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## Adapting the Mode of Provision of Student Support Services in Response to Increasing Remote Teaching and Learning in Higher Education

### Abstract:

Student support services play a pivotal role in facilitating student personal development, improvement in academic achievement and reduction in dropout rates. They assist students to navigate through their studies with minimal hurdles while at the same time nurturing and equipping them with competencies that are likely to help them to deal with challenges at both personal and academic levels. Student support services provide students with a sense of belonging to their educational institutions and minimise chances of alienation. This, in turn, contributes towards improving the academic experiences of students. However, the Coronavirus pandemic and consequent adoption of remote teaching by most higher education institutions has made it not practical for the student support services to be rendered in the conventional face-to-face fashion.

This is because students are continuing with their studies from places away from the campuses. However, the sudden change from campus-based to remote teaching and learning is overwhelming to many students. As a result, more students need the support services to help them cope with the new reality of studying in isolation, and facing other challenges such as taking care of sick family members, not having ergonomically proper study spaces, and having no peer motivation for studies. This reality puts pressure on higher education institutions to adapt their mode of provision of student support service with a view to ensuring that such services are also provided to students when they are in off-campus locations. This paper argues that higher education institutions can make use of digital technologies to extend the provision of student support services to online platforms. Such adaptation in the mode of provision of student support services is critical to ensuring that remote teaching and learning are effective in meeting the educational goals of the higher education institutions.

**Keywords and key terms:** Academic success, student support services, online platforms, remote teaching and learning, technology, off-campus

## Introduction

Student support services comprise a range of human and non-human resources that institutions provide to their students to guide them and facilitate their realisation of valuable educational experience. They include library services, accommodation and catering services, sports and recreational services, health services, mail services, student governance and development services, psycho-social and wellness counselling, academic mentoring and advising, job placement, and financial support, to mention a few (Garrison, 1989; Garrison & Baynton, 1987). The significance of student support and guidance is anchored in classic humanist ideology that attaches value to nurturing in education (Smith, 2007). It is concerned with building and maintaining supportive and individual relationships with students, driven by convictions that such relationships support academic learning and promote personal development. Bartram (2009) views the provision of student support services as an extension of pedagogy, and believes that it creates conducive teaching and learning environments for students. Knowles (1990) concurs with this view and posits that student support services make students feel that they belong to higher education institutions which care about them. Such sentiments contribute towards motivating students to work hard and do better in their academic and extra-mural activities.

As expressed by scholars such as Tinto (1975), the primary mission of student support services is to provide developmental opportunities to academically disadvantaged students in order to enhance their levels of engagement with their higher education studies. University students in the contemporary world are faced with a myriad of challenges that make achieving their goals very difficult, and sometimes even impossible. These include secondary and/or high school systems that underprepare them for the rigours of higher education, cultural alienation, language barriers

which make it difficult for students from certain backgrounds to adjust to university life, alcohol and drug abuse and psychological trauma, and anxieties associated with separation from families. These challenges not only limit academic achievements, but also increase the drop-out rates of students from universities. However, student support services empower students with means of coping with the challenges. They therefore make a difference between failure and success in students. Elaborating on the critical role that student support services play in helping students to do well in their studies, Ludwig-Hardman & Dunlap (2003) contend that the provision of quality student support services is the key strategy to improving student success and addressing the challenges of student drop-out and failure to progress within regulation times. They aver that while many factors contribute to attrition, at the top of the list are inadequate levels of interaction and support. They further aver that student support services can improve the quality of students' academic experiences, connect them to their institutions, and help them develop the self-directed learning skills that are necessary to succeed in a learning environment, and to empower them to achieve their learning goals and improve their lives.

In South Africa, specifically, the National Education Policy Act (RSA, 1996) clearly identified quality student support services as vital in fostering the full personal development of each student, and the moral, social, cultural, political and economic development of the nation at large. Student support services play a fundamental role in promoting the holistic development of students towards economically productive and responsible citizenship. The success of students and the consequent improvement in graduation rates can be directly linked to the efficient and effective provision of student support programmes (National Plan for Higher Education, 2001).

It follows from the foregoing that rendering student support services should be considered integral to the provision of quality higher education. It is with

this understanding that the Higher Education Act (RSA, 1997) mandated councils of public universities to develop and implement policies on the provision of student support services, in consultation with students' representative councils.

Traditionally, student support services are provided in person when students are physically present on campuses. However, in the wake of the Coronavirus pandemic, providing support services to students in the traditional way is either not practical, or possible to a limited extent. As institutions increasingly adopt remote teaching to continue with their academic programmes whilst students are not necessarily on campuses, it is essential that there should be a rethink regarding the mode of delivery of support services to students. Students require more of the support services when off-campus where learning without the peer support and motivation of other students becomes a lonely journey. This paper looks at how the delivery of support services could be adapted to respond to the reality of increasing remote teaching in higher education.

## **Alternative mode based on technological developments**

Rapid advances in information technology have reshaped the learning styles of many students in higher education, creating new opportunities for students. These technologies can be used to deliver instruction matched to the learning styles of the new genre of students (Dede, 2005). Thornburg (2000) is of the view that the incorporation of these technologies into educational settings is a gamechanger which has made people to radically shift their views and perceptions about teaching and learning. These technologies enable students to access courses and materials anytime, and from anyplace. They have also enhanced the learning capability of students who find it intimidating to express themselves and ask questions within face-to-face

class environments. If it were not for these technologies, many of introverted and shy students would not be able to make it as high achievers in higher education.

The COVID-19 pandemic has compelled higher education institutions to consider leveraging the use of advances in technology not only in teaching and learning, but also in the provision of student support services. They have had to rethink and adapt the mode of delivery of student support services because the increasing remote teaching and learning arrangements mean that students are not in a position to physically walk to the support service offices on campuses to obtain the services they need (Gill, 2020). Ironically, the COVID-19 pandemic, has increased the level of need of support services by students, as well as the range of support services required by the students. This is because the sudden change from on-campus, face-to-face tuition, to off-campus technology-mediated learning, has been overwhelming to the majority of students who also have to cope with possible Coronavirus-related morbidities and deaths within their families. Some of them find themselves in conditions in which they do not have access to proper study spaces with furniture and other facilities that meet the minimum ergonomic standards. All these make it more desirable that full suites of student support services should be extended to off-campus locations where students find themselves (Gill, 2020).

The modern computer-mediated communication technologies offer the possibility of rendering most of the student support services online (Gill, 2020). For this reason, higher education institutions are urged to make the necessary investments in the relevant technologies so that they can reach and support as many students in need of the support services as possible. Students need to receive ongoing assistance in such areas as planning academic programmes, solving instructional problems, coping with remote teaching and learning, and building skills for career advancement and job hunting (Smith, 2007).

These are in addition to psycho-social counselling and wellness support. With online student support services, students studying remotely will feel less isolated. Instead they will become empowered with the knowledge and understanding that they can access student support at any point in time by simply making a few clicks on their electronic devices. This has a great potential to enhance the students' experience with remote teaching and learning arrangements (Thornburg, 2000).

Online student support service provision systems are therefore increasingly becoming an alternative means of providing services to students who are in off-campus locations (Usun, 2004). While encouraging higher education institutions to adapt the mode of delivery of student support service from face-to-face to online, Nord (2020) emphasises that it is necessary for the institutions to ensure that their online student support service provision systems are purposeful. This means that they should be designed, developed and operated with the sole purpose of providing support services to students, and that they should meet the requirements of the diverse student populations as the beneficiaries.

Van-Heerden (2009) avers that, traditionally, student support services have mostly been remedial and reactive in nature. However, online student support needs to be more proactive and comprehensive in nature given the variety of factors that affect learning away from the physical campuses. The online student support services should be provided in a manner that aims at developing students into holistic persons. This requires that the services should, as far as possible, incorporate the full range of possible interactions that students would ordinarily have with an institution. Where institutions are unable to offer particular services, systems of referring them to other places where they would be able to access the required services should be put in place.

Purposeful online student support service provision systems should be transparent and

accessible. They should provide clear points of contact, clear standards of service, and other relevant information to users and other interested parties. They should be made available on demand according to the needs of the students. This could mean that they are made accessible for 24 hours every day of the week, where possible (Nord, 2020). Barr (2014) argues that universities should provide student support services that are highly visible, with contact information for reaching live human consultants for assistance. Furthermore, the online student support service systems should be responsive. This means that they should be designed, developed and operated with the understanding that students have different needs and should be attended to individually. For example, the systems should offer extra support to underprepared students, to students who are not proficient in the official language of teaching and learning, and those who are generally from disadvantaged family backgrounds. Providing support services to those students helps them cope with the demands of higher education (Barr, 2014).

It is also vitally important that the online student support service provision systems should be interactive. They should encourage and facilitate interaction among and between students, academic staff and student support staff as the purpose of student support is to realise academic success and student retention, while preparing the student for the world of work. They should, at the same time, be self-directed and developmental, to facilitate self-management of processes and development of skills and attitudes necessary for independence and lifelong learning (Ludwig-Hardman & Dunlap, 2003).

Perhaps more importantly, the online student support service provision systems should be integrated. They should demonstrate a high level of cross-functional collaboration that results in students experiencing the diverse range of services as seamless as possible. Higher education institutions should possibly provide



active links to related sites and pages that are focused on student needs (Nord, 2020).

An analysis of the information on student service portfolios and positioning of student support services in South Africa indicate that there is no clear trend in the structuring of academic and non-academic support services. In some institutions academic and non-academic student support services are integrated, and in other institutions they are separated. However, there is an increased tendency towards integrating and aligning the diverse range of student support services (Van-Heerden, 2009). Where there is integration, academic staff should be directly involved in academic-related student support. In the process, they are also likely to be the first to detect depression and other mental health problems among students. In such cases, they should refer the students to specialised units such as student counselling, for support.

Higher education institutions are required to establish and strengthen online student support services units that will gradually integrate all facets of comprehensive student support services in line with the institutional strategies and goals (Smith, 2007). It is also crucial that the online student support service provision systems are open to change, making them able to evolve continuously to accommodate new student populations, educational developments, changes in economic conditions, technological advances, and findings from research and evaluation (Nord, 2020).

## **Developing effective online student support service provision systems**

It is vitally important that the development of online student support service provision systems is presented as a strategic thrust within the strategic plans of the concerned institutions. This would ensure that there is a solid base of support among members of the institutional leadership (Van Heerden, 2009). It would furthermore ensure

closer alignment between the plans for developing the online student support service provision systems, on the one hand, and the missions and strategic directions of institutions, on the other. This is critical because the online student support service provision systems are intended to enable institutions to fulfil their core functions effectively. They should not be developed in isolation from the main activities of institutions (Nord, 2020).

The planning process should be informed by the relevant sets of information on the support service needs of students. Higher education institutions should collect relevant sets of information to be considered for making decisions regarding development and operationalisation of online student support service provision systems as strategic thrusts within the institutions' strategic plans. Some of the relevant information and/or data sets are student support service needs, student characteristics, impact of existing services, reports from academic staff regarding participation of students in academic activities, trends in student demographics, student health and wellness, best practice models and guidelines (Nord, 2020).

The process of developing online student support service provision systems should be driven by cross functional teams whose representation might include individuals from the student services/student affairs (for example, information, advising, career and personal counselling), academic support (for example, academic skills assessment and development, the writing centre), Office of the Registrar (student information systems, admissions, transfer credit, enrolment management), Student Recruitment, Institutional Research, Deans of Faculties, Programme Directors, Information Technology, Financial Aid Officers, and Faculty Representatives (Nord, 2020). It is also important for the higher education institutions to secure buy-in from students by ensuring that student representative structures are represented on the cross-functional teams. The institution may also consider issuing calls for

proposals from students asking for ideas about how the online student support services can be improved and/or made more accessible through innovative application of technology (Nord, 2020). This is extremely important because students are at the receiving end of support services, and therefore they are in a better position to advise institutions on all aspects that would lead to the development and operationalisation of effective and efficient online student support service provision systems. Trowler (2010) avers that engaging students in such a manner enhances their holistic development as well as their performance in academic and extramural activities, while at the same time enhancing the reputation of the concerned higher education institutions.

It is also advisable that higher education institutions develop performance indicators which would be used in assessing the extent to which the online student support service provision systems meet their intended objectives. Examples of the indicators would include percentage improvement in students' satisfaction with the support services, percentage increase in student retention rates, percentage reduction in dropout rates, and percentage increase in graduation rates (Nord, 2020) to mention a few. Monitoring and assessing the extent to which online student support service provision systems meet their goals and objectives would also assist higher education institutions with identifying gaps and areas of improvement. The higher education institutions would then make the necessary plans to fill in the gaps, address the weaknesses, and render more of the student support services that make the most positive differences to student performance and satisfaction (Avramidis & Skidmore, 2004).

## **Holistic provision of online student support services**

As explained by Harrington & Oliver (2000), it is important to adopt a holistic approach in the

provision of online student support services. This means providing student support services at all stages of the student 'life cycle', from the time of application for admission to an institution to the stage of exiting an institution following graduation. Institutions may as well offer specialised support service to their alumni.

Before potential students register with an institution, they should be thoroughly orientated to the institution and the various study options available (Harrington & Oliver, 2000). They need to have access to relevant information about the higher education institution so that they get to know the different qualification offering available to the potential students, the kind of support they can expect, tuition fees and costs applicable to studies leading to specific qualifications, and the options available to attain further qualifications on completion of their first degree studies. An early understanding that the university offers various types of support programmes, for example, career guidance and counselling, academic support, health and well-being, life orientation and financial aid, is also crucial (Student Support Services Framework (SSSF), 2009). This form of orientation should also introduce students to the leadership of the institution and of the student body (Krauth & Carbajal, 1999).

As part of pre-registration student support services, institutions should provide on their web-pages detailed information about the learning programmes and courses they offer, pre-requisites and co-requisite, the delivery mode, tutorials and/or practical sessions, and self-assessment tools for students to evaluate their readiness for university. Providing these sets of information to the potential students contributes positively towards preventing problems after admission and enrolment and thus increasing the chance for student success (Barr, 2014).

Once the students have registered at an institution, and during their first year of study, higher education institutions should pay particular

attention to the needs of first-time and first-generation students (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1993). These groups of students are often at high risk of not being able to cope and/or adjust to the demanding nature of higher education (Horn, 1998; Ishitani, 2003). Most first-generation students have had no access to key educational resources while at the school level. For example, there are students who only got their first-time access to a computer at university. In order for students to be successful, universities ought to provide a firm foundation to first-time entering students as they transition into the higher education environment. An effective method to retain first-time entering students is to implement strong first-year experience programmes intended to meet the students' academic, emotional, and social needs (Astin, 1975, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980, 2005; Tinto, 1975, 1993).

On-course student support services are provided to pipeline students as they undertake their studies. Most of these services are of academic support in nature (Harrington & Oliver, 2000) and thus include academic advising, access to personal tutors, language literacy, mathematics and mathematics literacy support (Smith, 2007), to mention a few. These are meant to assist in enhancing the students' learning experiences.

Non-academic support services are also provided to the pipeline students. This type of support goes beyond the instructional environment, and include life skills coaching, advice on psychosocial and health related issues, practical assistance and opportunities for leadership sport and cultural development and advice on job-hunting (Smith, 2007). In South Africa, the COVID-19 pandemic has made it urgent to prioritise the provision of non-academic student support services which mainly include psycho-social and mental health services for students and staff in post-school education and training institutions (Higher Health, 2020).

Students should also be supported as they exit, and after exiting higher education institutions. The support at this stage should involve the provision of information and guidance on opportunities for studies, job placements and entrepreneurial skills development. Institutions should also implement a tracking system to identify key employment destinations of their graduates (Harrington & Oliver, 2000). The tracking of students will assist higher education institutions with determining the effectiveness of programmes with respect to facilitating access to the labour market or to further studies and inform the future direction of policies (SSSF, 2009).

## Conclusion

Rendering student support services is integral to the provision of higher education by higher education institutions. Such services make students feel and believe that they are cared for by their respective higher education institutions, and it thus helps motivate students to take their studies seriously. Tinto (1975) demonstrated a positive relationship between the provision of widely accessible quality student services and improvement in the retention of students, and overall student success. However, higher education institutions are encouraged to provide quality student support service not only as a critical component of an effective student retention programme, but also as a necessary developmental intervention whose goal is to develop the student in all areas of life. As Ludwig-Hardman & Dunlap (2003) observed, quality student support services help improve the quality of students' academic experiences, connect them to the higher education institutions, and help them develop the self-directed learning skills that are necessary to succeed in their academic and extramural activities.

The COVID-19 crisis has made off-campus learning necessary for the majority of students. This means these students cannot access the on-

site student support service outlets. However, the pandemic has meant that students need the student support services more in order to assist them cope with psycho-social and economic effects of the pandemic which, if left unattended to, would compromise the ability of the students to learn remotely. Fortunately, developments in information communication technologies offer the possibility of providing the student support services remotely. It is for these reasons that higher education institutions are urged to adapt the mode of delivering student services from face-to-face to online.

Higher education institutions that intend to design, develop and operate effective online student support service provision systems should ensure that they make this a strategic thrust within their strategic plans so that there is commitment and support from the top leadership of the concerned institutions. Furthermore, they need to ensure that students are actively involved in the design, development and implementation. It is equally critical that such systems allow for holistic approach to the provision of student support services.

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