

Chapter 7

Supporting Learners with Special Needs in Open and Distance Learning

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ABSTRACT

Open and distance learning (ODL) systems provide learners with a flexible learning environment independent of time and place. However, the advantage of this flexibility may turn out a disadvantage if the learners do not find a solution to problems they may face before, during, and after the learning process. In eliminating this disadvantage, learner support services play an important role. The quality of support services has a direct impact on learner retention and academic success. Especially, for the learners with special needs, the quality of support services has a particular importance. Within this context, in this chapter, the authors address accommodations for learners with special needs in ODL. First, this chapter focuses on support services in ODL, then learners with special needs in ODL and what accommodations learners with special needs require according to their disability type. Finally, the authors exemplify the accommodations for learners with special needs in ODL institutions and offer recommendations.

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INTRODUCTION

In open and distance learning, the learner and instructor are geographically separated from one another. For this reason, learner support, in the distance education context, takes on a different sense of importance (Brindley; Walti & Zavachki-Richter, 2004, p. 9–11). Traditional learners have access to support services for affairs like admission, student enrollment, financial aid, registration, help desk, and library – all of which are main components of the education process – through facilities present on the campus. However, distance learners, since they are not present on the physical campus, encounter limitations in access to support services. Therefore, distance learners can feel alone in the learning process, lose their motivation, and eventually even fail (Lapadula, 2003, p. 119–120). To prevent this, support services offered to traditional learners should also be accessible to distance learners. According to Dirr (1999, as cited in Lapadula, 2003, p. 119-128), there is a need to create a comprehensive support service approach, one that completely addresses the needs of distance learners, rather than simply adjusting the traditional learner services for distance learners, as they possess different characteristics. Dirr also states that this approach will provide a learner-centered environment whereby distance learners will be able to capture the same learning experience as traditional learners, meet the expectations of accreditation authorities, allow institutions to completely benefit from the advantages of the up-to-date technologies and to be more competitive in the highly intense, fluctuating educational environment, all of which will contribute to sustaining learners within the system. Similarly, Floyd and Casey-Powell (2004, p. 57) are of the opinion that traditional learner support services must be redefined by taking the needs of distance learners into consideration.

Institutions offering ODL should initiate the process of planning support services for distance learners by identifying learner needs (Rumble, 2000, p. 223). However, in this planning process, one should not ignore the fact that ODL programs are focused on providing educational opportunities to individuals who are unable to attend traditional education due to various reasons; in other words, the learner group has a heterogeneous structure. One of the groups constituting this structure is learners with special needs. Thus, it would not be useful to organize support services without considering the learner characteristics (Fiege, 2010, p. 13). In the light of the facts mentioned above, it can be concluded that one of the crucial matters should be taken into consideration in designing an online course in ubiquitous learning environment is accommodations for learners with special needs. In this context, the purpose of this chapter is to describe learner support services in ODL and accommodations for learners with special needs in ODL institutions.

Support Services in Open and Distance Learning

Learner support, in the broad sense, is defined in open and distance learning as “besides the design and presentation of course materials, all activities supporting students’ progress in their studies” (Simpson, 2002, p. 6). Brindley et al. (2004, p. 9–11) described learner support as “all services which help learners to gain knowledge and skills and to attain the learning objectives necessary for them to be successful”

There are various studies in the literature that present the importance and necessity of support services. For example, Mills and Ross (1993, as cited in Scheer and Lockee, 2003, p. 178) stressed the necessity of learner support services in forming a high-quality distance education environment. Sewart

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