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Book Review – Supporting Students in Open and Distance Learning

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The Open and Distance Learning (ODL) system has come a long way, emerging as an acceptable mode of extending the outreach of educational opportunities globally, ranging from China with the world's largest population to Tuvalu with a population of only 11,000. In terms of geographic area, Sharma (1997) reported that ODL institutions are operating in countries large and small, the largest being Russia, to Israel, one of the smallest. In terms of population, Costa Rica boasts of one of the smallest populations served by ODL, whereas China's ODL system undoubtedly serves the largest. Owing to the diverse nature of demographic variables in terms of placement, job, socio-economic conditions, open university students often find it inconvenient to be physically present in a classroom setting for face-to-face instruction at stipulated times and places. However, to help overcome barriers of time and space, students studying using the distance mode, nonetheless require periodic guidance as well as counseling on academic and non-academic matters. In addition to print materials, students also require administrative, academic and library support services. Quite simply, effective student support helps to increase student retention (Brindley, 1985; Hara and Kling, 1999) and is clearly an indicator of success for any educational institution.

The central theme of Simpson's book *Supporting Students in Open and Distance Learning* is student support. But the book's author feels that this area did not get its fair due as compared to other dimensions of the ODL system, such as theory, pedagogy, management, organizations, technology, economics and assessment. Backed with more than 25 years in the area of ODL (such as leading UK's Open University Center for Educational Guidance and Student Support), the author presents his ideas and research on supporting students socially and in face-to-face settings; delivering support through technology or at a distance; staff or learning-skills development; and helping student retention. Put simply, Simpson's book provides practical advice for practitioners of ODL to help them develop viable tutor/counselor relationship building skills, as well as insights on how to effectively manage academic or non-academic support, retention and student outcomes. Supplementing the knowledge imparted through his book, Simpson suggests extra resources in the form of books, websites, newsgroups, and journals that all deal with the same theme, student support.

Organized in fourteen chapters, this book covers a broad range of topics, including working definitions of student support, delivery mechanisms, and staff development. Chapter 1 gives readers an idea of some structural models of ODL and definitions of academic and non-academic support. The next chapter provides a background on student support and deals with the practical, theoretical, and moral rationale for the central role of student support in any ODL system. This chapter also offers insights on how to identify a student who is not ready for ODL, and accordingly what sort of support they may require. The third and fourth chapters discuss non-academic and academic supports respectively. In Chapter 3, that author explores various forms of advising activities such as informing, commending, and exploring, then goes on to discuss a variety of skills and personal qualities that a student support adviser should ideally possess. Rogers (1951) suggested that the personal qualities of warmth, empathy, acceptance and openness are of great help. The author further opines that developing listening, selecting and process skills, help to boost and facilitate dialogue between the student and their supporter. Such other forms of non-academic support as assessment (pre-and in-course), advocacy, actions for providing support, and agitation (e.g., for change institutional policy) are also covered in this chapter.

The fourth chapter elaborates on tutorial activities as a form of academic support. Tutorial activities may be initiated by defining the territory of study (the course syllabus), to enriching students' learning experiences by encouraging them to study further and to seek extra knowledge. This chapter also describes various tutor styles, which may range from *didactic* (formal lecture, explaining and authoritarian) to *facilitative* (student oriented and democratic).

The next few chapters deal with delivery of support to students using such means as written instructions, telephone, face-to-face meetings, audio-visual media, and computers and mixed media. The fifth chapter examines the logistics of providing support at a distance through written media (letters, problem-solving pages in magazines, and leaflets), communication via telephone, and audio-visual media, etc. In this context, letters can be used for specific one-to-one communication or they can be in the form of a standard address on a given issue or subject. Leaflets, that are less expensive to produce and distribute, can create a permanency of record and express a given message as a straightforward text without demanding any specific responses from students. Leaflets may also be used for self-assessment texts that encourage students to interact with the media – i.e., by filling out a questionnaire, reading experiential texts, and offering insights of specific nature.

Various advantages and disadvantages of phone support (one-to-one or audio-conference) are also discussed. Chapter 5 provides further information on video-phone calling and voicemail systems, and discusses the ways they can be effective in providing student support. The next chapter is devoted to providing support using the computer. Daily software and hardware are becoming more powerful,

and when coupled with dropping costs, computer technology has now become an inherent component of student support mechanisms. More and more institutions are providing content via the Internet to students scattered around the globe. This chapter takes into consideration issues of access, content quality, and effectiveness of using computers. Discussed in the light of the different modes of computer usage, student support issues consist of online email support, Web-based support, and offline support using media such as CD-ROMs, etc. However, the author offers a word of caution: "What will such new developments do for students?" "Will it help them overcome isolation?" Clearly these are words of caution that make us ponder the potential pitfalls of ODL as a system.

Face-to-face student support, being the most visible, versatile, rich (and often manifest in high job satisfaction amongst support staff), receives special attention within ODL system. Chapter 7 provides a detailed examination of face-to-face student support. Beginning with clarification of the difference of face-to-face support in ODL and other educational settings, this chapter proceeds to by analyze the ways in which face-to-face support can be delivered: one-to-one or in groups, in both academic and non-academic contexts. The author then supports his view by providing some examples and concludes with examples of how to evaluate the effectiveness of different media, and what particular kinds of support may be useful to a student.

After discussing how support may be delivered through various media, in Chapter 8, the author examines issues related to student support outside the institution. The author contends that such outside support can be economical, cost effective, and that many students often give more weight to outside support than to internal support. He also notes that ODL institutions may also influence outside support structures such as students' families, friends, partners, employers, or fellow students studying at the same institution. Clearly these outside support structures have their own influence on student outcomes.

Chapter 9 explains how students can be helped to develop learning skills either individually or in face-to-face groups; what kind of pro-active support can be provided at various stages of course delivery (e.g., early or later pre-course stage, course-start stage, before or after the first assignment, mid-course stage, pre- and post-exam stages, etc.). Activities related to development of reading and writing skills are also explained in this chapter. Development activities for group learning may be scheduled both within a face-to-face session and within a tutorial program.

I read with much interest the next two chapters. Chapter 10, which deals with support for different students (educationally disadvantaged, physically challenged, students with mental health difficulties, prison inmates, older students, and students in other counties), captured my attention immediately because "Special Education" has been a subject, I have taught to my post-graduate M.Ed. students. This chapter brings to light crucial issues of how to extend

support effectively to differently placed (disadvantaged) students. Chapter 11, which focuses on "Student Support and Retention," likewise caught my attention. One month prior to reviewing this book, I presented a similarly themed paper: "Student Retention in Open and Distance Learning System" at the 15th annual Asian Association of Open Universities Conference held in New Delhi on 21-23 February 2002 and organized by the Indira Gandhi National Open University. In this chapter, the author has outlined the general principles of retention that address such questions as: What students to attract and retain? What students are at-risk? What are the probable reasons and stages where students are more likely to dropout? The author suggests measures for retention activities and covers various aspects related to recruitment (getting new students onboard), retaining (keeping the present lot), and reclamation (getting students who bailed-out back onboard). This chapter concludes with different case studies that illustrate some research input and applicable solutions to the issues under investigation.

Theory and practical application – in any discipline or area of research – always goes hand in hand. Theory forms a sound base upon which to situate practical application, which, in turn, paves the way to outcomes that either reinforces or advances theory. Chapter 12 deals with two basic theories of counseling underlying student support: humanistic or person-centered counseling and behavouristic counseling. It concludes with a discussion of the ODL theories underlying student support, and observes ODL vis-à-vis conventional education in terms of its "substituteness" and comparative ratings.

The next chapter examines another important aspect of ODL, namely structure, quality and staff development in student support. In this chapter, the author examines two basic types of ODL organizations (campus-based and distance teaching). Examined on the basis of which kind of student support is provided, institutions can be centralized (i.e., all course production, support or assessment performed from one location) or localized (i.e., course production and administration are centralized, but student support is localized). Structurally the organization can be hierarchical (under a line management) or horizontal (team oriented). It discusses how quality in ODL be appraised, and how quality standards can be established (e.g., through student charters, response mechanisms to student complaints, etc.). Finally, theoretical and practical approaches surrounding staff development are presented and explained through the use of case studies.

In the last chapter "Epilogue – the Future of Student Support in ODL," the author draws a picture of how the world of ODL will look in the future, discussing various developments in student support using computers, the Internet, phone services, etc. The author concludes by emphasizing the centrality of a cost-effective way of retaining students and of a successful student support system, two central elements that humanize ODL systems.

One feature that I liked and would especially like to mention is the clarity and

direct approach the author took in presenting his subject matter. As soon as you turn over the contents page, the story begins. There is no waste of valuable resources (i.e., paper) in the form of routine acknowledgements, the preface, etc., which in some of books I have read, seem to go on for several pages. Instead, the author has maintained his direct communication style throughout the chapters. In sum, the book addresses various academic and non-academic issues and is thus useful for tutors/counselors, administrators, teachers, and to all those who are involved in student support.

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