
"Off-campus support" in distance learning – how do our students define quality?

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Abstract

The nature of quality teaching and learning in higher education has been subject to ongoing research and debate. In distance learning programmes, "teaching" comprises several distinct tasks including the provision of distance learning materials and the support of students' learning when they are away from the campus. This study examined the nature of quality in terms of the provision of "off-campus support" to students in a particular postgraduate distance education context. A questionnaire was administered to investigate students' perceptions and expectations regarding off-campus support. While students identified support related to their academic work as being the most important component of an off-campus support system, issues related to the availability and accessibility of this support were also highlighted. These findings informed the development of a model of quality off-campus support in the context of advanced level, distance learning programmes.

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Introduction

The notion of quality, although not a new idea in the general sense, is a relatively recent construct in the world of education, becoming particularly prevalent in the 1980s and 1990s. Higher education (HE) has not escaped the influence of this movement, with quality becoming an increasingly significant issue over the last 20 years (Lewis and Smith, 1994, p. ix; Ramsden, 1992, p. 2). This trend has arisen from several sources – a dissatisfaction with the performance of HE institutions, increasing competition for student enrolments, the growth in distance and online learning, and increased demands for public accountability. Manifesting itself in such concepts as "quality management" and "quality assurance", one outcome of the quality movement has been the emergence of an emphasis on the needs, expectations and satisfaction of the major "customer" in HE – the student.

HE institutions can no longer afford to ignore quality concerns. They must closely examine their values in this regard – with respect both to what is espoused and to what is actually practised in the day-to-day operation of quality management systems. If the expectations and needs of students are to be taken into account, the focus must be not so much on the accountability aspects of quality assurance, although this is certainly a requirement and likely to remain so, as on the improvement aspects – a system whereby quality is defined and monitored in such a way that real benefits for students in terms of student learning are initiated, fostered and maintained. As Bowden and Marton (1998, p. 277) describe, accountability will follow as a consequence of improvement, but should not be the "focus" of the assurance system. However, to improve one must first understand existing practice and values, an understanding most effectively reached through evaluation practices (Bowden and Marton, 1998, p. 215).

As Hill *et al.* (2003, p. 15) note, the use of students' views about their experiences of HE is widespread in assisting universities to monitor quality. Related to this emphasis are the emergence and proliferation of student evaluation of teaching as a significant component of quality management systems in



many HE institutions. Thus, as Gilroy *et al.* (2001, p. 15) state:

"Quality" is a term "not only freely used . . . it is also [. . .] freely and regularly inspected.

The research described here sought to define "quality" in terms of off-campus support in a particular postgraduate distance learning context. It comprised the reconnaissance phase of an action research project concerned with improving the evaluation of teaching in a suite of distance learning programmes in educational management. However, before these evaluation procedures could be examined, it was necessary to identify the activities and processes that comprise quality off-campus support. In the reconnaissance phase, then, data regarding students' perceptions and experiences of off-campus support were gathered and analysed.

Valuing students' perceptions

This research is based on a series of assumptions with regard to quality. In the first instance it assumes that students are a valid and reliable source of data about their HE experiences. Second, it assumes that, having gathered data from students, we will place some value on them. Third, it assumes that we will value them enough not only to utilise them to satisfy the accountability aspects of quality management but also to actually improve what we do.

Relevant literature in this regard focuses mainly on the role of students in evaluating the quality of teaching and, by implication, the overall quality of an HE institution. Certainly, the practice of evaluation by students has become widespread in this sector as the demands for accountability and concerns about quality continue (Gallagher, 2000, p. 140; Kwan, 1999, p. 181; Wilson, 1998, p. A12).

Much of the literature suggests that students are well-placed to evaluate the teaching that they experience and that these evaluation data are both valid and reliable when the goals and purposes of the evaluation match the tools and methods used (Ramsden, 1992, p. 89; Watchel, 1998, p. 192). Ramsden (1992, p. 89) asserts that the experiences of students' own past

schooling render them "uniquely qualified" to judge the way in which they are being taught and easily able to "differentiate the empty performer from the good teacher" (Ramsden, 1992, p. 90).

This literature lends support to the position of valuing student feedback – be it perceptions, expectations or evaluations. This may be particularly so in the research described here, where the students are mature adults already in responsible full-time educational management positions as well as studying at a postgraduate level. The students in this research context are educators and teachers themselves. They not only have the schooling experiences of their own youth on which to base current judgments and expectations, they have also already experienced some form of HE in the course of their teacher training. Furthermore, as practitioners in schools, they are knowledgeable about pedagogy and accustomed to appraising the teaching performance of colleagues and team members. In short, these students are likely to be able to accurately describe and evaluate good teaching. Swenson (1998, pp. 34, 37) acknowledges the value of such students' views:

Upwards of half our college and university students are now of the age group we used to refer to as non-traditional. Of those, four out of five work full-time [. . .] It is difficult to argue that these students shouldn't be viewed as intelligent consumers of HE [. . .] We are quick to condemn the discourteous, slow, or unresponsive service we receive at a bank, service station or department store. Why shouldn't students feel the same way about the services provided by our institutions?

Criticism of the use of student ratings tends to be based on the extent to which we believe that allowing students to "have a say" about their courses and teachers allows them to have influence and power over what goes on in HE institutions. For example, Martinson (2000, p. 80) questions the logic of basing staff tenure, promotion and remuneration decisions on information gleaned from student evaluations. He also addresses the issue of HE institutions bowing to the pressure of students as consumers in their attempts to serve the students' interests and the possibility of HE delivering "that which is in the student preferences as contrasted with doing that which is in the student interest". Another view is put

forward by Husbands (1998, p. 118), who describes the complexities surrounding the use of students as evaluators, who are, in effect, "internal customers" and "subordinates" in terms of their relationships with their teachers who are in a position of power over them. Other criticisms of student evaluations relate to concerns about bias arising from the influence of teaching style, teacher personality, class size, subject area, and so on (Martinson, 2000, p. 79; Williams and Ceci, 1997, p. 14; Wilson, 1998, p. A12).

Scriven (1993a) provides a comprehensive rebuttal to such criticisms of the validity of student evaluations. He identifies several "potential sources of validity" for student ratings (Scriven, 1993, pp. 2-3). In the first instance, a high correlation exists between student ratings and learning gains. Students are also well able to rate their own increased knowledge, comprehension and motivation, and are in a unique position to observe matters of "fact" and "style" that contribute to effective teaching. Scriven also notes that students are in a good position to "judge such matters as whether tests covered all the material of the course". Finally, he describes the collection of student ratings as an important process in involving students as participants and decision-makers in their own learning.

Consideration of a useful "middle ground" in terms of valuing students' feedback has emerged in the literature of late. As Swenson (1998, p. 39) notes, viewing students as customers and, by implication, allowing them to influence our ideas about quality do not necessarily erode the role of academic staff. Rather, this may be viewed as a mutually beneficial partnership:

In sum, having "customers" in higher education does not mean pandering. It does not mean the customer is always right. It does not mean we never say no. It does mean treating people with respect. It means listening and adapting.

Peterson *et al.* (1997, p. 136) also emphasise the shared responsibilities of staff and students to make a contribution to quality in HE.

The research reported here utilises such a middle-ground approach – students are our customers and are uniquely placed to describe and evaluate their experiences of HE. Such feedback can assist our decision making about

academic structures and teacher performance. HE institutions ought to be concerned about quality and equally concerned about allowing students to have some role in determining it.

The characteristics of quality off-campus support

A review of the literature concerned with distance education provides a useful starting-point for checking students' expectations and perceptions. "Distance learning" is defined by a number of authors (Holmberg, 1989, p. 3; Keegan, 1996, p. 50; Kember and Murphy, 1992, p. 3; Willis, 1994, p. v). It is generally differentiated from other modes of teaching and learning by the idea that geographical distance separates the learner and teacher (or institution) with learning materials and various technologies being used to deliver programmes. This isolation is a significant factor in the delivery of distance education programmes – therefore the actual teaching component is significant in the success of students (Sewart, 1983, p. 47; Willis, 1994, p. iv).

This teaching is described in a number of different ways in the literature but the central theme that emerges is that of supporting the learner. Rowntree (1992, pp. 74-6) describes "support" as taking many forms including helping students with the content of the programme and assessment tasks alongside assistance with personal difficulties such as stress, managing workload and maintaining interest in their study. Indeed the role of the teacher in this setting may be to provide personalised help and advice on "matters that are nothing to do with the subject-matter they are learning about" (Rowntree, 1992, p. 83).

Marland's (1997, p. 88) analogy of the distance teacher as being "a member of an emergency response team" and the work of Sewart *et al.* (1983, p. 56) emphasise the provision of appropriate feedback as one aspect of student support in this context. Kember and Murphy (1992, pp. 12-14) favour a personal approach to the provision of feedback with an emphasis on providing examples and additional explanations. Race (1998, p. 124) asserts that "there is no single factor more critical than the feedback that open learners receive on their

progress" and gives a variety of suggestions to enhance the quality of this feedback, including reference to the need for feedback to be both prompt and individualised (Race, 1998, pp. 124-5).

Holmberg (1989), widely regarded as a seminal author in the field of distance and open education, also stresses "support" for students as being an important factor in successful learning. He focuses on the idea of the "emotional involvement" of the student in their study and the necessity for students to feel a rapport with both their teachers and the providing institution (Holmberg, 1989, p. 162). He emphasises that "learning is encouraged by frequent communication with fellow humans interested in the study" (Holmberg, 1989, p. 163), describing effective distance teaching as being as much a function of "feelings of belonging and co-operation as [...] the actual exchange of questions, answers, and arguments in mediated communication" (Holmberg, 1989, p. 163). Overall, Holmberg stresses empathy as the overriding consideration when interacting with students.

Thus, it is simply not enough for institutions to implement distance learning programmes solely through the provision of print and/or online materials. Quality with regard to distance teaching and learning cannot be achieved by merely providing the notes, activities and readings for students to read and utilise in assignments. It is crucial that students are facilitated in their learning by being able to access both academic and non-academic support from their lecturers. In these contacts with staff, students must be acknowledged as individuals and receive assistance that is personalised in nature. Staff must be able to build rapport with students and be capable of sustaining warm and supportive associations with many individuals over the duration of their distance learning programmes. In this way, students will be encouraged and facilitated to complete their studies.

Research design

The research utilised concepts traversed in the literature as the basis for discovering students' perceptions of quality off-campus support as

the group at the "receiving end" of this aspect of their distance learning experience. In this way students could "explain how they understand quality" (Gilroy *et al.*, 2001, p. 16).

The context for the research was that of advanced level management programmes being delivered to mature, part-time students already in full-time employment in educational institutions. At the time of the study, approximately 100 students, mostly employed as senior managers in primary and secondary schools, were enrolled across the three programmes offered. These programmes ranged in duration from one year to four years of part-time study, with on-campus block courses ranging from four days to three weeks over a 12-month period. Although not solely delivered by distance, these programmes were all primarily of a distance learning nature with students being expected to complete the majority of their coursework and research away from the institution and its staff.

A questionnaire was designed to gather data about the types of off-campus support considered important by students, the types of support actually utilised by these students, their perceptions of what constitutes "quality" off-campus support, and their perceptions of the lecturer skills and behaviours required to deliver this support effectively. The questionnaire was developed using a mixture of structured and unstructured elements in order to collect both numerical data about the importance of various descriptors of off-campus support (for example, about the types of off-campus support students perceived to be important), and comment-type data (for example, about the nature and type of feedback on assignments perceived to be most useful by students). Where students were asked to select from a range of options, they were also asked to identify and prioritise three of their selections. This allowed them to indicate their overall selections as well as particular preferences within these selections.

The questionnaire was posted to all students ($n = 90$) who had been enrolled in an education management programme in the preceding 12-month period. In all, 49 questionnaires were returned – a response rate of 54 per cent. Where respondents were required to select from a range of choices, the frequency of selection and

the percentage of overall selection for each item were calculated in order to aggregate the data in a way that would identify the main features and trends. Where respondents were required to prioritise their selections, a simple weighting mechanism was employed in order to show the overall importance or priority given to each choice. Comment-type data were summarised and categorised into main themes.

Results

The first section of the questionnaire investigated student perceptions regarding the important components of an off-campus support system. Specifically students were asked:

- What types of off-campus support do you believe should be offered to participants in education management programmes?
- What types of off-campus support do you believe to be most important to provide to students?
- What types of off-campus support have you utilised during the last 12 months?
- What types of off-campus support were most useful to you?

These data are shown in Table I. Column A shows the frequency with which students selected each type of support as being a necessary component of an off-campus support system (1 = most frequently selected), column B shows how important students perceived each type of support to be within the overall system (1 = most important), column C shows the frequency of students' reported actual

utilisation of each type of support (1 = most frequently utilised), and column D shows how students rated the usefulness of each type of support actually utilised (1 = most useful).

Table I shows that students believed that, overall, all off-campus support types identified in the questionnaire should be offered. Guidance in interpreting assignment requirements, feedback on draft research work and supervision of research planning and activity were considered to be particularly important elements. Components of "academic" support were perceived to be more important and useful overall than "non-academic" support and were most commonly utilised by students. There are two likely reasons for this. The first is that the students are mature and have some experience of study at the tertiary level. They rarely require assistance with numeracy and literacy skill development or non-academic aptitudes and skills. Second, these students do have some on-campus teaching sessions and corresponding face-to-face contact with lecturers during their enrolment in the programmes. This may provide opportunities for students to clarify the course territory and course concepts.

The questionnaire also gathered data regarding student perceptions about the effective provision of off-campus support. Both qualitative and quantitative feedback was sought to answer the following questions:

- (1) What factors are important to you in terms of the "quality" of the provision of off-campus support?
- (2) Of these factors, which are most important?

Table I Student perceptions: components of an off-campus support system

Type of support	A Frequency	B Importance	C Utilisation	D Usefulness
Assistance with understanding course materials	5	5	5	4
Assistance with course concepts	3 =	3	4	5
Guidance in interpreting assignment requirements	1 =	1	3	3
Assistance with essay-writing skills	6	7	6	6
Supervision of research planning and activity	3 =	2	2	1
Feedback on draft research work	1 =	4	1	2
Help with managing programme workload	7	6	7	7 =
Non-academic advice, advocacy, counselling	8	9	8 =	9
Other	9	8	8 =	7 =

- (3) What factors are important to you in terms of lecturers' skills in providing off-campus support?
- (4) Of these factors, which are most important?

These data are shown in Table II with numerical rankings being ascribed in the same fashion as Table I. Column A shows the frequency with which students selected each factor as being necessary in terms of the quality of off-campus support (1 = most frequently selected), while column B shows the perceived importance of each factor (1 = most important).

Table II shows that the quality factor of the availability and accessibility of lecturers to respond to queries and concerns was the most important factor for students in the provision of quality off-campus support. Related to this is the importance that students placed on lecturers' prompt attention to their requests for assistance. As one student noted: "Important to have the work returned promptly and with good feedback, so that you can develop before the next assignment is done". Also rated as being of importance is lecturers having a good knowledge of the programme. That is, they are able to give students accurate advice and, furthermore, this advice is unlikely to vary from lecturer to lecturer. One student commented that: "Sound programme knowledge is absolutely essential; otherwise students lose

confidence in lecturers, and hence the programme itself".

Table II also shows that in relation to lecturer skill factors the ability of lecturers to be enthusiastic about helping students and to give constructive criticism was clearly the most important factor for students. With regard to feedback, students confirmed the importance of constructive, clear, specific, honest and encouraging feedback in statements such as:

That it is precise – focusing on critical aspects of the work, that it is honest – if the work is poor, say so, but also give constructive advice.

That the positive feedback affirms. That the other feedback is constructive, so that I know what I need to change/improve.

Encouragement when I am on the right track, constructive criticism when I am not.

Knowing what needs to be done to improve it – although critical analysis of my work "hurts" a little, it makes me much stronger and a better learner.

Such comments indicate that students want to be given clear guidance about the strengths and weaknesses of their work, to receive acknowledgement for work well done, and clear justification for corrective feedback or criticism. "Guidance" was identified as an important factor – students wanted to know whether they were "on the right track" and how best to proceed further. Comments were also made

Table II Student perceptions: factors determining the quality of off-campus support

Factor	A Frequency	B Importance
<i>The "quality" of off-campus support</i>		
The lecturers are available/accessible	2	1
The lecturers have a good knowledge of the programme	3 =	4
The lecturers reply to my messages promptly	5 =	6 =
The lecturers reply to my requests for help promptly	5 =	2
The draft research work I submit is returned promptly	7	6 =
The draft research work I submit is returned with appropriate feedback	3 =	3
My assignments are returned promptly	8	8
My assignments are returned with appropriate feedback	1	5
<i>Lecturer "skills"</i>		
The lecturers have effective listening skills	4 =	4 =
The lecturers have effective oral communication skills	4 =	3
The lecturers have effective written communication skills	2 =	4 =
The lecturers are constructively critical	1	2
The lecturers demonstrate empathy	6	6
The lecturers are enthusiastic about helping me	2 =	1

regarding the ability of lecturers to provide assistance with literature and other information sources. In short, comments made by students clearly place an emphasis on constructive criticism as being the type of feedback of most use to them in their coursework.

Discussion – how do students define quality?

The components of quality off-campus support

Students perceive many components of off-campus support to be important. They believe it is important that these are all available, even though they as individuals may not utilise the system frequently or in its entirety. The off-campus support system must, therefore, be flexible enough to cater for the variety of needs of a number of individuals. As Rowntree (1992, p. 77) states:

Most learners need individual support. They need feedback that relates to their specific unique concerns.

In the case of this particular student cohort, support related to the academic activities associated with course work is considered far more important, and utilised considerably more frequently than other types of support. Descriptions of the various types of off-campus support are provided by a number of writers in this field (Lewis, 1984, p. 83; Rowntree, 1992, p. 72; Willis, 1993, pp. 109-10), while Simpson (2000, p. 6) uses the terms "academic support" and "non-academic support" to categorise the many support activities he has identified. These structures, although providing useful starting-points in a consideration of off-campus support, do not closely match the perceptions uncovered by the questionnaire. The support activities most clearly identified by the respondents are all of an academic nature. The provision of this support helps students to successfully complete the assignment and research requirements of the programmes. Students do not require assistance with understanding course materials and concepts to nearly the same degree.

The availability and accessibility of the off-campus support system

It is important that a range of types of academic support are offered to students when they are off-campus. The questionnaire results also indicate that off-campus support must be able to be accessed promptly. Students value the availability and accessibility of staff to respond to their queries and concerns. This may be because of the nature of the student cohort participating in these particular programmes. They are busy senior professionals, already in full-time employment in positions of responsibility in educational institutions.

There are three elements of availability and accessibility that must be considered. In the first instance, students want to be able to get in touch and to make contact with the person to whom they wish to speak. Second, they also want the reassurance that, if a message is left or an e-mail sent, this will at least be acknowledged. In this way the student knows that they have still made contact. Third, they want requests for support actioned promptly. If this is not possible immediately, then they want to be safe in the knowledge that the information or advice required will be soon on its way.

The effectiveness of lecturers within the system

Just as a multi-faceted system of off-campus support that is available and accessible to students is of importance, so too is the capability of the lecturers who are providing the support to do so effectively. A number of qualities and skills are important in this respect. These skills fall into two general categories: (1) providing appropriate feedback; and (2) being enthusiastic about providing support.

As such, a "mesh" of academic and personal capabilities is required on the part of the lecturer, if quality off-campus support is to be provided.

First, in terms of providing appropriate feedback, students expect lecturers to have a good knowledge of both the discipline and the programme itself as well as being able to provide appropriate feedback that is constructively critical. Kember and Murphy (1992, p. 14) provide the following guidelines for giving constructive "comments":

ask questions that will enable the student to clear up misconceptions; avoid sarcasm and harsh criticism; avoid being condescending or patronising; use simple language; and focus on encouragement rather than discouragement. In fact the quality of the feedback provided is more important to the students surveyed in this research project than the speed with which it is provided. The literature related to this aspect of providing feedback on written work in distance learning is prolific. Central to this is an emphasis on providing specific, informative and individualised feedback that suggests areas for improvement (Holmberg, 1989, p. 56; Kember and Murphy, 1992, p. 12; Simpson, 2000, p. 42; Willis, 1993, p. 81). As Simpson notes, such feedback is a significant component of students' contact with their lecturers. He states that:

For many students such feedback is the most substantial teaching contact they have with their tutor. For some it may be the only contact. Giving such feedback is a difficult task – too kind or elliptic and students will not understand where they are and what they need to do to improve; too direct and unvarnished and they may be so discouraged that they will drop out inappropriately (Simpson, 2000, p. 42).

The second consideration here is the importance that students place on the lecturer being enthusiastic about supporting them. In fact students placed more importance on this than any other factor in terms of lecturer behaviour. Clearly students want to feel that lecturers are interested and motivated to assist them. These findings relate closely to the emphasis in the distance education literature on the importance of teachers developing an appropriate rapport with learners (Holmberg, 1989, p. 162; Kember and Murphy, 1992, p. 26; Rowntree, 1992, p. 77). Holmberg (1989, p. 162) identifies the development of "warmth in human relations" and "emotional involvement" in the study on the part of the learner as contributing to deep learning and goal attainment. This relationship development is also another means by which the isolation of the distance learner may be addressed.

A model of "quality" off-campus support

Off-campus support in this distance education context is considerably more complex and

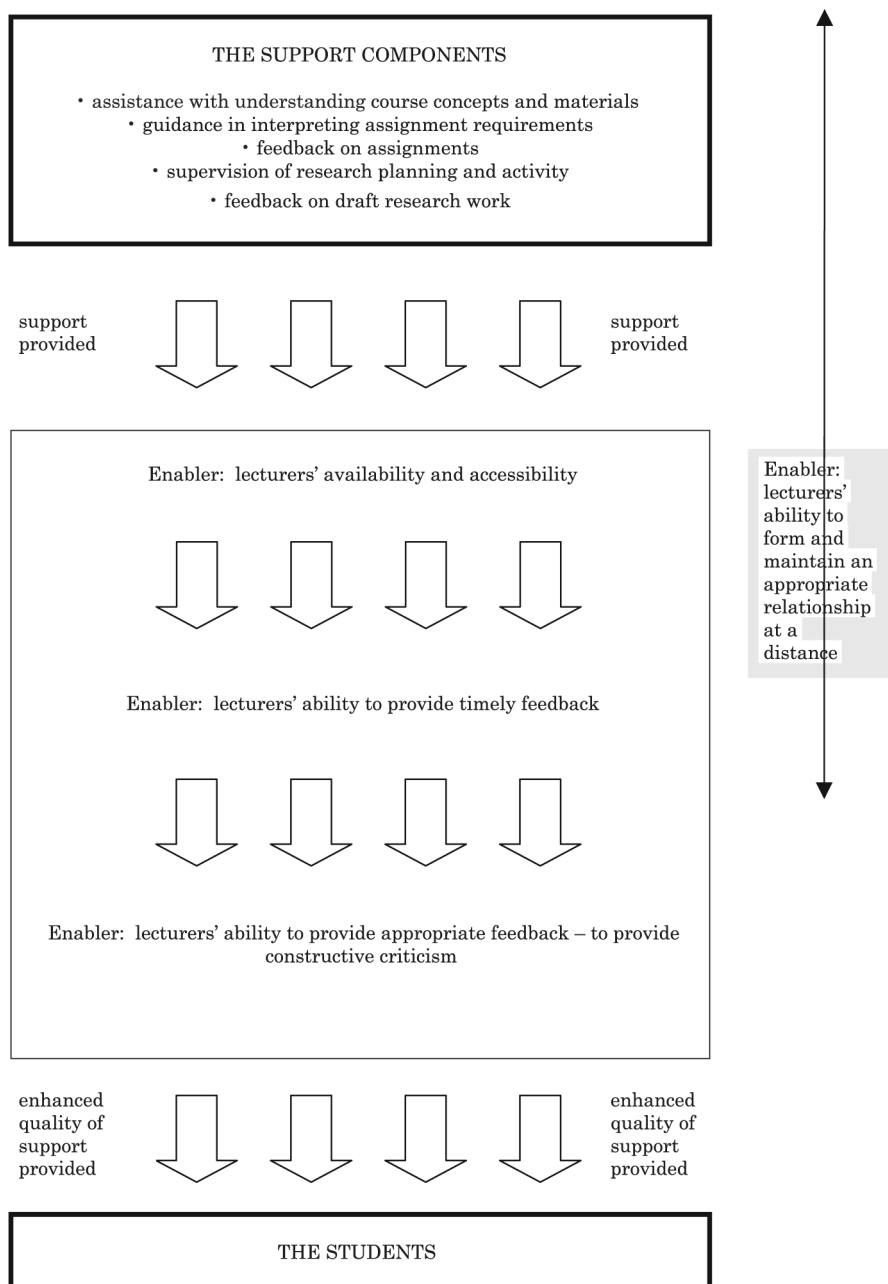
multi-dimensional than the mere provision of distance learning packages and other support materials, either in print or online. This research confirms that, while its nature must be closely linked to individual students' needs, its quality will be determined by the way in which it is delivered. It is the author's contention that much rests on the lecturer's capability to effectively combine both academic and personal skills. In other words, lecturers will raise or reduce the quality of off-campus support through their behaviours, skills and attitudes. These characteristics may be construed as "enablers" or "barriers" where quality is concerned.

A model of off-campus support has been developed that conceptualises both the components of the support system and the processes crucial to its effective delivery. This model is shown in Figure 1. It differs from those currently found in the literature concerned with supporting distance learners in that it portrays off-campus support as a process rather than a product or service. More important, however, in terms of quality is the emphasis placed on the role of lecturers in influencing whether or not students experience quality off-campus support.

Thus, the model involves the lecturer employing a series of "enablers", if it is to be delivered effectively. It is, however, susceptible to breakdown at at least three points. Where the "enabling" behaviours, skills and attitudes are absent, a barrier to the provision of quality off-campus support emerges. Furthermore, the model exists within an environment where lecturers are able to form and maintain appropriate relationships with students at a distance. This model provides not only an illustration of what the components of quality off-campus support are in this particular context, but also a picture of how this system actually works or does not work in practice. If students experience off-campus support where each enabler is operating effectively, then they are likely to receive support that is rich and diverse and which, as a consequence, enhances their learning.

On the other hand, if these enablers become "barriers", then students' experiences of off-campus support will lack certain quality dimensions and, by implication, the lecturer

Figure 1 A model process for quality off-campus support delivery



will fail to fully facilitate or enhance learning in ways that students perceive as “effective”. If teaching is to be defined as a process that facilitates learning (Biggs, 1999, p. 4; Brown and Atkins, 1988, p. 1; Trigwell and Prosser, 1999, p. 247), then the provision of quality off-campus support in distance learning programmes must be carried out effectively by academic staff. The model illustrates how lecturers can “get it right” and by implication how easily they may “get it wrong”.

Conclusions

Regardless of the types of support which are identified as contributing to the overall provision of off-campus support, quality is affected by the way in which it is delivered by individual lecturers. For example, quality is influenced by the usefulness of the feedback students receive on assignments and research work, the availability and accessibility of lecturers, and the promptness with which

lecturers respond to and reply to students. This research has shown that students place particular emphasis on lecturers' ability to provide constructively critical feedback and to respond to their concerns and queries with enthusiasm. Good teaching in distance education in this setting is considerably more complex and multi-dimensional than the mere provision of distance learning packages and other support materials. It is closely tied to individual students' needs and largely influenced in terms of quality by individual lecturers' skills and abilities in delivering it.

It is not difficult to see links between these students' perceptions and the "type" of students surveyed here. They are nearly all in full-time employment in management positions in schools with considerable responsibility and demands on their time and energies, quite apart from the family and other commitments most also have. They are mature and academically capable. They need little non-academic support and little support in terms of understanding the course material. What they do require is a readily accessible and highly individualised off-campus support system. Put very simply, they want to know that the support is there and they want to be able to access this support immediately, as and when required.

These findings serve a further purpose that has not been fully explored in the course of this research. That is, they provide a picture of students' expectations and perceptions of quality against which lecturers may compare their own beliefs and values with regard to the provision of off-campus support in two ways. In the first instance, what students are saying may be different, to a greater or lesser degree, from perceptions currently held. Lecturers' "pet" practices may be brought into question and forcibly reshaped through knowledge of what it is that students really expect and need. A rethinking of the type of feedback supplied to students, and time management priorities in terms of how speedily it is supplied, are the most obvious examples here. Second, any mismatch between students' perceptions of effective off-campus support and lecturers' own perceptions provides a useful starting-point for considering how these differences may best be communicated and understood and what

changes are needed in everyday practice to accommodate them.

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