

## RESEARCH AND PRAGMATISM IN LEARNER SUPPORT

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### INTRODUCTION

In the literature on learner support in open and distance education, description and prescription outweigh empirical enquiry or research. Publications on learner support are often in the form of 'how to do it' guidance or reports of experience. These can have practical value but may be atheoretical, unsubstantiated or lack validity when transferred to other contexts. While many accounts express the conviction that learner support services make a difference to outcomes, demonstrations of the relationships are less easy to find. Learner support has so far received less research attention than other aspects of open and distance learning. Why should this be? There are four possible reasons: learner support may be perceived as a less glamorous activity than some others in open and distance education (support staff often have less power, status and pay); it is often regarded as peripheral to the 'real business' of developing materials; it is an element particularly vulnerable to financial cuts; or it may largely be a pragmatic activity rooted in the lessons of experience.

The last of these possibilities is the focus of this chapter which seeks to examine two questions:

- Is there an established body of research findings on learner support?
- Can decision-making about learner support be based on research findings, or is it essentially a pragmatic activity, contingent on each individual system and context?

### WHAT CAN THE RESEARCH TELL US?

Research evidence on learner support in open and distance education comes from several sources:

- investigations of individual elements of a support system, for example, tutoring by the media (audio-tape, audio-graphics, computer-conferencing, telephone and audioconferencing), correspondence tutoring, counselling, turn-round times for course work;

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- in the wake of research on drop-out or persistence, in terms of the kinds of interventions that institutions and staff can make;
- analyses of roles and characteristics of 'successful' support staff;
- description and analysis of institutional or individual practice;
- studies of learner satisfaction with support services (such as Rashid *et al.*, 1994), now growing in number along with attempts to measure and assure quality.

In the literature on learner support there are few reviews of research. Of these, some take a wider focus than learner support alone and not all distinguish between empirical research and other kinds of writing. Cookson (1989) identifies empirical work on learning at a distance (but not specifically learner support). Wright (1991) focuses on learner support, but does not distinguish between research reports and other kinds. Sweet (1993) reviews the literature (not the research) on student support and some more general aspects of learning. Faced with the disparate array of research and theory on learners and learning at a distance (a broader focus than learner support alone), Gibson (1990) attempted 'to add order where none ... appeared to exist' by using Lewin's (1936) field psychology of learning to provide a theoretical framework for exploring it. A critical review of the research carried out so far on learner support is still needed.

So what *can* we conclude from the research? The following is an attempt to list broad findings:

- learner-institution contact, such as regular contact with support staff, appears to have a positive effect on learner performance and persistence rates;
- factors which correlate positively with course completion rates include the use of course assignments, early submission of the first one, short turn-round times for giving learners feedback, pacing of progress, supplementary audio-tapes or telephone tutorials, favourable working conditions in the learner's context, the quality of learning materials and reminders from tutors to complete work;
- multiple interacting factors (personal, environmental and course variables) are at work in determining learner success; some institutional interventions can assist if appropriately targeted;
- learners value contact with support staff and other learners, though do not always use the services provided; learners most often report a preference for face-to-face tutoring compared to other media, though where face-to-face meetings are not possible, other forms of contact are rated as acceptable or valuable;
- what happens in the early stages of recruitment and enrolment affects later success or failure;
- personal circumstances and lack of time are the most common reasons given for withdrawal from study.

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However, stating these broad conclusions in this way may give some of them more substance than they warrant. Some are based on studies which have produced marginal or equivocal findings. Replication studies are few and frequently produce conflicting findings or fail to confirm the earlier ones. For example, Taylor *et al.*'s (1993) study on student persistence and turn-round times in five institutions in four countries failed to produce generalisable results; it drew attention to the very considerable differences between institutions and their practices, and the difficulties these created for achieving generalisations. Often too narrow a range of research methods are used yet different research approaches can elicit different answers: for example, Garland's (1993) use of an ethnographic approach revealed different reasons for drop-out to those elicited by questionnaires.

## SOME ISSUES

There is enormous variation in learner support systems in open and distance learning. Commonalities may lie in similar goals (such as 'providing interactivity and dialogue', 'personalising a mass system', 'mediating between the materials, the institution and the learners', 'institutional responsiveness to individuals', 'differentiation of support services according to different group and individual needs'), but with diverse ways of achieving them.

## Concept definition

Definitions of learner support vary. To take just three: one describes it as the elements of an open learning system capable of responding to a particular individual learner (Thorpe, 1988, p. 54); another as the support incorporated within the self-learning materials, the learning system and assignment marking (Hui, 1989, p. 131); and a third as 'the requisite student services essential to insure the successful delivery of learning experiences at a distance' (Wright, 1991, p. 59). Some authors include learner support as an integral part of a course, others place it as a supplement. Some include administration and delivery operations in their definitions, others do not. The range of services included in models of learner support also varies; some include pre-entry services, others do not (see Reid, Chapter 25 in this volume). In some cases support services are provided in partnership with other agencies (such as mentor support for teachers in school-based training, or for in-company learners), adding yet another dimension of variation.

Learner support can be viewed as having three components: the *elements* that make up the system, their *configuration*, and the *interaction* between them and the learners, which creates its dynamic. The elements are:

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- personal contact between learners and support agents (people acting in a variety of support roles and with a range of titles), individual or group, face-to-face or via other means;
- peer contact;
- the activity of giving feedback to individuals on their learning;
- additional materials such as handbooks, advice notes or guides;
- study groups and centres, actual or 'virtual' (electronic);
- access to libraries, laboratories, equipment, and communication networks.

Configuration of these elements varies, depending on the requirements of course design, infrastructure of a country, distribution of learners, available resources, and the values and philosophy of the open and distance education provider. Interactivity between the provider and learners differs in level, intensity and function.

The choice and use of these components are based on practicalities as much as on research findings (if not more). For example, though feedback on learning has been identified in at least one empirical study as having beneficial effects on learner progress and course quality (Boondao and Rowley, 1991), some institutions cannot afford to provide it, or see it as a low priority in the face of competing demands, or cannot find enough appropriate people to carry out the tasks, or find the logistics of doing it too difficult given the infrastructure of the country. Reports of practice illustrate that learner support is heavily contingent on local circumstances. Comparisons can be misleading, sometimes based on false assumptions. How far, then, do findings from one context apply elsewhere?

### Diversity and generalisation

Some of the problems in generalising are illustrated by differences in the roles of support staff. In some cases different titles refer to essentially the same kinds of roles; in others the same title encompasses quite different tasks. In some systems, 'tutors' do no marking or commenting on learners' course-work; in others, 'tutors' spend 80–85 per cent of their time allocating grades and designing tests for learners, or yet again, use commenting on assignments as the main means of dialogue with learners. The amount of learner support differs as does the proportion of resources allocated to it. The ratio of learners to tutor varies widely: within my own experience it has ranged from 3:1 to 300:1, a difference of scale which has predictable implications for the tutor's role (see Aalto and Jalava, Chapter 24 in this volume). In some cases learner-support staff are selected by qualification, experience and interview, in others they are elected by the group of learners (Warr, 1992). Usually support staff are paid by the open and distance education provider, but sometimes they are paid by the learners, or do the work unpaid. Do these differences matter? I think they do, in two ways: firstly, they make generalisations unsafe for the unwary and, secondly, they

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have consequences for the motivations of support staff, the meanings they attribute to their roles and work, and for the match between the role as specified by the organisation and as enacted by staff (aspects little researched but of concern to managers).

A similar caution about generalising arises from the myth of 'the learner'. The term has a generic ring about it, but in fact refers to a very wide variety of people with different backgrounds and concerns even within one institution (Evans, 1994). Not all open and distance learners are adults, highly motivated or self-managing. Some are primary school-age children (Forbes and Wood, 1994) or disadvantaged young adults with negative and politicised attitudes to learning (Nonyongo and Ngengebule, 1993), or post-graduate doctors or engineers. Contexts of learning vary from yurt-based, non-formal education for women in the Gobi desert to multinational in-company training by computer networks in Europe.

The research on learner support in open and distance education does not reflect this diversity. Its base is relatively narrow: most published research studies are on formal education, institutionally based, and usually higher education in the more developed countries. Yet cultural contexts have considerable implications for the generalisability of the research findings. Models of 'good practice' developed in western institutions are not always appropriate for other countries and cultures, for example:

... given the fact that the socio-religious tradition is one of seeing the younger generation as necessarily in a position when they should take orders, listen to elders, their individuality or independent thinking or decision-making is not nurtured. Often these traditions and customs run contrary to the basic expectations required of open learners.

(Priyadarshini, 1994, p. 458)

and

while education means spreading awareness and lifting taboos, it does not mean violation of people's customs and traditions. This must be kept in mind while planning a support system.

(*ibid.*, p. 462)

The diversity described points to the situated nature of learner support in three respects: its place in curriculum and course design, the characteristics and milieu of the learners, and the culture and social structures in which it operates (see Koul, Chapter 3 in this volume). What role, then, can research play if concerns are so specific? What are the implications for constructing research agendas?

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**Practical concerns and research agendas**

Some of the difficulties in reconciling practical concerns with broader research agendas are illustrated in a report from a group representing several Asian Open Universities (Sweet, 1993). Practical concerns about learner support were specific, described as 'unique to a particular institution and reflected local conditions, customs and practices' (*ibid.*, p. 97), yet the common research agenda created by them listed broad topics not specifically focused on learner support, for example:

Explore the feasibility of engaging in various entrepreneurial activities.  
Develop models of institutional collaboration.

(Sweet, 1993, p. 99)

This contrasts with the research questions from a single institution, following from an empirical study of science students' needs at the Open Learning Institute (OLI), Hong Kong, for example:

What should be the quantity of provision of tutorials in distance education? Should the attendance of these activities be made compulsory?

(Chan Shui Kin, 1994, p. 53)

As the researcher says, the answers to some of these questions are not simple, needing not just administrative answers but also some which critically examine academic perspectives and educational values. However, answers do need to be sought in the context of the particular institution. For more theory-focused research, some of the questions would need to be re-framed, for example, to become 'in what circumstances should tutorials be compulsory?'

The contrast between these two agendas raises some questions: do research agendas on learner support only become focused when embedded in the context of a particular institution or system? Is applied research only relevant to the institution where conducted?

**RESEARCH, PRAGMATISM AND DEVELOPMENT**

While both research and pragmatism have influenced the development of understanding and practice in supporting learners, research so far seems to have played a weaker role. What does it add up to?

**Is there a theory of learner support?**

Theory is essentially an account of how ideas are related, a complex system for organising the ideas through which we conceptualise some aspect of experience. However, 'a few loosely related propositions about causal

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interconnections do not constitute a theory ... though they may contain elements of one' (Dey, 1993, p. 52). Does this describe the current status of research on learner support? Do the research studies on learner support build convincing models or add up to one or more theories? Not so far, for several reasons. Some of the studies are not linked to any theory. There has been relatively little testing out of propositions, theory or findings from one context to another (Taylor *et al.*'s (1993) study is unusual in this respect). A large number of topics seem to be researched in isolation from previous related work, and do not build on earlier efforts to formulate theoretical explanations. Some studies are single-variable studies resulting in simple explanations for what are clearly complex problems. Sometimes the interpretation of results is over-optimistic. Many studies are descriptive – a necessary part of the research process – but also lack analysis. Some guiding concepts (like 'learner independence' or 'interaction' or 'mediation') are meaningful at one level but not well understood nor well operationalised. 'Learner support' is weakly conceptualised. So, looking at the research on learner support, we cannot claim to have a theory or theories, or even be close to it. But is this too pessimistic a conclusion? What kinds of research are we talking about?

**What counts as research?**

A distinction is often drawn between 'pure' and applied research. 'Pure' research is primarily concerned with advancing knowledge within a particular field rather than finding solutions to practical problems. It asks broader questions at a higher level of generality than applied research, for example 'how do tutors affect students' approaches to learning?' These kinds of broad questions apply across different contexts and countries. Applied research asks more specific questions, about practical problems focusing on particular programmes and groups ('how did those tutors on that course with that kind of role affect those students' approaches to learning?').

Much of the research in open and distance education generally is applied research (including evaluation) – a problem-solving activity of a practical kind. This reflects the need for managers and course developers to get answers to pressing practical questions. Sometimes it is possible to combine such applied research with more theoretical explorations, but not always. Often institutions or project groups are too small to contain the right kind of expertise within their staff or lack the resources or time. However, research of an applied kind is essential for the effective functioning of open and distance education systems – for getting feedback on the learners, the courses and the systems.

Institutions vary widely in the amount of institutional research they do. Some institutions do little and neglect to compile the necessary baseline data

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about learners, support staff and their activities. The following situation at the University of Papua New Guinea is, unfortunately, not unique:

... records are so bereft of information that students who have already matriculated cannot be easily identified, let alone separated, from those who are still in the process ... the problems caused by this lack of information make the other problems which impact on student performance pale in comparison.

(Geissinger and Kaman, 1994, p. 87)

A starting-point for many applied research endeavours on learner support by an institution must be a set of baseline student statistics (Calder, 1994). This can also assist in the monitoring and review of the development process over time and is helpful for testing out organisational myths about what actually happens. Another source of institutional research is that done by practitioners.

### **Practitioner research**

There is a broad spectrum of what can count as research in learner support. It includes more than the studies that appear in journals. The results of systematic enquiry also appear in the form of internal reports, discussion papers, learner guides and supplementary materials, and feed into training materials, staff development workshops and the development of institutional policy and practice. Dissemination of this kind of research tends to remain at the local or institutional level where it can contribute to the development of a culture of research-minded practice, often in the form of action research. Not all those who contribute new knowledge and extend understanding are 'experts' or professional researchers. Many support staff who actively research their own practice would not claim to be so and are often not active in writing up their findings for publication. This kind of practitioner research can have limited visibility outside an institution but considerable influence within it.

Within large institutions, practitioners' work can be unknown or ignored by 'professional' researchers who may in any case work within a different research paradigm. The opposite is the case, too. Researchers' work may not easily reach practitioners, even within the same institution (the case studies in Schüemer (1991) illustrate the difficulties that researchers and evaluators have in disseminating their findings and influencing decision-making); this is yet another dimension in which separate worlds can exist within one institution (see Costello, 1993). One result of this lack of connection or dialectic between practitioners and researchers is missed opportunities: to build productive partnerships, to democratise evaluation, and to make use of a broader range of research approaches, particularly qualitative and participative ones. Some forms of research are more difficult for centrally

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based research staff to do and, because of this, the range of approaches and methodology may become narrowly focused. For example, survey research is more easily managed by centrally based researchers than some qualitative forms of enquiry with distant learners.

Whether 'pure' or applied, any piece of educational research is shaped by some underlying assumptions and researchers of all kinds adopt procedures which follow from them. It is vital for practitioners and researchers alike to know what these are in order to carry out investigations or to assess in any meaningful way the products of such research. This understanding is neither the concern solely of professional researchers nor irrelevant to distance education. This belief leads me to disagree with Coldeway's view that:

The debate over qualitative versus quantitative research in education is best left to those with a keen interest in the philosophy of science. The distinction appears to be far from the needs of distance education research at this time.

(Coldeway, 1988, p. 48)

Research in distance education should not be divorced from the concerns of mainstream educational research, where there is currently lively debate and practical engagement with issues surrounding the use of qualitative and quantitative approaches and their effective combination (Bryman, 1988). To disengage from this kind of debate is to weaken the quality of research in open and distance education.

## CONCLUSIONS

Clear conclusions are difficult to draw from the research on learner support. Some of the most basic questions about learner support – for example, the kind of questions Perraton poses (in Chapter 2 of this volume) about face-to-face study: 'what kind, how much and for what purpose?' – cannot easily be answered by present research findings, at least without so much qualification as to be unhelpful for practical purposes. Answers to questions such as these most often begin with the words 'it depends'. Decision-making in response to them has to take account of a number of different kinds of factors, and trade-off one set of benefits or losses against another. While research can (and should) inform practice, providing services for learners is most often a pragmatic, problem-solving activity enacted in a particular context.

But this is not an argument for abandoning attempts to do research on learner support. Useful development can be generated from within an organisation which actively researches its own practice and which ensures that it knows enough about itself in order to do this. The move from this to generalising across settings is a large one. Building theory would need stronger conceptualisation, more repeated testing of concepts and the creation of organising frameworks or theories. And some speculation: what

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might a theory of learner support look like? In the meantime, research-minded practice is the route to improving learner support.

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