technology e.g. computers or television, may unknowingly exclude some learners, e.g. those in rural or semi-urban areas may not have access even to such technologies.

- **Course or programme demands**

The crucial component around which the success of student support hinges is the demands or requirements of the programme. These are the core issues which have to be carefully considered when the programme is conceived. Some of the issues in this regard which need to be focused upon are:

- Type of assessment – continuous or terminal or a combination of the two. In case of continuous assessment, there is a need to decide about who will undertake the assessment? It could be done by the core faculty or academics in the organization or by part-time faculty, tutors and counselors.
- Weightage – It has to be decided whether continuous assessment involves the teaching component as well as making or grading or only the latter. The weightage to be assigned to the continuous assessment component in the scheme of overall assessment also needs to be ascertained.
- Face-to-face component can be a part of the distance education programme depending on its nature and need. In some skill or competency enhancement programme, interaction with the tutors becomes necessary. The purpose of the face-to-face support could vary from just the need of social experiential learning or for mutual support through peer interaction. Geographical factors and location of learners for a particular programme have to be considered for organizing face-to-face interactions.

- **Scalability**

Scalability determines the way a distance education system should be organized depending on its volume of activity. One major determinant e.g. could be the number of students which the programme intends to enroll. The management of student support will be structured differently for a programme enrolling 100 students than one that targets to register 100,000 students, the dimension of scale will directly impact all activities of academic and administrative support, e.g. the nature and number of teachers/faculty, organization of admission, student queries, regional and local support services through study centres or work centres.

- **Geography**

The geographical factor considers not just the physical terrain but also has a social dimension. It includes the aspects such as:

- Density of population in a given area (rural or urban).
- Transport facilities and their costs.
- Extent of freedom exercised by the females in movement outside their homes or for all students in dangerous areas.
- All these issues will have a bearing on the extent of student-tutor interactions and their meetings at a particular place.

- **Management Systems**

Let us examine some specific issues related to management of student support services. These will be dealt with in detail in the sections that follow. The management issues deserving specific focus are:

- Centre periphery organization – This implies that the services are delivered at a location away from the central institution. Such a setup often leads to a hierarchical structure and proves negative. A 'partnership' or 'distributed' model can be more useful for effective student support i.e. partnership for production and presentation.

- Management of Information - to ensure smooth flow of information to and from the centre and peripheral elements.
- Quality assurance – In ODL systems, since most of the services are delivered outside of the central organization, quality of these services has to be assured. For instance, tutoring or counselling is done by part-time faculty or tutor-counsellor or mediated through computers or postal learning materials etc.

- **Budgeting**

A significant consideration is the decision regarding the investment to be made in the student support provisions. Decisions about the outcomes of these investments in terms of student retention, assessment and evaluation procedures, quality of learning experiences, have to be considered. The institution has to adopt the appropriate financial model, depending on the direction in which funds flow in the organization.

### **Main Operations Involved**

In the context of the framework described above, the challenge is to provide good quality learning experiences to the distance learners. For achieving a minimum level of efficiency and effectiveness the institution should be clear about the different elements or activities involved in providing such a learner support system. Let us now take a look at the main elements or services of the support framework that the institution will need to focus on.

- *Pre study and Admission enquiry/advice/information*

A student will expect right information and guidance which institutions do provide through prospectuses. However some organizations provide platforms for individual and interactive enquiry systems. This may be through face to face contacts, letters, e-mail, telephone outreach events etc. The important considerations are timeliness, transparency and competence.

- *Teaching-Learning Strategy/Tutoring/Counselling*

This is a very crucial component of the support services being provided to the learners. It includes all support, human and physical in addition to the course materials provided to the learners. The management issues involved are:

- Tutors/academic counselors constitute the core staff or are part-time local resource persons
- Nature of teaching-learning format – correspondence, mail, individualized, teleconference or CMC etc.
- Role of the counselors/tutors in continuous assessment and the latter's weightage in the overall assessment scheme.
- Role of tutors/counselors in the terminal assessment.

All the above issues are context specific. The type of security mechanisms that a particular country can put in place will be crucial in deciding the extent of responsibility to be assigned to a part time faculty. This is essential to maintain the sanctity and confidentiality of the examination and assessment systems. These decisions will also

have a bearing on development of suitable quality assurance mechanisms.

- *Learner Support Centres/Local Study Centres*

Some institutions adopt a system where there is a need for face to face support for the learners. This support is organized at a local resource centre, termed as a study centre/programme study centre/special study centre etc. Tait (1995) has described four models for organizing study centers. These are:

- 1) The Rented Model: Rooms and laboratories (if needed) are hired from another institution for the specified meetings/contact programmes/practicals. e.g. most study centers in IGNOU follow this pattern.
- 2) The Partnership Model: Another institution provides the location and services. e.g., the Recognized Study Centers in IGNOU.
- 3) The Dedicated Model: The building (whether rented or purchased) is solely dedicated for the ODL institutional activities.
- 4) The Civic Model: In this scheme the local community through a provincial body or council takes responsibility for providing the resources for educational activities of the institution.

In systems which cater to large numbers, as in IGNOU, there can be a regional coordinating body, Regional Centers. The Regional Centers are the middle tier in the three tier system of student support followed in IGNOU and coordinate between the Headquarters and the local support centers.

- *Assessment Systems*

The effective management of assessment systems in an ODL system (as in a conventional system also) is very crucial for the success of the organization. In an ODL set up the assessment system is a core component of the overall framework. However it needs to be supported through the academic counselors/tutors as the component of continuous assessment is involved and has considerable weightage in overall achievement of learners. There is need for an efficient management system considering the large scale of operations dealing with examinations, assignments, project work, practical work etc. Institutions need to focus on issues of safe and timely conduct of examinations, record maintenance, attendance sheets, award lists, transfer of records etc.

Image of the institution and the respect people have for it depends greatly on the sanctity of its assessment procedures.

(Acknowledgement: This section is abstracted from an article entitled, 'Planning Student Support in Open and Distance Learning in The UK', by Alan Tait).

Before we proceed to the other important components of learner support that require careful planning and management, you may attempt to answer this question.

### Check Your Progress 1

- Notes:** a) Space is given below for your answer.  
b) Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

List the non-academic support provided to the learners as described by Simpson.

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### 2.2.2 Management of Finance

One of the major attractions in setting up of ODL institutions is the fact that it is much more cost-effective than face-to-face teaching in traditional systems. This is true only if the number of students involved are relatively high. To develop a cost effective system the student numbers must be optimized (Melton, F.R., 2002). Hence the distinguishing feature in open systems is the need for management of investment.

Open systems, especially those which produce materials have higher fixed costs and longer financial planning periods. This necessitates use of more sophisticated methods than usual annual budgets (Freeman, R. 1997). If student numbers have to be taken to levels to achieve cost effectiveness, a careful planning and consideration is to be given to student support systems. Efficient support services can be provided to large number of learners only by decentralizing the support activities.

Melton (2002) compares the costs of ODL and FFT (face-to-face teaching) and gives some indication of the extent to which the former can be more cost effective. The fixed costs of ODL, like the cost of course development, institutional costs, regional institutional costs are much higher as compared to FFT. The variable costs in ODL e.g. student support which depends on student numbers are much lower per student when the number of students is relatively high.

Rumble (1987) in a study noted that the minimum numbers required on UKOU courses to achieve cost effectiveness varied from course to course. For example he found that in a particular course (foundation course) break-even point was reached at a student enrolment of 2,658 while the break even point in a post foundation course was reached at 800 student enrolment. This is also primarily because of the belief at UKOU that students at foundation course need more support than at a higher level, hence more investment is made at the former level. Rumble confirmed through this study that comparisons should be made between courses of similar quality and that the cost of an ODL course depends largely on what is invested in them.

Wagner's (1997) study on drop out rates indicated that the annual recurrent costs of supporting a full time undergraduate in the UKOU were one third the cost of supporting the counterpart in the FFT University. Rumble (1986) noted that evidence for distance teaching having the potential to be cheaper per capita (i.e. more cost effective) than conventional education.



The question that is often raised when cost comparisons are made between ODL and FFT institutions is about the quality of teaching and the graduates produced. Whether the cost effectiveness of ODL programme can also sustain the quality of output as compared to conventional FFT systems, is debated. Many researchers have questioned the equivalence of academic quality of distance and conventional education systems. Carnoy and Levin (1975) argued that the cost savings of an OU (Open University) system 'may be obliterated by a smaller educational product'. This according to them is primarily because the average university student has greater access to tutorial services, instructional materials and instruction, libraries, computers, campus classes than the OU counterpart (Rumble, 1986). However most come to the conclusion that ODL can be highly cost effective if delivered on a large enough scale to offset the high investment costs.

Another consideration for financial management of learner support is to develop a system of decentralized learner support. A system is required in which student numbers can be easily expanded without overstressing the resources. For this a system of regional or local support needs to be created. The example of IGNOU is a case in point. The student support is provided through a network of regional centres which operate through a set of learner support centres in each region. These learner support/study centres provide academic counseling, guidance and material distribution and assessment support to learners attached with them.

The academics at the Headquarters are there to develop courses. Hence learner support is provided through part-time staff and central academics are thus not affected by expansion in number of students. This is applicable even in situations where all teaching and student support is provided online (Melton, 2002).

### **2.2.3 Management of Human Resource**

In most distance education systems support to learners is provided at a distance from them. The support is generally in the form of study materials, consulting and tutorial services through face to face contact, telephone or postal correspondence. Since ODL deals with students at a distance, the question of the effectiveness of the communication systems always arises. Another issue involved is the ability of the institution to monitor the quality of services being offered to the students. In many cases since the institution deals with large numbers spread over a large area, the tutors are recruited locally. The institution needs to keep a check on these 'distant tutors' as to whether they are serving the needs of the students.

Generally DE (distance education) courses are developed for a large clientele and those academics that develop the course cannot do the tutoring for each enrolled student. However some institutions do encourage the course developers to do some tutoring for e.g. - Universidad Nacional Abierta, the full time staff travel to local centres for tutoring. Also in the British Open University some study courses are developed by academics who tutor the course. But by and large the ODL institutions induct and orient part-time faculty to do the tutoring.

To maintain quality, it is important that their counselling/tutoring is monitored and supervised by the full time faculty or 'senior tutors'

(Rumble, 1986). Whatever is the form of academic support, formal e.g. a tutorial or informal, e.g., an encouraging remark, its provision has to be ensured through a proper management system. Freeman, R. (1997) describes three management tasks for learner support:

- Creating a support system
- Enabling students to use the system
- Mechanism for monitoring the provisions of support systems to the learners.

The sources of learner support range from tutors (personal and/or subject), line managers and mentors to fellow learners. This support can also be technology mediated. Let us look into some issues of management of these human sources of learner support.

### **Management of Support from Tutors/Counsellors**

Freeman (1997) considers the tutor as the key supporter in systems which offer longer accredited courses. Support from tutors is very important since learners cannot complete courses if left untutored and unsupported. The main functions of the tutor are:

- As a subject expert
- As a gateway to other resources
- As a facilitator by giving feedback on progress
- As a counselor by encouraging/assisting with personal problems
- As an evaluator by assessing the learners.

The management functions here are:

- To ascribe a role to the tutor
- Monitor and support the role
- Evaluating the role.

Freeman (1997) has provided a framework for managing the tutor support function. There is not much distinction in the function of the tutor as a subject expert and a feedback provider, because both are concerned with the performance of the learner in the subject. However since the content in ODL system are self instructional, the subject expertise may not be overly emphasized in appointing tutors/counselors. There is however need for more experienced tutors or mentors for newly appointed tutors. This is an important management function. Freeman's matrix examines the three managerial functions against all the five aspects. It is also highly difficult and complex as far as monitoring and evaluating tutor performance is considered. This is mainly because it is difficult to observe all tutors in action in the field as they operate occasionally on visits to the study centres. Their visible 'output' is only in the form of feedback on assignments. Some learners may also give feedback on tutor performance. Efforts have to be focused on extracting maximum information from these sources.

Table 2.1: Managing the Tutor support function

Examples of setup tasks	Examples of monitor/ support tasks	Examples of evaluation tasks
<p><b>Tutor as subject expert</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Set standard for tutor qualifications and experience in the subject</li> <li>- Recruit tutors to those standards</li> <li>- Brief tutors on the course content</li> <li>- Train tutors in relevant teaching techniques e.g. phone tutoring</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Arrange mentor support for new tutors from an expert in that subject</li> <li>- Monitor (via subject expert) the tutor’s marketing of assignments</li> <li>- Monitor learner feedback on their subject support, e.g. on tutorials</li> <li>- Monitor student progress lack of progress could indicate poor support</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Compare marks statistically against those of all other tutors</li> <li>- Review learner feedback</li> <li>- Review tutor feedback on the course and the organization</li> </ul>
<p><b>Tutor as a gateway to other sources</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Brief tutor on other resources available through the organization</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Provide subject expert support (i.e. some well versed in access to resources) to the tutor</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Review learner comments on the resource access they had</li> <li>- Review tutor feedback on there resource access role</li> </ul>
<p><b>Tutor as provider of feedback</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Define feedback standards</li> <li>- Train tutors in how to give effective feedback in an open system</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Monitor learner comments on their support and feedback</li> <li>- Provide mentor support to the tutor</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Evaluate learner comments on the feedback they received</li> </ul>
<p><b>Tutor as helper with personal problems</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Brief tutors on the types of problems learner have</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Provide mentor support to new tutors</li> <li>- Monitor student progress as lack of progress could indicate unresolved problems</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Review learner feedback</li> <li>- Review learner progress</li> <li>- Review tutor feedback on the problems they received and how they dealt with them.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Tutor as assessor</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Brief tutors on the assessment system</li> <li>- Train tutors on any assessment skills</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Provide an experienced assessor to support the new tutor</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Compare tutor’s assessment against other indicators of learner potential less prior qualifications</li> <li>- Collect learner views of the assessment process and specific assessments</li> </ul>

(Source: Managing Open Systems, Richard Freeman (1997), Pg.50-51)

Other types of human resource support that needs to be managed are managing peer and group support and support from mentors.

Managing group support – Organizations can play a major role in organizing group support. The learners can be encouraged to set up study groups or self help groups. For this the learners need to be able to communicate with each other. They need access to personal details of their peers. This of course should be done with the consent of the learners. Admission days and induction meetings can be the appropriate times when they will have easy access to such information. Alternatively the organization and the local centres can prepare and circulate the list with personal details to interested learners.

Organizations can facilitate functioning of such peer groups in the following ways:

- Tutors can identify the activity which will be usefully performed through group work
- Meeting place can be arranged for such groups
- Guidelines to set up and maintain self-help groups can be published
- If computer facilities are available, arrangements can be made for them for meeting online.

### Managing Support from Mentors

'Mentor' is a term used for a workplace-based supporter, who is assigned to a learner and has some responsibility towards the learner.

It is defined as, "A person who accepts the role of facilitating an individual's learning. In its purest form, the concept involves the mentor being chosen by the learner and carries out activities as requested by the learner" (Jeffries et.al., 1990). Freeman (1997) has described three activities for effective functioning of mentors. These are:

- i) Apprise learners about the concept of mentors, and how to choose them because for most learners it may be a new phenomenon. This may be done during induction meetings.
- ii) The organization can provide mentors with some summary about the programme/course in which they will be allocated to learners. This could be about the aims of the course, outline of content, role of mentors, functioning support systems and assessment systems.
- iii) Evaluation of mentor roles for improvement in their future performances.

This facility is difficult to put into practice since support systems cater to large numbers of programmes, learners and dispersed local support centres.

### Check Your Progress 2

- Notes:** a) Space is given below for your answer.  
b) Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

How can a Distance Education Institute facilitate the functioning of peer groups?

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## 2.3 DATA MANAGEMENT

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Learners in the ODL systems require a variety of academic and administrative support during their study career. The range of support activities required include:

- developing instructions material
- dissemination of routine information
- answering queries
- processing admission data
- record maintenance
- dispatch of study materials
- monitoring assignment evaluation
- management and coordination of administrative support structures
- conducting examinations and
- certification – issuing certificates.

An open and distance learning system is heavily reliant on its administrative support structure since learners are studying at a distance. Fundamental to the success of such a system is an effective record management system or data management.

### 2.3.1 Student Records

You need to first understand the significance of records in an ODL system. An effective data management system will ensure that:

- every learner gets the correct study material on time.
- learner achievement records are kept securely.
- financial and other matters are documented in a systematic manner.

There are three crucial aspects of data management that the planners should keep in mind. These are:

- a) Need for record keeping
- b) Type of records to be managed and
- c) Method/mechanism for data management.

Let us examine each aspect briefly:

a) ***Need for data management:***

Some of the reasons that make an effective record management system imperative for ODL systems are:

- keep track of learner's progress as a whole and also that of individual learner
- maintain continuity irrespective of change of personnel
- assist academic counselors/tutors in organization of tutoring
- compare courses, tutors, learners, sexes and years
- analyse data of particular age cohorts of learners, so as to identify emerging trends

- facilitate ongoing planning process
- have a historical proof of tasks undertaken
- facilitate research
- give feedback to all stakeholders – learners, tutors, planners, administrators, faculty etc.
- monitor and evaluate the system.

b) *Type of data/records*

The different kinds of data that should be properly recorded and managed are:

- assignments submitted
- marks/grades awarded
- term end examination awards
- difficulties faced by learners
- obstacles faced during programme implementation
- correspondence with all – learner functionaries, community
- feedback from all sources
- attendance registers – at headquarter and learner support centers
- personal records of learners – personal data progress report, assignment data.
- maintenance of a log or journal for incidents, visits, materials, equipment
- details regarding the issue of instructional materials to all
- records of finance and accounts
- Notes of meetings, counseling (theory and practical) sessions, follow up actions required/taken.

c) *Method of keeping records/data*

Records can be kept either on paper or on a computer based system. Those ODL institutions which deal with large number of students, computer based systems are preferable to manual systems. Whatever the system adopted for record management, some important features, that it must have are:

- simple
- logical
- easily comprehensible by users
- secure and
- sustainable

a) **A check list for reviewing and evaluating the student record system**

The following questions may be asked to assess whether the data is fulfilling learners' needs:

- I) Does the student database contain the following information?
- Personal details – name, address, age, family circumstances and employment status, academic and professional qualifications.
  - Special requirements such as specially adapted material for disabled learners.
  - Counselling/tutorial records, receipts of assignments, grades, monitoring of tutor comments.
  - Details of materials dispatched with dates and status of undelivered materials.
  - Attendance records at counseling sessions especially in skill and practical oriented programmes.
  - Status of fee payment and details of fees paid.

- II) Does the database ensure that records are updated, detailed and accurate?

In order to ensure these, the following activities are to be taken care of:

- Regular monitoring of records system to ensure their efficient functioning.
- Dissemination of right kind of information to the right people at the right time.
- Information kept in a secure manner, so that access is enabled only to authorized personnel.

- III) Are the support functionaries regularly trained and updated on record management system?

Essentially all the support service functionaries i.e. personnel involved in instructional, counseling or administrative, activities, need to be trained and updated on the record management system and the method of using it (COL, 1999).

The task of designing a student record system that produces meaningful decision, making information, is a challenge for ODL practitioners. There is need to take a holistic view of the mission and vision of the institution with a focus on the objectives and the processes for achieving them.

A practical example is from the University of Pretoria, South Africa. Analysis of student registration data, revealed 99% students using mobile phones. Hence the SMS facility was used to send regular messages to their students. Regular information was sent to students pertaining to:

- Alerting students about dates of material dispatch. So that they could pursue this at their post offices.
- Providing information regarding extension of assignment submission dates, using an encouraging language.
- Notifying deadlines.
- Sending reminders to register for term end exams.

At this stage it is also pertinent to examine the common type of records that need to be kept by distance education institutions. This is shown in Table 2.2.

Table 2.2: Checklist for starting or reviewing a student record system

Records	Possible Questions	Possible Details
<b>Personal student profile</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What kind of students enrolled?</li> <li>• Where are they from?</li> <li>• How many have access to mobile phones?</li> <li>• How many have access to computers, email and the internet?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Full contact details, including mobile phone numbers.</li> <li>• Means of identification</li> <li>• Demographic factors, i.e. age, gender, geographic location.</li> <li>• Resource factors e.g. place of learning, available learning times, electricity access, media and technology access.</li> <li>• Prior learning and experience, qualifications, distance learning experience, language ability.</li> <li>• Special educational needs</li> <li>• Occupation and work history, learning motivation</li> </ul>
<b>Retention and dropout</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How many students are completing the programme (completion rate)?</li> <li>• How many students complete the programme and graduate (throughput rate)?</li> <li>• Do demographic trends show differences between enrolment and successful programme completion?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Number of enrolled students.</li> <li>• Number and names of students who drop out.</li> </ul>
<b>Fee payment</b>	What is the student fee recovery rate?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Names of students with fees owing.</li> <li>• Amount outstanding</li> <li>• Due date</li> </ul>
<b>Material dispatch</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is the rate of successful material delivery?</li> <li>• What are the most common material delivery problems?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Names and addresses of students.</li> <li>• Date materials were sent.</li> <li>• Delivery mode (include postal reference number if necessary).</li> <li>• Number of non-delivery complaints.</li> </ul>
<b>Student participation and progress</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How many students are inactive (not participating in contact sessions, not handing in assignments)?</li> <li>• How many students are at risk (participating but failing formative assignment)?</li> <li>• What is the assignment turn-around time?</li> <li>• What are the most common delays for receiving student assignments?</li> </ul>	<p>Contact session attendance:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Number of attending students (per session, across all sessions)</li> <li>• Attendance by individual students (per session, across all sections)</li> <li>• Assignment submission (formative assessment): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Date assignment received</li> <li>– Date assignment marked</li> <li>– Date on which marked assignments are returned to students</li> <li>– Reasons for delay in receiving assignments from students</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Assignment results (formative assessment): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Individual assignment results</li> <li>– Group assignment results</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<b>Student complaints</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are the most common complaints?</li> <li>• What is the complaint response rate?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nature of the complaint.</li> <li>• Name of the person recording the complaint.</li> <li>• Date of complaint.</li> <li>• Action taken.</li> <li>• Date when the action was taken.</li> </ul>

(Source: Managing Students Records in Distance Education; A Topical Start-Up Guide to Distance Education Practice and Delivery, Commonwealth of Learning, Knowledge Series, 2005).



### Check Your Progress 3

- Notes:** a) Space is given below for your answer.  
b) Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

Provide reasons as to why effective record management system is imperative for ODL systems?

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### 2.3.2 Managing Data Pertaining to Academic Counsellors/ Tutors

In most ODL institutions, data collection systems are not always centralized. They have different databases for different activities, which later need to be integrated. For example at NAMCOL (Namibian College of Open Learning) the student record system is integrated with the management information system. This facilitates easy collation and access to data by both staff and researchers.

Freeman (1997) describes six categories of student records, which are:

- i) Course information – static (i.e. known information – when the course starts) and dynamic (i.e. any changes as the course is delivered).
- ii) System information – allocation of work and organizing it.
- iii) Learner information – static (i.e. learner details at the time of enrolment) and dynamic (i.e. changes to the learner during the course)
- iv) Learner progress information – details of learner performance
- v) Tutor performance information – communication on the tutor’s comment and marking (grading)
- vi) Summative information – overall results of the course, results for the tutors’ groups evaluative feedback from the learners.

Table 2.3 describes the type of information the academic counsellors/ tutors require in ODL systems.

Table 2.3: Phases of Tutor Involvement and their corresponding information needs

S. No.	Stage	Examples of Information Needs
1.	Recruitment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Course contents</li> <li>• Tutor role</li> <li>• Commitment required, e.g. when tutors have to be available to learners</li> <li>• Tutor development and support system</li> </ul>
2.	Induction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Course materials – the chance to become familiar with them</li> <li>• Qualification details</li> <li>• Mentor system – how it works</li> <li>• Learner system, e.g. how learner get materials. what work they do; how they submit work</li> <li>• The tutor system e.g. how to contact learners; how process learners' work</li> </ul>
3.	Tutor development	<p>These skills are imparted as required for an ODL system</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The tutors would be experts in their subjects and competent face to face tutors.</li> </ul>
4.	Supporting learners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Details of learners : demographic, workplace, special needs</li> <li>• Changes to course to qualification assessment systems</li> <li>• Learner progress details</li> <li>• Changes in learner status, e.g. change of address, withdrawn from a course</li> </ul>
5.	Course review	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A record of the final performance of each learner</li> <li>• A summative record of the tutor's performance e.g. range of marks awarded, average mark awarded</li> <li>• Summary of the learner feedback on (a) course (b) tutor</li> </ul>

(Source: Freeman, R (1997) Managing Open Systems,. Pg. 63-64).

When tutors are scattered over many places as e.g. in the case of IGNOU, management of provision of information becomes very challenging. Freeman (1997) describes a successful data management system as a balance of various factors for providing the information. These factors are:

- Balance between static and dynamic information in the system e.g. print is more suitable for static and computers for dynamic information.
- Depending urgency of the information needed – post will take longer than fax message or e-mail.
- The extent of labour provided by the organization, managing paper based systems of information are more labour intensive.
- Storage space available in the organization.
- Types of computer systems available with the organization.
- Access to computers and fax of tutors/counsellors

An innovative method of data management is being practiced at the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU). The two major initiatives were undertaken by the Regional Services Division (RSD) at IGNOU and focused on:

- i) Web-based monitoring of academic counseling and assignment evaluation.
- ii) Maintenance of online database of academic counselors.

The learner support centres perform two major activities i.e. academic counseling and assignment evaluation. An information base of these two activities is crucial for effective management of support services. Also, since 60% of the budget for regional centres is spent on counseling and assignment work; it is important to know their status, for monitoring and feedback. The data pertaining to academic counseling, assignment received and evaluated per week at the study centre is directly uploaded at the server in the IGNOU Headquarters. It can be accessed at the URL: <http://www.ignou.ac.in/divisions/rsd/counseling/search.asp>

IGNOU also maintains a web-based online database of academic counselors, engaged at all the learner support centres, spread throughout the country. Owing to the large scale expansion of the university and diversification of its support services network, an urgent need was felt to develop online software to keep track of the academic counselors. Details of these counselors can be accessed at the following URL, which is on the IGNOU server: <http://www.ignou.ac.in/divisions/rsd/rcdata/login.asp>

The results of maintaining such online databases, has been successful. Data is now available about the number of counseling sessions held course wise and number of students who attend these sessions from the allotted number. The faculty at the Headquarters also benefits from such data as they can plan training of counselors in their programmes and plan other academic activities (NCIDE Report, IGNOU, 2009).

### **2.3.3 Data Management of Assessment Systems**

Most open and distance learning systems are assessing their learners. Management of assessment process and relevant information is a stupendous exercise. Freeman (1997) lists four aspects of an assessment which directly influences, how its can be effectively managed. These are:

#### **i) Format of assessment**

The types/designs of assessment can be of the following types:

- a) Tutor marked assignments
- b) Computer marked assignments
- c) Closed book examinations
- d) Open book examinations
- e) Portfolio based assessments

#### **ii) Time of the test**

- a) At a time fixed by the organization
- b) On demand

iii) **Frequency of assessments**

- a) Only once in a cycle
- b) Limited number of times
- c) As many times as the learner wishes to

iv) **Quantum of assessment to be taken**

- a) All assessment on one occasion
- b) Take it in parts, at their own pace
- c) Resist/Reappears in the unsuccessful parts

Let us examine management of information of some assessment activities:

**Management of Assignments Data**

The issues that need to be considered are:

- Provision of clear-cut guidelines to tutors for assessment of assignments
- Marking/Grading guidelines should be provided
- Provision of suitable feedback forms for – counselors learners and learner centre coordinators
- Timetable clearly stating the schedule/time of submission, evaluation and data compilation timeframes.
- Clear rules and guidelines to deal with request from learners regarding extension of deadlines and appeals on awards, i.e. grades on marks.
- Information to learner about their marks scored and updating of their records.
- Guidelines to be provided for assessment of practical/skill based assignments.

**Management of Projects**

Many programmes require the learner to undertake project work which is a research activity. The performance of the learner in the project activity is assessed from the report submitted in fulfillment of that course often along with a viva-voce. Many programmes at IGNOU involve a project component, e.g. the computer programme – BCA, MCA, Management – MBA, Education – PGDHE, etc. the project reports in some programmes are required to be submitted at the Regional Centres and in some at the central evaluation units at the Headquarters. Due to high enrolments in such programmes, compilation of information, its management, effective utilization in organization of support activities is a major challenge. An innovation in this area has been undertaken by S. Mishra and G. Mythili of STRIDE, IGNOU. They have developed an online system “Web based environment of evaluation of project reports”. It is a software tool for evaluation of ES-320, a course in one of the IGNOU programmes. Some innovative features of this tool are:

- Automatic allotment of project report to evaluators
- Automatic updating of student record and feedback
- Online evaluator authentication

The software is placed at the following URL on the IGNOU server:  
<http://learnerprojects.ignou.ac.in/>

This system can be used for project report submission in other IGNOU programmes also. Since the reports are digitally available, a lot of physical space is saved as also logistical and administrative efforts are spared. It can also facilitate development of online library of project reports which can check plagiarism, mass copying and duplicacy of efforts.

**Information on Assessment**

Assessment systems in ODL differ markedly from those in a face-to-face setup. The differences are:

- The academic counselor/tutor do not design the assessment items/questions. They need to be informal as much as learners do.
- The learners and tutors are dispersed which increases the risk of misunderstandings, and hence necessitates a carefully designed information system.

**Table 2.4: Tutor and Learner information needs on assessment**

	Type of Information	Examples of Information Content
1)	Information on the assessment process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How many items have to be done</li> <li>• When the items can be started</li> <li>• When are they to be submitted</li> <li>• To whom these items have to be submitted</li> <li>• How they should be submitted, e.g. would be processed</li> <li>• Other documents required e.g. an assessment form</li> </ul>
2)	Information on the assessment tasks	For each assessment <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Purpose of task</li> <li>• Task details</li> <li>• Format (including length) of the answer</li> <li>• Marking criteria</li> <li>• Answers (for tutors only)</li> </ul>
3)	Information on the results of a given assessment	For each assessment <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Marks/Grades awarded</li> <li>• Explanation for how to interpret the mark/Grades – a conversion chart</li> <li>• Explanations of reappearing and appeal systems</li> </ul>
4)	Information on the overall assessment results	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Print out of results to date</li> <li>• List if items still due for submission</li> <li>• Advice/Implications of results so far</li> </ul>

[Source: Freeman R, (1997): Managing Open System, pg-106]

The first aspect deals with information on the overall assessment process, including the number and types of assessment process and procedures for submitting them. The second row deals with aspects of information on each assessment item. The third and fourth aspects give information on the learners' progress and keep learners updated about their correct records being reflected in the databases. Freeman (1997) observes that such assessment information is best provided through computer printouts from the headquarters, where all data is integrated. The result is officially recorded and learners can also challenge it if they consider it to be wrong. In large systems, such information is generated through computer managed systems [Freeman, 1997].

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## 2.4 QUALITY ASSURANCE IN LEARNER SUPPORT

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You will agree that the quality of any education system is dependent on many factors, both internal and external. Similarly the quality of an ODL system also varies since it is also the resultant of a variety of factors. For example – the resources (physical and human) available, the level of skills and expertise of its workers, the type of leadership, the communication system developed and its management and also the efficiency of the administrative systems. These systems are geared to achieve highest standards of quality within their realms of operation, so as to achieve a level of quality equivalent to the convention (Robinson, 1995). The ODL institutions though undergoing rapid expansion, that too beyond national boundaries, have yet to convince all stakeholders about the equivalence, if not supremacy of the ODL system to its conventional counterpart. Hence a lot of effort is being put in by the ODL institutions to promote quality assurance as an important tool for building public confidence. Many frameworks have been developed nationally and internationally to regulate and guide quality assurance programmes and some toolkits have also been developed for the purpose. However these are more prescriptive in nature as they are based on inferences drawn by the regulatory bodies and ODL providers. The need is to develop frameworks for quality assurance that evolve with respect to the learner behaviours and experiences. One quality assurance strategy cannot be uniformly applicable to all types of ODL institutions. The concept and philosophy of ODL requires that the process of developing quality assurance frameworks should be flexible and evolutionary, rather than prescriptive (Mannan, A., 2005).

Let us first examine the concept of quality in the context of education in general and in ODL system in particular. Quality as a concept concerns itself with issues of effectiveness, efficiency and accountability. Green and Harvey (1993) consider the following criteria for quality in education:

- Exceptionally high standards
- Perfection and consistency (zero defects)
- Fitness for purpose (meeting stated objectives)
- Transformation capabilities
- Value for money

However since ODL operates on the principles of division of labor and operating in a more systematic and self-conscious manner, the above criteria are applicable, albeit more vigorously to all elements, i.e., to:

- curriculum design, content and organization
- teaching, learning and assessment
- student progression and assessment
- student support and guidance

A high level of quality can be assured by following a three-pronged approach: a mechanism of internal quality assurance; evaluation by peers and accreditation by an independent and competent organization. The concept of quality is thus complex, value laden. It is a constantly evolving dynamic entity, subject to continual re-examination and re-interpretation (Robinson, 1995).

### 2.4.1 Quality Indicators

Generally the quality in ODL is judged by the quality of its learning materials – print and non-print. But you will agree that the enterprise of learning through ODL involves all learning experiences in totality that is provided to the learners. The course provider needs to ensure that proper learning conditions are provided. For this all the systems and sub-systems like course product, delivery and student support systems are well integrated. A framework for management of quality in an ODL system is provided by Robinson (1995). All these aspects have to be considered for ensuring quality. Whether it is the products, (e.g. course materials) or processes, (e.g. delivery of these materials to learners). The framework takes into account:

- **Products** – The instructional materials, i.e. print and non-print (media materials), output in terms of enrolled learners, pass percentage, skills and competencies acquired.
- **Services** – Registration of learners, guiding and advising learners, tutoring, counseling through feedback on assignment, providing support during the course, career advice and efficient management of the learner support centres.
- **Operational processes** which support the above i.e. delivery mechanisms, record keeping, scheduling, warehousing and stock control and quality assurance procedures.
- **Philosophy of the institution** reflected through its policy and mission statements, culture and ethos of the organization, mottos such as 'Education at your doorstep', 'reaching the unreached' as in IGNOU. Work culture and staff attitudes and their commitment levels affect the quality of services provided.

#### Quality Assurance Approach for Managing Quality in an ODL Institution

According to Robinson (1995), most of the approaches adopted for managing quality in an ODL system are developed from business and industry. For example quality control, quality assurance and total quality management. All approaches are focused on achieving desired standards of performance for all activities.

Let us examine quality assurance as an approach for ensuring quality in the educational context. Quality assurance “is the set of activities or procedures that an organization undertakes to ensure that standards are specified and specified and reached consistently for a product or service” (Robinson, 1995). This implies that reliable systems need to be created so that errors in the conductor operation are minimized. Quality control, on the other hand, looks at the products and progresses in retrospect. In this approach the non-performing or defective products are discarded. However both approaches cannot be taken in isolation, but in a more holistic manner along with assessment of the quality systems for total quality management.

Freeman, R. (1997) explains quality assurance as an approach for quality management. According to this approach the organization should identify the main processes and determine the devices for doing these, i.e. use of flowcharts and defined standards. The organization must have mechanisms in place to check whether the determined methods and procedures are being adhered to, i.e. monitoring systems and checks, i.e. audit systems should be established. The flow of activity in such a quality assurance approach is depicted in Figure 2.3.

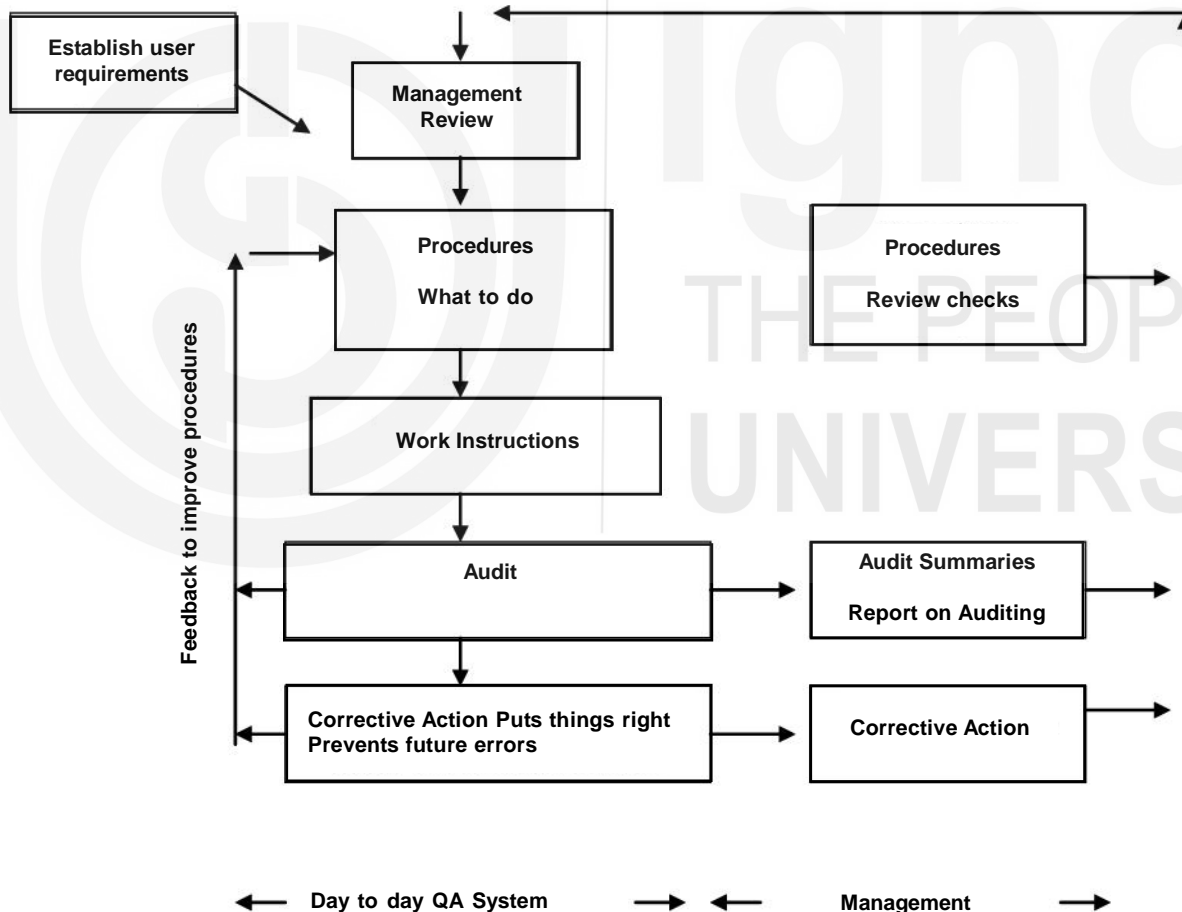


Fig. 2.3: Outline of a Quality Assurance System

[Source: Freeman, R. (1997): Managing Open Systems, p132]

The figure spells out those aspects of management when implementing such a system. These are:

- Clearly established user requirements e.g. the expectations of learners and employers.



- Listing out the main processes adopted by the organization, i.e., answering queries – pre-course and post-course enquiries, material production processes and academic counselling and tutoring. Based on these developing procedural codes and norms so that the best way of doing these may be practiced. This results in documents where procedures along with work instructions are detailed and compiled as documents.
- Data retrieval mechanism should be in place for effective management of learner support. ODL systems have to manage vast amount of information ranging from academic to non-academic aspects of learner support. The data pertain to students, i.e., their admissions, instructional components and their delivery, assessment and certification. Since the ODL systems cater to large number of students, data has to be stored and organized in an appropriate manner. This will ensure retrieval of correct information from the vast database whenever there is a query by the users. Data can be managed in a static and/or dynamic manner. Static data involves management which requires more physical labor and storage space, for example, keeping award lists in all courses of study for all learners, or student records/admission forms with relevant documents. Use of latest technologies, like web based management; on-line methods constitutes dynamic management of data/information using latest computer software packages. A sound data storage and retrieval system is instrumental in achieving optimum levels of quality assurance in organizing support services for distance learners.
- A monitoring or check mechanism, called 'audit' is put in place to investigate that the established procedures are being adhered to.
- A mechanism for corrective action is in place so that the institution learns from failures by rectifying the areas and following right procedures.
- Evaluating the system through a process of management review for changing the existing processes if required and adopting new ones to enable the growth and evolution of the institution.
- Many organizations have considered such an approach, but in ODL it has not been very successful. This is primarily due to the intangible nature of the teaching learning process, which cannot be defined through fixed procedures (Freeman, R, 1997). Quality assurance systems, particularly in the context of managing learner support, need to focus on operational processes in a way that is based on a review of existing practices. For example –
- Standards are set for a product or service, for instance setting the turn-around time for students' assignment works, providing the correct information to students about choice of courses etc.
- The development of a product or service is organized so that the desired standards are met.
- As a consequence reliable and consistent procedures for essential action have to be developed.

However, quality assurance procedures are generally difficult to implement in the ODL systems, because even simple problems can pose difficulty in resolving it. It also requires a shift in organization

culture. This should not deter institutions from adopting quality assurance procedures, for they will be poorer by not adopting them. Let us examine some common (though avoidable) failures encountered in the ODL system.

- Students write to the local centre to which they are attached for non-receipt of study materials. After not receiving any response, the student travels several hundred miles to enquire personally about the status of material dispatch. Often the student may collect the materials from the local centre during the visit or may be even return without the material. Reasons for the latter may be non-receipt of the relevant material by the local centre from the production unit, or could be some bottleneck in the processing of admission records, data entry errors etc.

A key concept in quality assurance here is to adopt a client-centred approach. This implies placing the learner first and not last while designing procedures and services. It is important that the internal processes of a system are well regulated and managed so that the blame game does not become a practice.

In the case illustrated above, even though the course materials are well designed, but failure in timely delivery to the learner will directly impact learner achievement and indirectly the attainment of the institutional goals and objectives.

It will be worthwhile at this point to examine the considerations for quality assurance in student support provided by the COL (2005). These are:

- Performance standards should be established and practices adopted for redress of student problems and these to be documented.
- The nature and content of student and staff record should be documented and easily tracked for which responsibilities need to be assigned.
- Procedures must be put in place to monitor various activities, e.g., student registration, material dispatch, academic counseling etc. Standards of performance need to be specified owing to differences in the type of services to a heterogeneous target group.
- Policy, procedures and timelines for assignment submission and return. Tracking, monitoring and reporting processes are to be established.
- Standards to be set up to communicate, monitor and track student access to their tutors.
- The standards for the support services, i.e., location, scope, standards of service and accessibility to be specified.
- Standards for examinations include procedures of scheduling, notification, administration and general conditions of examinations. All norms and procedures to be clearly provided, i.e., will all ODL students require to appear for the exam, who will invigilate, will external invigilators be taken?
- Periodic monitoring and review to be scheduled against specified performance indicators.

### Check Your Progress 2

- Notes:** a) Space is given below for your answer.  
b) Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

What are the quality indicators in the ODL system?

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### 2.4.2 Quality Assurance Criteria: Case Studies

Let us discuss a few selected examples of institutions which have established criteria for QA in student support services.

- **Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU)**

India is one of the few countries of the world to have a separate agency for coordinating and monitoring standards of ODL in the country. It has established the Distance Education Council (DEC) as a separate QA body for the purpose. The DEC has drawn up comprehensive guidelines for QA in ODL. The criteria suggested for student support are:

- Timely dispatch of course materials
- Training of tutors and counselors in methods of student support
- Timely delivery of multimedia packages to learner centres
- Quality of regular tutorial and counselling sessions
- Timely feedback on assignments
- Timely response to student queries
- Feedback to students on their performance and progress
- Facilitation of peer group interaction

- **Open University of Hong Kong (OUHK)**

Student support activities at OUHK include tutorial support through part time tutors provided by, optional face to face tutorials, available telephone support, and online instructional support through e-mail, discussion boards and asynchronous chat. QA criteria include:

- The Course Coordinators visits to monitor the tutorial sessions.
- Review of a sample of evaluated assignments.
- Feedback received from students  
(Jung, 2005)

- **Open University of Malaysia (OUM)**

OUM is the first open university of Malaysia and a private one. It faces the challenge of providing educational products, experiences and results meeting standards of established quality at par with the public conventional universities. OUM has thus adopted a customer centric

strategy to provide quality services and products. The QA criteria focus on:

- Since it is heavily dependent on tutors’ performance, it operates through a ‘Lead Tutor’ system where a senior tutor supports and guides the new tutors in face-to-face and online pedagogy.
- Online services such as online interactions, MS ISO 9000:2001 certified digital library and email based supports are provided.
- Extensive training is provided to the tutors.
- Assessment of tutor performance by learners and Learning Centre administrators.
- Best practice standards are identified in ODL management through benchmarking visits to renowned international open universities.
- Well-developed procedures for courseware development. e.g. market survey before developing an academic programme to ensure its viability (www.oum.edu.my)

### 2.4.3 Learner Charters

This is also what Simpson (2002) describes as ‘quality breakdown’. He attributes this failure to ‘organizational weaknesses’ and ‘staff problems’. There is need for the institution to be empathic with the student and staff. If the system examines the failures from the students’ perspective it is important to explore the expectations of the students, i.e. what is it that they will expect. Developing, ‘student charters’ or ‘learner charters’ is one way of doing it. The charter will provide some guidelines for what students can and should expect. For example, examine the extracts from the draft charter of UKOU (excerpted from Simpson, 2002):

“For you as an OU student we will endeavor to provide:

- 1) Face-to-face, phone and correspondence tuition appropriate to your needs in both method and content;
- 2) Correspondence tuition including return of assignments within four weeks of the due date and appropriate comment which explains the grade and offers adequate feedback to enable you to improve your future assignments.....”

Students will have clarity in their minds about what services they can expect from the institution. It also encourages them, to become assertive, lodge complaints and question the institution in case of poor services provided.

A Framework for quality assurance is provided by Simpson (2002) which is not an all time structure for all institutions. The structure is suggestive and not prescriptive and is applicable in some measure to all ODL institutions. In this Framework Simpson has raised 21 questions pertaining to different aspects of learner support. The questions under each aspect are summarized below:

#### Support Activities

- 1) System for dealing with student queries using all communication media.

## Management of Learner Support

- 2) Provision for accurate and speeding response without delay.
- 3) A practice mechanism for reaching out to disadvantaged learners.
- 4) Availability of reasonable choice of media for all learners to ensure their participation.
- 5) Policy of equal opportunities for all learners regardless of physical and mental needs.
- 6) Provision of timely support, especially at the beginning and end of course.

### Support Staffing

- 7) Appropriate and clear staff selection procedures.
- 8) Staff development programme in practice for all staff involved in student support.
- 9) Provision of an interactive platform for student support staff to reflect and give feedback.
- 10) Good ongoing support for staff, which implies good communication and feedback to and from the institution, commitment to support staff as they support students.
- 11) Supportive rather than punitive mechanisms to deal with staff problems.
- 12) Regular facilitation of staff to be empathetic and be aware of students' problems.

### Materials

- 13) Materials to cover students' problems and issues by and large.
- 14) Characteristic features of empathy for students being incorporated in them and a readability check done.

### Supporting students in practice (What the institution looks like to students)

- 15) Is it friendly and approachable or inaccessible?
- 16) Enrolment procedures, easy or difficult to follow?
- 17) After enrolments how much time do you take to feel part of the institution?
- 18) Is the sense of isolation overcome once the course starts?
- 19) Is there support provided if the student wavers or feels diffident after course commencement.
- 20) Appropriate mechanism to support a failed or dropout student.
- 21) Provision of monitoring systems at the macro level (progress through entire programme) and micro level (progress through each module or one course).
- 22) Did students get all the support they needed at the desired time within the resources available? If not where did the system fail them? How will the system reinforce and rectify the failures?

These are the indicators/benchmarks of quality assurance which can help to improve the quality of functioning of an ODL provider. Approaches however need to be context specific, though institutional goals may be common especially in the context of learner support i.e. timely delivery of materials, timely evaluation of assignments and return to the learners for timely feedback, providing access to support and advice for students. It is also important to remember the limitations of quality assurance. Limitations should also focus on making their vision clear to the staff about the factors that constitute good quality learning, the conditions that forfeit learning and the assessment of this learning.

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## 2.5 LET US SUM UP

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In this Unit you read about the following concepts pertaining to the management of support services in an ODL system:

- Different types of learner support required in an ODL system.
- A framework to identify the components of learner support that need proper management.
- Various activities and operations to be performed by these components and their management for effective student support.
- Procedures involved for decision making so as to evolve a cost effective mechanism of learner support which is the main attraction in an ODL set up.
- Management and organization of human resource, i.e., issues in organization of tutoring/counseling/mentors/group work.
- Methods of providing academic and non academic support by the institutions through a well developed communications system and a strong monitoring mechanism.
- Data Management.
- Quality assurance as an approach for managing quality in an ODL system for which an outline was developed.
- Focusing on learners' needs and expectations for learner support as there is need to draw up a learner charter.
- Some quality indicators or benchmarks were described to attain a minimum level of achievement.

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## 2.6 REFERENCES AND FURTHER READINGS

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## **2.7 FEEDBACK TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS QUESTIONS**

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### **Check Your Progress 1**

Non-academic support as described by Simpson comprises of:

- 1) Advising, i.e. giving information, listening to problems, suggesting possible course of action/directions, enabling learners to take decisions.
- 2) Assessing the non-academic aptitudes and skills and giving feedback to the individual in this regard.
- 3) Action in the form of practical help to facilitate study.
- 4) Advocacy as in making provisions for funding, recommendations, references.
- 5) Agitation so as to manage changes within the institution for the students' benefit and
- 6) Administration for organizing the student support.

### **Check Your Progress 2**

Organizations can facilitate functioning of peer groups in the following ways:

- Tutors can identify the activity which will be usefully performed through group work
- Meeting place can be arranged for such groups
- Guidelines to set up and maintain self help groups can be published
- If computer facilities are available, arrangements can be made for meeting online.

### **Check Your Progress 3**

Some of the reasons that make an effective record management system imperative for ODL systems are:

- Keep track of learner's progress as a whole and also that of

individual learners.

- Maintain continuity irrespective of change of personnel
- Assist academic counsellors/tutors in organization of tutoring
- Compare courses, tutors, learners, sexes and years
- Analyse data of particular age cohorts of learners, so as to identify emerging trends
- Facilitate ongoing planning process
- Have a historical proof of tasks undertaken
- Facilitate research
- Give feedback to all stakeholders – learners, tutors, planners, administrators, faculty etc.
- Monitor and evaluate the system.

#### Check Your Progress 4

Generally the quality in ODL is judged by the quality of its learning materials – print and non-print. Hence, the systems and sub-systems like course product, delivery and student support systems are integrated for management of quality in an ODL system. The framework which indicates quality takes into account:

- **Products** – The instructional materials, i.e. print and non-print (media materials), output in terms of enrolled learners, pass percentage, skills and competencies acquired.
- **Services** – Registration of learners, guiding and advising learners, tutoring, counseling through feedback on assignment, providing support during the course, career advice and efficient management of the learner support centres.
- **Operational processes** which support the above i.e. delivery mechanisms, record keeping, scheduling, warehousing and stock control and quality assurance procedures.
- **Philosophy of the institution** reflected through its policy and mission statements, culture and ethos of the organization, mottos such as 'Education at your doorstep', 'reaching the unreached' as in IGNOU. Work culture and staff attitudes and their commitment levels affect the quality of services provided.