

Identifying areas needing research and evaluation



Unit overview

Research and evaluation are an important part of offering services to learners. However, for a variety of reasons, not the least of which are the time demands of providing services, practitioners often find it difficult to carry out research. In fact, research activities may seem like a luxury that can be ill-afforded. On the other hand, data obtained from research and evaluation studies help us to work more effectively and efficiently by helping us to better understand and articulate the rationale for our work. For example, research and evaluation data from needs analyses and impact studies can help with setting priorities for service. These types of studies need not be time consuming, and can often be built into daily practice, such as record keeping. Practitioners may also be reluctant to engage in research and evaluation because they think it involves sophisticated techniques and specialised knowledge that they do not have. However, research and evaluation need not be complicated or carried out on a grand scale in order to be useful. Practitioners are often in the best position to carry out effective investigations regarding their work. This handbook is intended to help you to engage in research and evaluation by guiding you through the steps necessary to gather data that will be most helpful to you. This first unit of the course will get you started by covering the following topics:

- ▶ **defining tutoring and learner support** – some definitions, the contextual nature of practice, reflecting on your own context
- ▶ **identifying areas, questions, and processes that need investigation and why** – relevance, necessity
- ▶ **defining educational/learner support research and evaluation** – applied v theoretical; why applied research such as evaluation is the most common approach to investigate issues in learner support; how learner support research can be improved
- ▶ **the rationale for doing research on tutoring and learning support** – improving practice, building and testing theory, testing new methods and interventions, building a literature, sharing practice with near and far colleagues, making the case for resources, collaboration and shared understanding with colleagues, challenging assumptions, potential for saving of resources, management decisions about service priorities

- ▶ **the methods most commonly employed** – a look at various kinds of qualitative and quantitative research and how these match to purpose and context
- ▶ **the current state of the field** – some generally agreed upon findings, challenges and limitations: lack of theory, lack of replication, variation in context, non-generalisability, lack of baseline student information.

Learning outcomes

When you have worked through this unit, you should be able to:

- 1 Define tutoring and learner support in your context and draw a representational map of the ways in which you interact with your learners.
- 2 Formulate questions that identify the areas and processes in learner support in your context that need investigation and explain why these are important.
- 3 Define research and evaluation in relation to tutoring and learner support.
- 4 Provide a rationale for doing research on and evaluation of tutoring and learning support; describe how research can improve your practice.
- 5 Identify methods most commonly employed to investigate issues in tutoring and learner support.
- 6 Describe the current state of research and evaluation in tutoring and learner support and the significance of this for your own work.

Defining tutoring and learner support

Tutoring and learner support exist to serve the mission of the educational provider, and in this sense, are contextually bound, reflecting the provider's values and educational philosophy as well as other factors particular to that setting. That being said, there are certain commonalities across most distance education contexts in terms of the role of learner support. Tutoring is generally seen as encompassing a broad range of teaching and coaching activities that help to guide students through a course. Learner support is most often used as a term subsuming all interaction between institutional personnel and students (prospective and registered) intended to assist them in meeting their objectives from the point of first inquiry through graduation and beyond. In this course, the term tutoring is recognised as a form of learner support but will often be addressed separately in recognition of its centrality to interactions with students, and the need to address methods of investigation specific to tutoring as opposed to other types of learner support.

Some terminology

In the literature, the term **student support** is used as frequently as **learner support**. Hence, if you do literature searches, it is important to include both terms. In this course, the term **student** is recognised as being equivalent to **learner** in order to simplify usage. However, it is worth noting that the term **learner** is becoming more commonly used in the distance education literature probably because it implies a more active instrumental role in the learning process than the word **student**.

Tutoring

The tutor has traditionally played a central role in learner support in distance education, mediating between packaged learning materials and the learner, acting as subject matter expert, learning coach and facilitator. Although the learning materials may be seen to be the main source of content for a distance education course, learners still look to the tutor to act as a content expert: to answer questions arising from their study, guide them to other sources of information, to point out the connections between concepts, and perhaps most importantly, to give students feedback about their performance. In addition, tutors are often expected to provide more generic types of support that are characteristic of all good teachers: listening, mentoring, encouraging, guiding, and coaching. Some have argued that the role of the tutor in distance education (Lentell, 2003) has been undervalued, and this is probably true for a number of reasons. In general, the contribution that learner support personnel make to the total learning experience of the student has been undervalued. However, it is well established that even the most well designed packaged materials, whether these are print-based or offered through some other technology, do not in themselves, constitute 'a learning experience' but rather a learning resource. Learners want and need dialogue and feedback, and the tutor is there to provide this important support to learning. One of the main reasons for carrying out research and evaluation in tutoring and learner support is to better understand and articulate the role that these processes play in helping learners successfully navigate their studies.

Learner support

Learner support is the generic name that has been applied to the range of services that has been developed to help learners meet their learning objectives and gain the knowledge and skills that they need in order to be successful in their courses. Examples of these are given in Table 1.

Table 1 Examples of learner support activities

Type of service	Examples
Learner support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • tutoring • teaching
Counselling and advising	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • orientation • learning and study skills assistance, • academic advising • career and personal counselling
Administrative services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • admission and registration • library and information systems • support for peer tutoring • support for alumni organisation

In other words, learner support activities are all those interactive processes that are intended to support and facilitate the learning process. As noted above, these interactions begin at the point of first inquiry and continue through the learner's association with the educational provider, often for a lifetime.

Learner support

All those interactive processes that are intended to support and facilitate the learning process.

Traditionally learner support has been identified as being a completely different set of activities from those associated with course production. However, with the implementation of online learning, this distinction does not always hold and the line between the two sets of activities has become more blurred (cf. Thorpe, 2003). An online course may consist of no more than a syllabus and a reading list, with the content being created through interaction between learners and course facilitator.

Defining your model of learner support

Each educational provider may take a slightly different approach to learner support or offer a somewhat different range of services. The choice of services offered will depend on contextual factors such as values, educational philosophy, resources available, learner characteristics and needs, and types of courses and programmes offered. Research findings, assumptions and theories about learner behaviour, and knowledge arising from practice also play an important role in development of learner support services.

A range of services evolves at each institution with the idea that these will support the institutional mission. For example, an open university might have a mission of making post-secondary education more accessible. However, merely having an open admissions policy without support systems that increase chances for success may only lead to failure for students without the requisite skills. Hence, open universities may emphasise front end services – helping students to decide whether they are adequately prepared, offering remedial courses for those who need help in specific areas (e.g. writing, mathematics), academic counselling for appropriate course choice and so on.

A primary school programme that aims to reach children who might not otherwise attend school might put support in place that involves the parents – with the idea that this will increase likelihood of participation.

Research and evaluation help us to continually reflect on the rationale for our practice as it evolves. An important question to ask is, 'Do services actually accomplish what we have designed them to do?' If there is an assumption involved (e.g. students who participate in an orientation programme will be more likely to complete their first course), this should be tested. Hence, one of the first steps in reflective practice is to make these assumptions, beliefs, and theories explicit.

The starting point is to identify the various types of learner support offered by your institution, when and how students encounter these services, and what impact each service is intended to have.

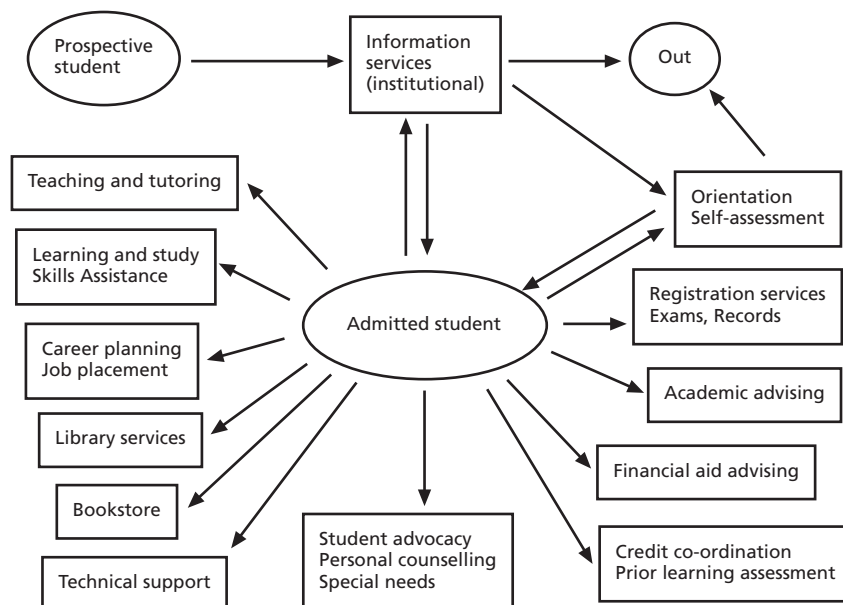
Activity 1 20 mins



Defining learner support in your context

As noted above, there are certain types of learner support that are common to most contexts but each institution develops its own priorities for services and methods of interaction with learners. You will now have the opportunity to think about all the types of learner support (including tutoring) that you have in your context. This activity will help you to reflect on your practice, first individually and then through dialogue with your colleagues:

- 1 First write down the definition of learner support (including tutoring) that best describes these activities in your work setting. Try to do this in a couple of sentences, focusing on **what** learner support is in your context and **why** you do it (the overall goal of learner support).
- 2 Next, using a single sheet of paper, draw a map of your learner support services from first inquiry through to graduation. Indicate which services are available to prospective students and which are available to registered students. Think about your services from a learner's perspective. When do they need help? How and when do they encounter support? Note whether each service is provided to groups and/or one-to-one and the various forms in which each service is available, e.g. in person, by telephone, in writing, through written or recorded information. You might find the following example helpful.



Notes: This map depicts a comprehensive set of support services for the learner from point of first inquiry (prospective student) through the course of studies (admitted student). Modes of communication (telephone, face-to-face, e-mail, video, post/print, etc.) could be added to the diagram. Contact with graduates such as support for alumni organisation might be another element to be considered (Brindley, 2003).

- 3 Think about your particular role in learner support. If you can, highlight your place on the map that you have drawn. Go back to your definition of learner support and describe your role in learner support as succinctly as you can, e.g. 'I am a tutor who interacts with students about the content of their course and about the process of learning. The objective of what I do is to help the student acquire better learning skills while mastering the content of the course.'
- 4 Once you have had the opportunity to reflect on what you do in learner support and why you think it is important, ask a colleague or colleagues about their opinions. You might show them the definition you have developed and the map you have drawn to aid the discussion. Are their views similar? Are there differences of opinion among your colleagues with regard to their beliefs about learner behaviour and what effect different approaches to learner support have on learners? Do any of their views surprise you or make you think differently about your practice? Do you now have a clearer sense than when you started about your overall model of learner support, the individual services that comprise it, and your role in interacting with students? Do you have a better sense of why you do what you do with students, and in the larger picture, the underlying rationale for the choices your institution has made regarding learner support?

The feedback to this activity is at the end of the unit ►

Activity 2 20 mins**Definitions of learner/student support**

The following are six different definitions of learner/student support. Read each of them and try to identify what seem to be the key concepts in learner support.

- 1 'The element of distance education most nearly akin to traditional education: it is the interface between the institution and its students' Sewart (1993, p.12). However, he emphasises the importance of context in defining the specifics of learner support, noting that student support services 'must be constructed in the context of the almost infinite needs of the clients; are dependent on the educational ethos of the region and the institution; are dependent on the dispersal of the student body, elements of resource and the curriculum or product of the course production subsystem; and are dependent on the generic differences in the student body which it has been set up to serve.
- 2 In an extensive review and analysis of the literature concerning learner support in distance education, Sweet (1993) did not provide a specific definition of support services. Rather, Sweet focused on the implications for a changing role of learner support as distance education evolved from an industrial model in which the learner was seen as a passive recipient of packaged knowledge to new more interactive forms of distance learning. In particular, he emphasised the need for more integrated roles for helpers with an explicit goal of student support being to facilitate the intellectual and personal growth of the learner. Based on a view of the student as an active participant in the learning process, Sweet noted that 'support services need to maintain their involvement in the remediation of student problems but, at the same time, they must become more active in promoting the intellectual development and well-being of students. The latter approach suggests that the traditionally distinct advising and tutoring tasks be brought into closer alignment and, in some situations, be combined the single role of an *academic counsellor*. The focus for this altered role is the promotion of interaction among and between students and instructors through either mediated or face-to-face means' (ibid, p. 1).
- 3 Brindley (1995, 112-117) lists a set of goals for learner support: 'development of independent learners, student empowerment, personalization of the learning system, democratisation of the system, and early engagement and connectedness' but is not prescriptive about services offered. Rather, she emphasises the need for institutions to develop responsive learner support systems that reflect the particular elements of their context, in particular their educational philosophy and values and their learners' characteristics and needs. She recommends building a service model based on the particular mission and goals of the institution and informed by research findings. She discusses the elements to be considered when developing learner support services, how services can be more responsive to learner needs, contribute to 'learner persistence' and success, and '...play a key role in the strategic positioning of an institution or distance education service' (ibid, p. 103).
- 4 Tait (2000), who has written extensively on the topic of learner support, emphasises the difference between learner support activities and course production in traditional

distance education, and focuses on the important role that learner support plays in responding in a personal and individual way to learner needs. His definition of ‘student support in open distance learning (ODL)’ is ‘the range of services both for individuals and students in groups which complement the course materials or learning resources that are uniform for all learners, and which are often perceived as the major offering of institutions using ODL. Student support is thus pragmatically distinguished within the totality of activities of an ODL programme, which overall, of course, could be said to have as its primary goal the support of students’. He divides the functions of student support three ways: ‘1) cognitive: supporting and developing learning through the mediation of the standard and uniform elements of course materials and learning resources for individual students; 2) affective: providing an environment which supports students, creates commitment and enhances self-esteem; and 3) systemic: establishing administrative processes and information management systems which are effective, transparent and overall student-friendly’ (ibid p. 288).

- 5 Simpson (2002) defines student support as ‘...all activities beyond the production and delivery of course materials that assist in the progress of students in their studies’. He divides these activities into two broad areas as follows. ‘The first is academic (or tutorial) support – which deals with supporting students with the cognitive, intellectual and knowledge issues of specific courses or sets of courses. This will include, for example, developing general learning skills, numeracy and literacy. The second is non-organisational aspects of their studies.’ In the latter, he includes such Activities as advising, helping students assess their skills, advocacy, and administration (ibid pp. 6-8).
- 6 Thorpe (2003) addresses the need to re-define learner support in an online environment. She moves away from a systems approach to more a functional approach, defining learner support as ‘...all those elements capable of responding to a known learner or group of learners, before, during and after the learning process’ (ibid. p. 201) With this definition, she recognises the interactive nature of learner support as well as the blurring of distinction between learner support and course production in online learning. Rather than trying to define types of support by staff roles, she notes that learners need support in two contexts. The first is in regard to ‘institutional systems (such as knowing what is on offer, how to apply, how to claim a refund, make a payment, choose a course, etc.) before, during and after course study’ and the second is ‘the course they are studying, such as how best to complete a particular assignment, how to contact and work with other students on the course, how to make sense of something in the course materials, whether their contributions to the course conference are relevant, well conceived or otherwise, and so on’. She goes on to note that it is in the latter context particularly that ‘CMC and the web are challenging our concept of learner support’ (ibid p. 203).

The feedback is at the end of the activity ►

Identifying areas for investigation

Setting priorities for research can be challenging, and it is helpful to start by considering your personal interests as a researcher before turning your attention to the needs of the organisation. In order to sustain a research programme over time, particularly under circumstances of limited time and other resources, motivation may need to be fuelled by a strong personal interest in the subject area. This is why you will often see the same researcher's name appearing in the literature on a particular topic year after year (cf. Tinto and dropout). What questions are of most interest to you? What topics continually crop up in conversation with colleagues? What areas of practice do you feel most strongly about? Do you hold some passionate beliefs about learners that you would like to pursue? These are all helpful questions in thinking about a line of research that you might sustain over time by collecting data and exploring various aspects of related practice.

Study tip



Return to the definitions you created of learner support and your role, and the one page map you made of the model of learner support in your institution or organisation. Make any necessary changes based on your reflections, readings, and dialogue with colleagues. Keep this as a reference.

Institutional goals are obviously of importance in setting priorities for research and evaluation. Broad questions might be as follows: What is the institutional mission? How do you think learner support contributes to this mission? What are short and longer term needs for information related to tutoring and learner support in this institution or organisation?

Institutional goals and the learner support practices that are designed to meet these goals provide a basis for thinking about research and evaluation. As noted above, whether explicit or not, there are always assumptions, beliefs, and theories underlying practice. Practitioner research is most often aimed at investigating these, whether by stepping back and collecting data from which to build a theory (e.g. dropout research), or by evaluating or experimenting with practice through testing the assumptions or theories upon which it is based. Priorities for this type of examination often spring from speculation about the effect institutional behaviour will have on learner behaviour; perceived problems or challenges, a change in contextual factors, or learner behaviour that is observed but not understood. For example, all the following are examples of situations that might initiate a piece of research:

- ▶ attendance at face-to-face tutorials suddenly declines
- ▶ there is a persistent problem of early dropout from courses

- ▶ the request for extension of time limits on courses is so high that it causes an unmanageable demand on tutor time
- ▶ some courses have much higher completion rates than others
- ▶ there is steady shift in demographics of the student body
- ▶ there is a change in the financial situation of the organisation that results in the need to cut services or change the way in which they are offered in order to save money
- ▶ some students complete courses much more quickly than others
- ▶ a group of students approaches the institution to ask if they can start a peer tutoring network
- ▶ a colleague attends a conference or workshop and brings back a new idea for learner support
- ▶ the current practice of giving an unlimited number of time extensions on courses is being questioned.

Finding the right question(s)

When you start to think about the number of questions to be answered, it appears that the possibilities for investigation are infinite (and they probably are). A common mistake in research is to be too ambitious, for example, designing instruments for data collection that are far too lengthy and result in collecting data that are never used. This usually stems from over enthusiasm and a failure to check on whether the research is both necessary and useful. When identifying areas for research, it is important to brainstorm so that important and promising areas are not missed but then it is also important to narrow these down. It is important to think about what areas of investigation have the best possibility for making a difference through developing new practices or making changes to current practice, or in some other concrete way such as informing decisions about resource allocation. In other words, what questions do you need answered in order to continue to develop more effective learning environments for your students?

Determining a research agenda and priorities is not always as straightforward as defining the areas that need investigation. Occasionally, there are institutional or stakeholder pressures to make particular areas a priority for research. These priorities may or may not be compatible with the areas that you determine are important for research. Also, some research funders have narrow guidelines about acceptable areas for study. With experience, you can often find ways to define your research so that it meets criteria set by others even when it does not initially appear that there is a match. Having a clear set of research priorities determined by you and your colleagues will help you to navigate these situations.

Another consideration in identifying areas for investigation is the relevance and/or intended outcome of the research in a larger context. This does not mean that small scale studies that are intended to improve practice in a subscribed area of practice should not get priority. However, if you think about the relevance of the research at the time of choosing areas for investigation, you might formulate your question in such a way that the data generated will be of use to a wider audience. Think about how this research could be used by you, your department, the institution as a whole, one or more stakeholders (e.g. funding agencies), and/or the wider community of practitioners in your country and abroad. As a practitioner, you probably read learner support literature and attend workshops and conferences on topics of interest. What investigations have the greatest possibility for impact? Will the investigations under consideration contribute to existing research and/or move theory and/or practice forward? The question of how your investigation might fit into the larger world of research will be addressed further as the course progresses, in particular, in Unit 2, when literature reviews are discussed.

Activity 3 20 mins



Identifying areas needing research and evaluation in your practice

In this activity, you will identify your areas of greatest interest to investigate. At this stage you do not need to develop specific questions – this will come later. For now, work through the issues as follows:

- 1 List your areas of personal interest for research and evaluation. These may be exploratory in nature such as trying to understand learner behaviour better without a specific theory in mind, a test of a theory or an assumption, an evaluation of current practice, or an experiment with new methods. What would you like to know more about that would help with your practice?
- 2 List areas of research that you think are most pressing for the institution or organisation in which you practice. What would make the most difference in terms of progress toward goals? (e.g. a breakthrough in improving completion rates, a more cost-effective tutoring system, an increase in the number of satisfied students who recommend the institution to others; availability of data on employment of graduates).
- 3 Score your list of areas on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 high and 10 low, on each of the following criteria:
 - your own interests
 - possibility for improving your practice
 - making a positive difference to the institution
 - and contribution to practice in the larger context of distance education.

If you want to be more precise, you can weight each of the criteria according to which you think is most important.

The feedback to this activity is at the end of the unit ►

Study tip

Rewrite your list of areas for investigation in the order in which you ranked them. As you review these, make note of any thoughts you have about specific questions to be answered. Keep the list for future reference.

Defining research and evaluation in relation to tutoring and learner support

Pure versus applied research

There are many different types of research that can be used to explore questions in learner support. One of the most common ways to classify research is to use the two broad categories of **basic** or **pure research** and **applied research**.

Basic or pure educational research is concerned with gaining a better understanding of the structures or processes involved in teaching and learning without necessarily having a particular problem in mind. The influence of this type of research on change in practice is cumulative in nature (as understanding grows) and may evolve very slowly. An example of data from pure research that has had an influence on practice is the increasing sophistication with which we understand the process of dropout. The most frequent reason given by students for dropping out (particularly from retrospective studies that simply asked dropouts the reason for their decision) is a change in personal circumstances or lack of time. However, we no longer take this at face value. Through increasingly sophisticated methods of inquiry and statistical analysis, we have come to understand much better the complex nature of a student's decision to dropout. A decision to dropout or persist is dependent on the interaction among a wide variety of variables related to the institution, the context, and the individual learner. For example, a student who has been educationally disadvantaged and lacks academic skills and confidence might still make a decision to persist if she has good support from family members and encouragement and practical help from a tutor. The same student without support systems might well make a decision to dropout. Hence, when designing support programmes such as orientation for new students, we now take into account multiple variables regarding the student and their interactions with their environment and with the institution.

Applied research is also concerned with the structures and processes involved in teaching and learning but investigations take place in response to specific challenges or problems faced by practitioners and administrators in a particular context. The most common types of applied research involve testing or evaluating the effectiveness of programmes or services or particular features of these with the goal of collecting information that will aid decision-

making. Applied research can usually have a much quicker and more direct impact on practice than basic research.

Robinson (1995) characterises the difference between pure and applied research as follows:

“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?”) (ibid, p. 5)

Evaluation: A special kind of applied research

Although, as Robinson points out, ‘There is a broad spectrum of what can count as research in learner support’ (1995, p. 5), generally, investigations into tutoring and learner support fall into the category of applied research.

Evaluation, which is concerned with making judgements about the value of programmes, materials, or methods, is a specialised type of applied research that has particular usefulness for practitioners, and warrants special attention in this handbook. Evaluation can be classified into four main areas or types of investigation:

- 1 needs assessment (planning)
- 2 formative (process)
- 3 summative (outcome)
- 4 efficiency (cost-benefit)

Effective evaluation in learner support will include using a combination of these four types of investigation.

An assessment of needs is critical to effective programme planning and is an important step in evaluating how well services meet needs as well as identifying unmet needs. Formative evaluation takes place once a programme or service is in process and is concerned with whether it is being carried out as designed (e.g. Are tutors doing what they have been trained to do?), serves the target population (e.g. Are learners using the tutoring service?), and operates as expected (e.g. Are regional offices operating as planned?). Summative or outcome evaluation focuses on the impact of a service or programme, looking for evidence of both expected and unexpected outcomes (e.g. Do learners who participate in orientation programmes behave any differently than those who do not: higher completion rates, higher levels of satisfaction, higher levels of re-enrolment?). Efficiency or cost-benefit studies are becoming more common in education, and learner support is no exception. Questions that these studies address relate to whether funding was

spent for the intended purpose, and whether outcomes were achieved at a reasonable cost, especially when compared to other methods of reaching the same goals (e.g. How do different methods of tutor provision compare in terms of cost-benefit?). The greatest challenge in these studies is attaching monetary value to outcomes achieved.

Practitioners usually have immediate needs for knowledge about practice that require a practical approach to investigation. Although results may be published in a journal, it is just as likely that results will be disseminated internally to the organisation in the form of a report or discussion paper, or find their way into practice through materials for staff training (Robinson, 1995) or learner support.

Improving research and evaluation in learner support

The current state of research and evaluation in learner support, characterised as it is by small-scale studies carried out in specific settings with results that may only be accessible to a limited audience, has serious limitations and does not easily lend itself to theory building. However, that being said, over time, patterns and similarities can emerge from such investigations that provide valuable insight for practice. This process of building a research and theory base for learner support will be aided by practitioner attention to the following:

► **Development of baseline student data collection standards.**

Ensuring that sufficient student data is collected and recorded in retrievable form during processes as such admission and registration to ensure that basic research functions such as demographic comparisons and longitudinal student performance tracking can be carried out.

► **Precise measurement.** Whenever possible, using standardised measurement tools for variables (e.g. student satisfaction, achievement). If an in-house measure must be developed, its construction process and reliability/validity assessment should be identified (we will say more on this when methodology is discussed in greater detail).

► **Generalisability.** Often applied studies (e.g. those designed to investigate aspects of practice) are not easily generalizable beyond the confines of the setting where they were carried out. However, some attention given to sampling and other techniques can give better generalisability from a limited situation to the larger context.

► **Research control.** Applied studies that investigate effects of certain kinds of interactions or interventions with students require attention to techniques to control for extraneous variables that can affect outcomes. Single variable studies that attempt to account for a change by looking at only one variable (e.g. a method of tutoring) can result in a simplistic explanation that cannot account for a complex process such as improvement in student satisfaction.

- **Replication.** One of the most important steps in acquiring understanding and hence, improving practice is being able to replicate studies in different contexts. Replication is facilitated by use of standardised measures, carefully controlling for extraneous variables to the extent possible, and making results available to others.
- **Theory building.** A theory, quite simply, is a way to organise ideas to explain behavioural or physical events. The more powerful the theory, the more events it can explain. In general, learner support research tends to lack a strong theoretical base whereas research into tutoring often draws on educational theory. Theories from other disciplines such as psychology, sociology, and anthropology are often useful sources of theory for understanding learner behaviour and developing learner support programmes. Studies that are theory based lend themselves to better conceptualisation, analysis, and framework building over time. As well, it is more likely that theory based studies will be replicated and contribute to the larger body of understanding of practice. For example, Tinto (1975) developed one of the earliest comprehensive theories of educational dropout based on Durkheim's (1961) theory of suicide. Many replications of Tinto's studies have been carried out, and current models of dropout and programmes to increase student retention are still building on this early work.

These considerations are not meant to be daunting, but rather to improve both research and practice through what can be a fairly straightforward process with checklists along the way to ensure that even the smallest of studies will be of maximum benefit. As you work through the units in this handbook, you will see that studies do not have to be complex in design in order to meet these requirements.

Activity 4 30 mins



Defining research and evaluation

Think about the areas for research that you have already identified and choose one area to explore as follows:

- 1 State a question that would address this research area from a pure research perspective. (e.g. What factors are associated with institutional loyalty as measured by intention to re-enrol and desire to recommend the institution to others?)
- 2 State two or three questions (possibly representing different studies) that would address the same research area from an applied research perspective. (e.g. Does institution initiated contact in the form of early contact by the tutor in the first course contribute to institutional loyalty? Does use of academic advising services correlate with institutional loyalty? Are those students who have a greater tendency toward institutional loyalty more likely to complete a full course of studies over time?)

- 3 Think about the results that you might get from studies that addressed the questions that you have just developed. Answer the following questions: Which study or studies would most likely yield the most immediate and useful information for your practice?

The feedback to this activity is at the end of the unit ►

A final comment

Before we leave our discussion of 'what is research?', we shall take a look at the ideas of Hadley and Mitchell (1995) on this topic.

Reading



What is research?

Hadley and Mitchell (1995), writing for practitioners in counselling, offer the following answer to the question, 'What is research?':

'Any discussion of what research is, whether among researchers or people without research training, will reveal as many answers to this question as there are people to discuss it. How, then, is research different from any other sphere of human activity? And how can we define it?' (p. 3). There are four principles that are usually part of any definition of research. These help us to think about the unique characteristics of research as a unique activity:

- 1 The purpose of the research is to increase knowledge. Researchers seek to increase knowledge by gathering data to answer questions.
- 2 Researchers investigate publicly observable verifiable phenomena with procedures that can be repeated given like conditions.
- 3 Research questions are formulated carefully so that it is clear what sort of data will satisfactorily answer them.
- 4 Research data are collected, analysed, and interpreted systematically to maximise confidence in the answers they provide. (ibid, p. 8)

They note that 'Most writers about the scientific method include the four principles we listed, but some controversy surround a fifth idea: that *the questions asked are drawn systematically from a body of theory, and the answers obtained support, expand, or refine that body of theory*' (ibid, p. 9). Although, as noted above, it is important, when appropriate, to relate research and evaluation to theory, sometimes there are important questions to be answered for which there is no related theory. Hadley and Smith note that in practitioner research, questions are often drawn from many sources including 'theory, practitioners' experience, and agencies' accountability for their service programmes' (ibid, p.10).

They focus on the first four principles in their definition of research, saying 'Using these ideas as a base, we offer the following definition of research: Research is an activity conducted to increase knowledge by systematically collecting, analysing, and interpreting data to answer carefully formulated questions about publicly observed phenomena' (ibid, p. 4).

They note that practitioners often do research on the unobservable, such as attitudes and emotions, (e.g. feelings about a particular service, attitudes toward school) but that we use methods such as attitude surveys to translate the unobservable to the observable.

Study tip

Looking at research studies with a critical eye is a very good way of improving your own approach to investigation.

Look through the proceedings from a conference such as those from the International Council on Distance Education or pick up a journal such as Open Learning, Distance Education, International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning, or Journal of Distance Education.

Find a short article describing a research study and skim it.

Think about the type of research described and how useful it might be in your setting. Is the study based on a particular theory?

Does it incorporate the principles discussed above?

In what ways might the study be improved if you were replicating it?

Rationale: Why do research and evaluation?

There are a great many reasons why practitioners do not do research and evaluation, and you are probably aware of most of these! Practitioners are often on the front line of service to learners, and short of time. Research requires reflection, an activity that can seem like a frill in the context of demands for service that are often time sensitive – such as returning calls from students, marking papers, or providing course choice advice prior to registration deadlines. Practitioners are often multi-tasking already, covering a number of different service areas with students. Adding yet another task might seem like a burden. Practitioners usually work in contexts that are short of resources: staff, money, technology, and other infrastructure elements are usually spread thinly. Using resources for research and evaluation can seem questionable when compared to other shorter-term needs. Practitioners are often generalists as opposed to specialists, and may not think that they have the skills or background to do research. In the light of these constraints, how can we make a sound and convincing argument for the value and necessity of doing research and evaluation as part of practice?

The most compelling reason for doing research is to gain a deeper understanding of practice. Research and evaluation contribute meaning and substance to practice and hence, make it more rewarding. Although it may be challenging initially to include research and evaluation as a regular part of your activities, the benefits of doing so are many:

- **The need to challenge belief and assumptions.** As already discussed, whether or not they are explicit, practice is based on beliefs, assumptions, and theories about what impact tutoring and other learner support activities have on learners, all of which need to be continually challenged. Data from research and evaluation can provide us with concrete measures of progress toward goal attainment. For example, if tutoring is designed to help students develop certain kinds of learning

skills, should we not evaluate whether this is being accomplished, and measures of progress toward goal attainment. For example, if tutoring is designed to help students to what extent does it achieve this?

- ▶ **Research and evaluation data are valuable to planning and priority setting.** If you have a better sense of which activities have the greatest positive impact on students, you can use resources (including your time) more effectively. Information (such as which students are at greatest risk of dropping out or when the most critical period is for dropout) helps you to set priorities and plan the timing of interventions.
- ▶ **Research and evaluation data can help provide a rationale for resource allocation.** There is often a tension between course development, which contributes to programme and enrolment growth, and learner support which improves quality of the learning experience. It is important to be able to quantify the benefits of investing in learner support, and research data can help you to do this.
- ▶ **Research and evaluation can provide valuable information about learner characteristics** which will inform development of appropriate support. Data may also identify students with unmet needs such as older learners or disabled learners.
- ▶ **Research and evaluation can inform you about the need for new competencies among staff or a change in procedures.** If a large number of students report difficulties with a particular structure or process, it deserves examination.
- ▶ **Research and evaluation can contribute to better working relationships** within an organisation because they aid understanding and promote evidence-based practice. Rationale for practice can be better articulated and supported with accurate information.
- ▶ **Research and evaluation makes it possible for the practitioner to contribute to and benefit from advancements in the field** through sharing practice and theory with colleagues. Often, research is better when done by a team, and being part of team can provide support for research activities to individual practitioners. Once you start doing research and evaluation, you will find many ways to collaborate with colleagues in your own organisation and elsewhere that will build your curiosity and enthusiasm. You can also consider publishing the results of your work or presenting them at a workshop or conference.

Activity 5 20 mins



Rationale for research and evaluation

This activity will help you to think about why **you** wish to engage in research.

- 1 Think about the reasons why you might engage in research and evaluation. For example, what information would you like to have about your practice that you do not currently have, and what would it enable you to do?
- 2 Write down your most important reasons for doing research.
- 3 Now think about and write down some of the barriers to you doing research.

You can come back to this list later as you work through this course, and see if these factors are still valid, and if so, what you can do to reduce their effect.

The feedback to this activity is at the end of the unit ►

Reasons for engaging in research

You might like to compare your response to Activity 5 with the ideas put forward by Hadley and Mitchell (1995) in this next reading.

Reading



Why do research?

Hadley and Mitchell (1995) list a number of reasons for practitioners to engage in research including the ones below. Although they are speaking specifically about counselling practice, their points are equally applicable to tutoring and other areas of learner support practice:

- research offers the best available means for counsellors to know which kinds of interventions are most effective and which do not merit continued use with certain kinds of clients. Research reduces the likelihood that ineffective interventions will be continued based on a belief that they *might* work.
- the experience of serving clients yields ideas for research that are more relevant to counselling than they would be if developed without this experience.
- conducting research requires counsellors to keep abreast of related literature more than practice alone does; this knowledge benefits both research and practice.
- a counsellor who conducts research can put the findings immediately into practice; research reports written by others often reach readers after a long delay.
- conducting research encourages counsellors to think rigorously. In turn, such thinking ... encourages counsellors to conduct service activities so that their results are clearly demonstrable.
- being skilled at conducting research helps counsellors make good decisions about whether existing knowledge is sufficient for the tasks at hand or whether new research needs to be carried out.
- conducting research and publishing in the professional literature expands opportunities for two-way communication with other scientist-practitioners, thus enriching the professional knowledge base of all participants in the counselor's network.
- discovering new knowledge is fun. It is exhilarating to have an idea for a new way to work with clients, test it out, and see the data confirm its validity. Further, researchers are often fascinated when unanticipated features are discovered in the data, such as cultural or gender differences. This exhilaration and fascination energise both research and counselling activities (ibid, pp. 6-7).

Research and evaluation methods

There are many different ways of doing research. In the next unit you will consider how to choose a method that best fits your research question and the type of data that you would like to collect. Here we will discuss research methods in more general terms.

It is helpful to start by thinking about the purpose of your investigation by asking questions:

- ▶ Do you want to better understand a particular process such as motivation?
- ▶ Do you want to know whether to invest in face-to-face tutorials as an adjunct to written communication between learner and tutor?
- ▶ Would you like to know more about who your learners are and how they experience interaction with your institution or organisation?
- ▶ Are you anxious to find out what students think about the new orientation programme that you are planning for this new term?
- ▶ Would you like to be better able to articulate the impact of tutoring on learning outcomes?
- ▶ Hadley and Mitchell talk about the 'mission' of a research project:

'A project's mission contains more than its research questions. ... We introduce the mission concept to emphasise the fact that every project has not only one or more questions the researcher is seeking to answer but also reasons (usually several) why answers to these questions are being sought. These reasons and the research questions together make up the project's mission, and will help determine the most appropriate method of investigation.' (1995, p.17)

Study tip



Keep the results of your activities (diagrams, lists, notes) together in a binder. Use page tabs to keep them organised and easy to access. Revisit these pages on a regular basis to reflect on your thoughts as you progress through the course.

Purpose of research and evaluation

To simplify, you might begin by thinking about research and evaluation as having two basic purposes:

- 1 description, and
- 2 exploration of the relationship between or among variables.

A **variable** is a characteristic (e.g. of people, environments, physical objects, behaviour, tasks) that can be categorised or measured. Examples include gender, age, teaching method, geographical location, or amount of time spent studying.

Some variables are **theoretical constructs** such as intelligence or social support. We cannot necessarily directly observe these but have developed ways to measure them.

Variable

A variable is a characteristic that can be categorised or measured such as gender, age, teaching method, geographical location, or amount of time spent studying.

Description

Sometimes we want to be able to better describe a group, a process, an institution or other educational phenomena by using one or more variables to categorising it. For example, we might want to find out how many open universities have special needs programmes for disabled students and what services are offered by these. Or we might want to be able to categorise our learners by age, gender, income, geographical location, and previous educational level achieved.

Relationship between variables

In investigating relationships, we are usually concerned with seeing what effect manipulating a particular variable (such as an aspect of teaching) might have on another variable (such as course completions). For example, we might want to know the effect on course completions of adding an interactive radio programme to a course. In this case, we choose a group (sample) and then see if their response to a variable (course completion) is correlated with their response to another variable (interactive radio).

Sometimes an exploratory study to improve description is a good first step before investigating the relationship among variables. For example, you may want to know more about your learners' characteristics (e.g. Is there any pattern that tells you about which ones are more likely to complete courses? What are students' expectations when they start to study? What factors do they perceive as contributing to or detracting from their satisfaction and success? What are their opinions of their current experience with your institution?). On the other hand, you may already have this kind of information, and are anxious to either experiment with some new practices or evaluate current ones. Whether the purpose of the investigation is description or exploration of relationships, there are choices to be made about methods of inquiry.

Quantitative and qualitative research

Research methodology is usually categorised into two broad types of inquiry: **qualitative** and **quantitative**. It is important to discuss these in relation to the purpose of the investigation and the type of data required. Qualitative research tends to be concerned with exploring phenomena through getting accurate descriptions, defining variables more clearly, trying to understand

experience, and looking for meaning. Quantitative research is concerned with categorization and accurate measurement of pre-specified and clearly defined variables.

For example, a qualitative approach to better understanding a tutor's experience of working with learners might involve in-depth interviews with a few tutors, recording exactly what they say, and then looking for patterns of similarity which emerge from what they tell you. A quantitative approach might consist of a short survey of many tutors that asks them to endorse specific statements that match their experience. Their responses can then be quantified in terms of frequency of endorsed statements (e.g. 46% of tutors say that...). Both types of study have the potential to yield useful information.

Qualitative research

The qualitative study will tend to yield a rich set of data (the scripts of the interviews), and being a verbatim account, it will accurately (albeit subjectively) reflect the experience of the particular tutors interviewed. As such, the qualitative approach is often said to have greater validity than a quantitative method, that is, it addresses what the study purports to address: the experience of these particular tutors. The qualitative approach generally relies less on strict design and structure than the quantitative approach, and is less concerned with reliability and generalisability and more concerned with gaining depth of understanding of the phenomena being studied.

The researcher may to some extent 'quantify' the data by searching for patterns and themes in the tutors' experience, and in this sense, these methods are heavily reliant on the researcher to find and articulate the meaning in the data.

Qualitative research

Tends to be concerned with exploring phenomena through getting accurate descriptions, defining variables more clearly, trying to understand experience, and looking for meaning.

Quantitative research

The quantitative approach (in this example, the survey of a large number of tutors), with its structured design and large sample can yield a great deal of useful information and is relatively easy to carry out. The collected data are not difficult to analyse (usually a matter of counting and calculating), and unlike qualitative research, this type of study relies less on the researcher's ability to interpret the results (has greater objectivity).

Quantitative research

Is concerned with categorization and accurate measurement of pre-specified and clearly defined variables.

Further, the quantitative study, with its strict protocols is more easily replicated. In other words, given like circumstances, the same survey is more likely to yield similar results at another time and place (have greater reliability) than the in-depth interviews. However, the gain in objectivity and reliability comes with a loss of nuance and personal meaning. The information gained from the quantitative method is more of a broad brush approach as opposed to the detailed painting of the qualitative approach. For example, from the survey, we might find out what percentage of tutors believe they need further training, but not what it is like to tutor if you feel unsure of your skills.

Qualitative versus quantitative

There are advantages and disadvantages to both approaches to research. Hence, both qualitative and quantitative data are often collected as part of the same study. For example, in student satisfaction surveys, ratings are usually collected on specified variables such as course materials, contact with tutor, etc. The addition of some open-ended questions can help explain and add meaning to the numerical ratings. Similarly, follow-up interviews with subjects who have participated in a programme evaluation or an experimental study can be used to collect descriptive information that gives depth and aids understanding of the quantitative data.

The purpose of your study will be the main determinate of the methods you use. As noted above, it is sometimes important to do a preliminary investigation that yields descriptive information. Sometimes there is not enough information about a particular phenomenon to proceed to a quantitative study. An exploratory study using qualitative methods can be an important step toward identification of variables and possibly relationships among variables to be investigated in a subsequent study. In the example above, the in-depth interviews with tutors might turn up a pattern of concern about lack of training, a reluctance to take on a personal counselling role, or dissatisfaction with not being able to adapt course materials to local contexts.

Within the broad categories of qualitative and quantitative research, there are many specific methods that can be employed to examine learner support issues. These include experiments, various types of observation, gathering data through surveys or interviews, and comparison studies. These will be touched upon in the next unit, as will the factors that will influence your choices.

Activity 6 20 mins



Purpose of research

Return to the notes you made about areas for investigation in your work setting, and the research questions you wrote. Think about these in terms of 'a research mission'. Choose a particular area for investigation to use in this activity.

- 1 List the reasons for investigating this area of your work. Try to state these as clearly as possible. (e.g. My institution needs to improve..., My institution needs to make a decision about..., I need to better understand....so that I can...)
- 2 Review the research questions that you wrote down earlier and think about whether these will give you the information you seek.
- 3 Write any additional questions that occur to you now.
- 4 Think about whether you might want to take a quantitative or qualitative approach to the research, or perhaps a combination of the two. What is the nature of the information you are seeking and what kind of approach is most likely to yield this kind

of data? Do you need to start with some exploratory research to better understand and define the area of investigation?

- 5 Write down what approach you think is most appropriate for your investigation, and if you have some ideas about specific methods of inquiry (e.g. survey, experiment, programme evaluation), make a note of these.
- 6 Explain why you think the approach you have identified is most appropriate.

The feedback to this activity is at the end of the unit ►

Readings on qualitative and quantitative research

The following readings offer some further thoughts on the nature of qualitative research.

Reading



Qualitative and quantitative research

Hadley and Mitchell offer the following description of qualitative research:

‘The core idea of qualitative research is that projects do not need to collect data in numerical form or use quantities or numbers to analyse the data. ... As a descriptor for research, qualitative represents a matter of emphasis rather than a separate and distinct category. Ideas and methods have been drawn from anthropology (ethnographic field methods), sociology (participant observation), and phenomenology (studying people’s verbal reports of internal experience). Many case studies are qualitative nature. ..., we offer the following descriptions of qualitative research. We emphasise that these are typical features, which are not present in every instance.

Qualitative research missions:

- are descriptive
- are exploratory
- concern people’s internal experiences
- include general rather than specific research questions, and
- are vague at first and evolve as data are collected and analysed.’ (1995, *ibid*, p. 49)

Coolican discusses quantification and qualitative experience as follows:

‘Quantification means to measure on some numerical basis, if only frequency. Whenever we count or categorise, we quantify. Separating people according to astrological sign is quantification. So is giving a grade to an essay.

A qualitative approach, by contrast, emphasises meaning, experiences (often verbally described), descriptions and so on. Raw data will exactly what people have said (in interview or recorded conversation) or a description of what has been observed. Qualitative data can be later quantified to some extent but a ‘qualitative approach’ tends to value the data as qualitative.

It is rather like the difference between counting the shapes and colours of a pile of sweets as against feeling them, playing with them, eating them. Or counting sunsets rather than appreciating them. The difference between each one may be somehow quantifiable but

such measurements will not convey the importance and the special impact of some over others.' (1990, p. 37)

Current state of the field

There is a growing body of literature in learner support in distance education that is quite helpful to the practitioner, particularly in gaining a better understanding of the field, its history and evolution, current practice in different parts of the world, and challenges. However, this literature is largely descriptive in nature, and is not based on a sustained and organised body of research. With the exception of research concerning dropout and retention, published research studies addressing learner support tend to be one time efforts aimed at a very specific situation in a particular context. These types of studies make a contribution to understanding and practice, but can quickly become dated or lost altogether when they are not replicated or used as a basis for further investigation.

As noted earlier, there are a number of reasons, most notably time pressure, why practitioners may find it difficult to regularly engage in research. In addition, the field itself offers a number of challenges to carrying out research. Robinson, writing in 1995, describes some of these. She notes the difficulties of applying research from one context to another when learner support by its nature is context bound.

Study tip



Make notes on any words and concepts that are new to you (e.g. qualitative, quantitative, variable).

Compare the definitions given here with those in other texts.

Write down definitions in your own words, and using this method, keep a running list of definitions to which you can refer as you work through the course.

To help you with this task, there is a list of key concepts and words towards the end of the unit.

How and which services are offered is dependent upon local conditions. Further, generalization is made difficult because of diversity in staff roles (tutor may mean quite a different thing from one context to the next), learner characteristics, and distance education settings.

Robinson (1995) makes the point that the literature does not necessarily reflect the diversity within distance education. Rather, most of it has been carried out with adult students studying at the post-secondary level in more developed countries. She also notes the difficulty of reconciling the needs to address pressing local issues with a broader research agenda for the field of

learner support. She concludes that there is much to be improved in learner support research including 'stronger conceptualisation, more repeated testing of concepts and the creation of organising frameworks or theories' (p. 229). Robinson (1995) acknowledges the need and worth of continuing to carry our research on learner support, albeit within the constraints she identifies.

Although there is no recent comprehensive review of research on learner support, one might suspect that the state of the field has improved a little since the publication of Robinson's article. A major factor in this is technology, and the very positive impact it has had on our ability to gather data and share it. There is the potential to have much better student record systems, analyse data more easily, and gain access to sources of research such as online journals. Another factor is the growing recognition of learner support as essential to learner retention and quality of the learning experience. Learner support is now seen as not only a legitimate, but a very necessary part of distance education practice regardless of the mode of interaction with students. As such, it requires sustained research and evaluation activity in order to continually test assumptions and theories, and to measure the effectiveness of practice.

Activity 7 60 mins



Overcoming challenges in learner support research and evaluation

- 1 Use the resource *Robinson 1995* for this activity.
- 2 Summarise the challenges in doing learner support research that Robinson identifies.
- 3 Reflect on how Robinson's description relates to your context. Are there challenges that do not apply? Are there additional challenges in your setting? If so, what are these?
- 4 Think about what might be done in your work setting to encourage research and evaluation. What are steps that could be taken to encourage participation? (e.g. set aside some time each month to discuss research issues and outcomes with colleagues)
- 5 Do you have a goal of collaborating on research with a colleague from another institution, presenting work at a conference, or publishing a paper? If so, write down what you would like to do and when you would like to do it.

The feedback to this activity is at the end of the unit ►

Study tip



In preparation for the Unit 1 Project, review all the activity notes you have made, and organise them so that they are easy to use. If there are recurring thoughts that you have as you work on the course, add these to your notes. For example, these might be anticipated challenges, or ideas for research questions.

Study tip

Review the list of key concepts and words below, to ensure that you have a good grasp of the meaning of each. If you find one or two that you are not sure about, return to the part of the text where these were introduced, and see if the definition provided helps. You might also want to consult other reference books on research to review additional definitions.

Unit summary

This first unit introduced you to the process of setting out a research mission: identifying areas for investigation, research questions, and the purpose of study. Different types of research were considered, as well as motivations and challenges for the practitioner-researcher. Finally, the current state of research in learner support was addressed. Key concepts introduced include:

- ▶ definitions of tutoring and learner support
- ▶ research as a unique activity
- ▶ pure or basic research
- ▶ applied research
- ▶ evaluation
- ▶ needs assessment
- ▶ formative evaluation
- ▶ summative evaluation
- ▶ efficiency (cost-benefit) evaluation
- ▶ qualitative approach
- ▶ quantitative approach
- ▶ theory
- ▶ validity
- ▶ reliability
- ▶ replication
- ▶ generalisability
- ▶ sample
- ▶ variable.

Project task



Identifying areas needing investigation

Identify three areas for investigation of learner support in your organisation. For each of these three areas:

- 1 Define the terms involved.
- 2 Write a question or questions to be answered by the investigation.
- 3 Provide a rationale for why these three areas are priorities for research or evaluation.

For example, if you think tutor training is an area that needs investigation, you will want to do the following:

Define tutoring and tutor training, and other terms used in the study. (e.g. student satisfaction, learning outcomes).

Clarify what it is you want to know more about. (e.g. Does tutor training result in a change in behaviour of tutors? Does tutor training have a positive effect on student satisfaction and learning outcomes such as persistence in courses?)

Identify reasons why this research is important. For example, you may want to justify the heavy investment in tutor training, and/or test the underlying assumptions of providing tutor training such as: 'training tutors affects their behaviour in a positive way', 'trained tutors result in greater student satisfaction', and 'learners are more likely to complete courses if their tutors are trained'.

References for Unit 1

Brindley, J. 1995 'Learners and learner services: the key to the future in distance education' in E. Keough and J. Roberts (eds.) *Why the information highway; lessons from open and distance learning*, Toronto: Trifolium Books Inc

Brindley, J. 2003 'Learner support: the key to quality learning environments' paper presented to *Tripartite International Workshop on Student Support*, Bangalore 12th June, sponsored by Commonwealth of Learning (COL), Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) and Karnataka State Open University (KSOU)

Coolican, H. 1990 *Research methods and statistics in psychology*, London: Hodder and Stoughton

Durkheim, W. 1961 *Suicide*, Glencoe: The Free Press

Hadley, R. and Mitchell, L. 1995 *Counseling research and programme evaluation*, Pacific Grove: Brooks/Cole Publishing Company

Lentell, H. 2003 'The importance of the tutor in open and distance learning' in A.Tait and R. Mills (eds.) *Rethinking learner support in distance education*, London: Routledge Falmer

Robinson, B. 1995 'Research and pragmatism in learner support' in F. Lockwood (ed.) *Open and distance learning today*, London: Routledge

Sewart, D. 1993 'Student support system in distance education' *Open Learning* 8, 3:3-12

Simpson, O. 2002 *Supporting students in online, open and distance learning* (2nd edition), London: Kogan Page

Sweet, R. 1993 'Student support services: direction for change' in R. Sweet (ed.) *Perspectives on distance education series: student support series: towards more responsive systems*, Vancouver: Commonwealth of Learning

Tait, A. 2000 'Planning student support for open and distance learning' *Open Learning* 15, 3:287-299

Thorpe, M. 2003 'Collaborative on-line learning: transforming learner support and course design' in A.Tait and R. Mills (eds.) *Rethinking learners support in distance education*, London: Routledge Falmer

Tinto, V. 1975 'Dropout from higher education: a theoretical synthesis of recent research' *Review of Educational Research* 45, 1:89-125

Feedback to selected activities



Feedback to Activity 1

There are no right or wrong answers in this activity. Its purpose is to give you an opportunity to pause from your regular work with students, and reflect on what you do and why you do it. Most research and evaluation questions in education flow from the necessity to test assumptions about learner behaviour, (e.g. Have we made the right assumptions about what contributes to student dropout?) or from questions about our practice, (e.g. If the tutor makes contact with the student early in the course, will the student be more likely to complete than if we wait until the student makes contact?) Hence, the starting point for effective research and evaluation is a deeper understanding of the assumptions and beliefs upon which our practice is based.

Feedback to Activity 2

We picked out the main concepts as follows:

- **Responsive** – to individuals and groups – through learner support. The learning process is personalised and humanised, as compared to items that are more fixed such as a course syllabus or packaged material.

- ▶ **Interactive** – interaction can be between students (facilitated by the tutor/support person) or between student(s) and tutor/support person.
- ▶ **Context specific** – learner support exists to further the goals of a particular institution and serve the needs of their clientele within a specific context.
- ▶ **Contributes to learning and development of the learner** – learner support is intended to facilitate learning within courses, and at the same time, to help the student develop personally and as an increasingly skilled learner.
- ▶ **Open to change** – concepts and practices in learner support have evolved and continue to evolve in order to fulfil the goal of responsiveness, e.g. to new learner populations, developments in education, economic conditions, technological advances, and of course, research findings!

Thorpe's thoughtful definition is helpful in conceptualising learner support in a flexible way that incorporates these key concepts, can be applied in any context, and is adaptable to changing times. Whether interaction with students is online or through other modes, the goal of learner support is personalise and humanise the educational experience – to help make it relevant to the individual or a specific group of individuals in order to facilitate their learning and help them develop as persons and learners.

Feedback to Activity 3

As with the previous activity, there are no right or wrong answers. The priorities for research will be contextually bound. What you should see emerging is an agenda for research and evaluation that is specific to your context, in line with your interests and appropriate to your institution or organisation.

Feedback to Activity 4

Usually, an applied study directed toward a specific problem to be solved will yield the most immediate and useful information, and this is why applied research is most commonly employed to investigate the kinds of practical issues faced in the practice of tutoring and learner support. However, exploratory studies designed to better understand such phenomena as institutional loyalty can also be of practical use, and may form the basis for more specific lines of inquiry.

Feedback to Activity 5

If you have not regularly carried out research or evaluation as a part of practice, getting started will be the most challenging step. Reflecting on what research and evaluation data might allow you to do that you are not currently

doing will help you get started. Once you have put one evaluation or research project into place, it is most likely that you will want to continue.

Feedback to Activity 6

Adults constantly encounter situations which require new information and skills, both in their personal and professional lives. We are engaged in learning projects as a matter of course, often without realizing it. For example, you might get a new camera, take on supervisory duties, have a first child, decide to paint your house, acquire new computer software, or take music lessons. We approach these tasks as part of our everyday lives. Starting to do research is no different. Once you begin to narrow down what areas you would like to investigate, and how you might like to investigate them, your next step is to acquire the knowledge and skills to proceed. This course is intended to help you do just that.

Feedback to Activity 7

As noted by Robinson (1995), there are many ways in which research and evaluation in learner support can be improved. However, as she also acknowledges, small contextually-based studies form valuable contributions to our knowledge base. Your efforts in exploring and evaluating various aspects of your work are as important to other practitioners as they are to you. It is hoped that your participation in the course will enhance both your enthusiasm for research and your ability to plan and carry out investigations in your field of endeavour.

Steps in researching and evaluating learner support

UNIT 2

Unit overview

In this unit, you will work through the steps of planning and implementing a research project. The term research is used in the broadest sense here, including all types of investigations as discussed in Unit 1. Regardless of whether you are investigating an issue in an exploratory way, experimenting with a new service or delivery method, or evaluating a programme or service that has been in operation for some time, the steps you will follow are very similar. Although you emphasise different areas to suit the purpose of your study, you will follow the same path. Careful planning will give you the best opportunity to get the research results that you need in the most clear and accurate way.

The first step in the process is to clarify your research question and then choose an appropriate method of investigation based on both the purpose of your inquiry and any practical considerations imposed by context. You can then begin to plan each step of the project, involving any other staff who will be involved so that they can help you anticipate any problems in the design and find ways to overcome these. Your design and implementation plan will be refined as you collect information from a variety of sources, including a thorough review of related literature. After you have worked out the details of the design and resource requirements for your project, you can move to the implementation phase, collect, analyse, and interpret your data, report your findings, and if appropriate, disseminate them.

The steps in research are sequential, each dependent on the effectiveness of the preceding ones. There are times when you might cycle back through the steps. For example, you might find something out during the information-gathering phase that leads you to refine your question further, and modify your design. You should, though, try to find as many faults as possible during the planning phase and correct these before you embark on the project so that when you reach the reporting stage, you have the information you set out to discover.

Learning outcomes

When you have worked through this unit, you should be able to:

- 1 Define a research question.

- 2 Choose an appropriate method of inquiry and data gathering strategies.
- 3 Plan the steps involved in the implementation of your research project.
- 4 Gather background information through literature review, consultation with key informants, and checking for existing data.
- 5 Analyse data and interpret findings.
- 6 Report and disseminate research results.

Defining your research question

During the last unit, you considered areas of your work that you would like to investigate, and you identified a research mission: a question to pursue and the reasons why it is important. In this unit, you will take this a step further, starting with defining and refining your research question and carefully reflecting on the intended use of the findings. It is important to formulate your research question in such a way that it directs and anchors your investigation.

For example, you might want to find out about the effectiveness of early intervention strategies by tutors to prevent students dropping out of their first course. The first step is to think carefully about this research question by considering how you will use the results. If you find that the intervention strategies you investigate appear to make a positive difference, what will you do with that information? Can these strategies be implemented? If you plan to work with some colleagues on this question, you will need to discuss the question and intended outcomes. Once you have agreed on what might be most helpful to students and what you can reasonably implement, you can refine your question and state the intended purpose, that is, what you hope to be able to do with the findings.

Perhaps you agree to try an intervention that includes two or three specific strategies. You decide to add a simple assignment that would be completed within two weeks of enrolment to help students assess their readiness for study. The assignment asks them to complete a questionnaire about factors such as time available, family support for their studies, current amount of time spent reading, and so on. There might be a timetabling exercise to help them to plan their study times during the week, balancing these with work and other activities. Tutors would give encouraging feedback on this assignment and provide some specific strategies for how to approach the course with the returned assignment. The research questions might be:

- Does raising student awareness of factors related to completion early in a first ODL course improve completion and retention rates?
- Does supportive contact with a tutor early in a first ODL course improve completion and retention rates?

The intended use of the findings might be:

- ▶ to find out whether this type of intervention strategy has a positive impact on student retention
- ▶ to implement the intervention strategy if it has the desired effect
- ▶ to find ways to improve and streamline the strategy so that it has maximum effectiveness and does not add considerably to tutor workload
- ▶ to use the findings to apply for a grant to further investigate early intervention strategies
- ▶ to report the findings at an forthcoming national conference on distance teaching strategies.

You can see that the intended ways in which the findings will be used are integral to refining the questions. The questions must be asked in such a way as to get the data needed for the intended use.

Activity 1 60 mins



Defining your research question

- 1 Review the project that you completed at the end of Unit 1. Choose one of the areas for investigation that you identified as the one to work with in this unit and review the question(s) you wrote and the rationale for the research.
- 2 Using the example given above, refine your research questions, being clear about exactly what you want to know.
- 3 Write down the ways in which you would like to apply and/or use the findings from this investigation.
- 4 Check your questions against the uses, and see if the questions need further expansion or refinement.
- 5 Choose one or more colleagues (at your institution or another) who have an interest in this area and get their feedback on what you have formulated. Incorporate any useful ideas.

The feedback to this activity is at the end of the unit ▶