

## Student support services in open and distance education

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Currently, when open, distance and flexible education is increasing worldwide, a reflection and analysis of lessons learned about how to support students' learning and which support services could institutions provide seems appropriate.

Beyond the effort to increase students' retention or to reduce drop-out in open, distance or online education, support services should facilitate more meaningful learning experiences for all. With the purpose of contributing to this goal, this issue of *Open Praxis* focuses on innovative and effective student support services in open, distance and flexible education. The call for papers included aspects such as the following:

- Distance learning students' needs and justification of support services in open and distance education.
- Innovative services to promote students' retention, performance and occupational guidance.
- Role of technologies for student support services. Possibilities and limits.
- Successful and relevant experiences of student support services in distance learning higher education institutions.

The call was open to research papers focused on theoretical foundations, concepts, analysis and results of studies regarding student support services in open and distance education, referring to aspects such as students' needs in distance education; need for student support services; overview or comparative analysis of services with a focus on innovative and effective ones; evaluation of student support services; support services for entry and first year students; services for after completion of distance learning programs; use of technologies for students' support; etc.

Also innovative practice articles were expected, providing a description and analysis of concrete innovative and effective experiences of student support services in open and distance education: information services; guidance and counselling; library services; retention programs; student support services based on technologies; e-mentoring; peer to peer support services; etc.

Seven papers have been finally accepted, four of them with a research approach and three of them with a practical approach. They cover some of the topics addressed in the call for papers, from organizational perspectives to individual case studies.

In the first paper, Alan Tait (*From place to virtual space: reconfiguring student support for distance and e-learning in the digital age*) provides a historical overview that leads to a shift from geographical approaches to student support in open universities to a pedagogical approach, facilitated by digital technologies. This shift places the focus on the integration of support with teaching, instead of considering support services as separated structures within institutions. This insight and reflections will be useful for open and distance education universities stepping towards digitalization.

Jacklyn J. Thompson and Stella C.S. Porto (*Supporting Wellness in Adult Online Education*) address a not so analysed aspect in distance education: wellness and health promotion in online education, considering physical and emotional aspects. Literature review and examples of good practice in this field lead to a set of recommendations for different stakeholders: from organizations to students themselves, of special interest if we are concerned with this sometimes disregarded needs in online education.

Javiera Atenas, Leo Havemann and Ernesto Priego (*Opening teaching landscapes: The importance of quality assurance in the delivery of open educational resources*) introduce a cross-wise topic in the process of distance education: the use of OER as a means to support learning. Their survey-based study highlights academics' opinions about using OERs and repository managers' opinions about developing good ROERs. A conclusion, in agreement with Tait's proposal in the first paper in this issue, refers to the need for integration among teaching and support services, repositories in this case.

Closing the research articles section, Steven J Greenland and Catherine Moore (*Patterns of online student enrolment and attrition in Australian open access online education: a preliminary case study*) present a study about a main concern in distance education: drop-out. Through analysing enrolment and withdrawal data on a specific study program, they observe different patterns and propose to monitor data in order to inform teaching practice and manage different support strategies to increase retention.

The innovative practice section is opened with a case study written by Kjrsten Keane and Miriam Russell (*Using Cloud collaboration for writing assignments by students with disabilities: a case study using action research*). They describe a experience of telecollaboration with a student with a physical disability derived from a cerebral palsy, following the steps of action research and thoroughly explaining the process and results. Concerned with accessibility issues and within the frame of universal design, they reflect about the support that cloud services provide in this case.

Maureen Andrade (*Course-embedded student support for online English language learners*) expands on language acquisition, transactional distance, and specially self-regulated learning, theories that underpin the embedded course model, where support is internal to the course and not an external and optional service. Referring to English courses for non-native speakers of English online students, she describes the experiences and the support strategies that promote self-regulated learning.

Finally, Phalachandra Bhandigadi and Ishan Sudeera Abeywardena (*Virtual tutorials in adult ODL: A WizIQ case study of Wawasan Open University*) explain the introduction of virtual learning environments in their institution, evolving from more traditional tutorial support based on regional centers to the use of a technological platform than can supply support to all the students. They analyze the experience and highlight advantages and lessons learned with the use of this support tool.

The diverse contributions that conform this special issue focused on student support services in open, distance and flexible education share two common ideas: the evolution towards integration of support services with teaching and the possibilities that technologies provide to support all the students, aiming to general and specific needs.

We expect that the diverse reflections, cases and recommendations presented in this issue are welcomed by our readers and provide useful insight for improving student support services in educational institutions that develop open and distance education.

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