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MANAGEMENT OF LEARNER SUPPORT

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MDE-413: Learner Support Systems and Services

(New Course in place of ES-313: Learner Support Services)

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MDE-413 : LEARNER SUPPORT SYSTEMS AND SERVICES

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-

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-

BLOCK 3 : COUNSELLING AND TUTORING SERVICES

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-

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-

BLOCK 5 : MANAGEMENT OF LEARNER SUPPORT

- Unit 1 : Learners' Expectations in Distance Education
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 - Unit 3 : Monitoring Learners' Progress
 - Unit 4 : Library and Information Services to Distance Learners
-

INTRODUCTION TO THE COURSE

Learner support services are indispensable components of the ODL system (ODLS). It is important not because of its relation to the Distance Education theories, but it is a key for learners' successes and their persistence in the ODL system. It is a fact that in Distance Education, there is the geographical separation of teacher and learner. In addition to it, socio-psychological factors affect the learners in their learning and completing the courses. The socio-psychological factors include language, culture, motivation, inadequate skills or preparation, anxiety, time and work or family constraints. Distance learners, therefore, need various support services that would help them to be successful learners. Learner Support Services (LSS) are treated as learner centered facilitating functions of ODLS which take into account problems of distance learners at pre entry stage, during the course of studies and at the course completion stage. In this regard, it is noted that learner support not only bridges socio-psychological distances, but also fosters learners for their personal development and the accomplishment of learning goals. In the light of the separation of the learner from the teacher, the techniques and mechanisms to provide support assume a significant dimension in the teaching-learning transactions through the distance mode. This course MDE-413 discusses about the concept of various Learner Support Systems and Services and their interrelationship with other elements of ODL, theoretical background of LSS and factors affecting the nature of support services. Some important mechanisms of learner support namely contact programmes, counselling, and distance teaching through tutor comments on assignment responses have been discussed thoroughly. It also describes the institutional mechanisms for providing learning support. After working through this course, you should be able to:

- describe the basic principles and methods of learner support,
- explain the importance of support services in the ODL system,
- discuss learner support services as a sub-system of any ODL institution,
- organize academic counselling and other support services,
- assess and report the performance and progress of distance learners,

This course consists of five blocks. These are:

Block 1: Learner Support: An Introduction – This block discusses the concept of support services as a major component of ODL and various institutional models and arrangements in providing Learners Support Services (LSS).

Block 2: Learner Support: Development of Skills – Various learning skills such as Study skills, Cognitive skills, Problem solving skills, Reading and Writing skills have been discussed to develop a self directed learner.

Block 3: Counselling and Tutoring Services – All the issues related to Counselling and Tutoring services like skills, qualities, media and technology in counselling and organizing counselling and tutoring services have been analyzed.

Block 4: Assessment of Learner Performance – Various components of Assessment in Distance Education like Tutor Comments, Tutoring

through Correspondence and Supplemental Interaction have been emphasized.

Block 5: Management of Learner Support – Some important aspects of LSS such as Learners' Expectations in DE, Management of Support Services, and Monitoring Learners' Progress have been analyzed.

Each block of this course consists of four units. We begin each unit with the section 'Introduction' followed by 'Learning Outcomes'. It articulates briefly

- what we have presented in the unit, and
- what we expect from you once you complete working on the unit.

In the last section of each unit, under the heading, 'Let Us Sum Up', we summarise the whole unit for purposes of recapitulation.

Besides, we have given self-check exercises under the caption 'Check Your Progress' of Self-check Exercises at a few places in each of these units which invariably end with possible answers to the questions set in these exercises.

What you are expected to do is to go through the units and jot down important points in the space provided in the margin. This will help you to make notes and prepare for the examination. At the same time, you will be able to save time during your revision. Therefore, we advise you to use these margins.

We hope that we have given enough space for you to work on the self-check exercises.

The purpose of giving self-check exercises will be served satisfactorily if you compare your answers with the possible ones given at the end of each unit under 'Feedback to Check Your Progress Questions'. You may be tempted to have a furtive glance at possible answer(s), as soon as you come across an exercise. But we do hope that you will overcome the temptation and turn to these possible answers (which are not the best answers necessarily) only after you write your own. These exercises are not meant to be submitted to us for correction or evaluation. Instead, the exercises are to function as study tools to help you keep on the right track as you read the units.

Besides this, counselling is also provided at your study centres for this course. Attending a counselling session will help you to clarify your queries and doubts. Counselling sessions are also the time when you can meet other learners, and see the diverse nature of the learner profile. If your learning style is discussion and interaction based, it is always suggested to attend the counselling sessions. Along with the counselling sessions, there are other media materials, and services available in this course, and you may like to take advantages of these by attending the teleconference sessions/virtual classes as and when conducted. You will receive information about special arrangements regarding this from time to time.

In this course, you have to submit one assignment consisting of both essay type and short answer type questions which carries 25% weightage. We suggest the following norms to be strictly practiced while you are working through the assignments:

- Write your roll number legibly as indicated in the Programme Guide.

- Before you put down anything in words, assimilate what you have read and integrate it with what you have gathered from your experience to build your answer.
- Make the best use of the block and the additional reading materials for diligently working through the assignments.

Beside the assignment, you have to appear for term-end examination for this course which carries 75% weightage.

About this block:

This is fifth or the last block of the course “Learner Support Systems and Services”. After discussing the issues related to Assessment of Learner Performance in distance education such as Tutor Comments, Tutoring through Correspondence and Supplemental Interaction, now we will make an attempt to focus on some important aspects of Learner Support Services such as Learners’ Expectations in Distance Education, Management of Support Services, and Monitoring Learners’ Progress. Since a learner has a very crucial role in the teaching-learning process in general and in distance education in particular, we have discussed various issues related to Management of Learner Support in distance education elaborately in all the units throughout this block.

In the first unit of this block, we have discussed learners’ expectations from various aspects in detail. We have focused on the meaning and concept of expectations, the characteristics of a distance learner, various domains of expectations and learners’ satisfaction.

In order to cater to the needs, aspirations and individual differences of the target groups, the management of learner support assumes a crucial significance. In view of these it is important to understand the components of learner support, i.e. academic and non-academic, and their effective planning, organization and management by the ODL institution. Therefore, in the second unit we have discussed various issues related to management of learner support, data management and quality assurance in learner support.

In the third unit, we have tried to find out why some learners successfully study through distance mode while others do not. We have also examined the causes of student attrition, categorized the types, and focused on some well known models of attrition. We have also discussed the factors that contribute to learner success and the measures that can be adopted for student persistence. The discussion in this unit is based on the inferences drawn from the empirical research studies conducted at some of the Open Universities across the globe. We hope that this unit would be of particular interest to you as it will give you an insight into the issue of learners’ progress and will probably help you in managing student dropout.

In the last unit, we have discussed about one of the important components of learners’ support i.e. how to use library services effectively. You should know about different types of library resources and services available in a library in the context of supporting distance learners. Therefore, in this unit we have discussed the information needs of distance learners and the guidelines for providing library services to them. This will enable you to think, plan and support distance learners in a more systematic manner.

UNIT 1 LEARNERS' EXPECTATIONS IN DISTANCE EDUCATION

Structure

- 1.0 Introduction
- 1.1 Learning Outcomes
- 1.2 Who is a Distance Learner?
- 1.3 Learners' Expectations
 - 1.3.1 Distance Education in General
 - 1.3.2 Study Materials
 - 1.3.3 Academic Counselling
 - 1.3.4 Assignments and Grades
 - 1.3.5 Technology Use
 - 1.3.6 Peer Group
 - 1.3.7 Institutions' Services
- 1.4 Learners' Satisfaction
- 1.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 1.6 References and Further Readings
- 1.7 Feedback to Check Your Progress Questions

1.0 INTRODUCTION

You have gone through Block-04 of this course ES-313 on Learner Support Systems and Services. In this block we are presenting Management of Learner Support. Since a learner has a very crucial role in the teaching-learning process in general and in distance education in particular, in this unit of the block, we shall discuss learners' expectations from various aspects in detail. The knowledge of learners' expectations, as we shall see, has a definite benefit not only for the policy makers in distance education but also for those involved in various stages of programme development and delivery.

Although it may seem that the concept of learners' expectations is associated with some psychological phenomenon only, it also serves both scientific and practical purposes. Because, at the most critical end of the teaching-learning process is the individual who intends to learn something from the teacher or course material. He/She has an active mind which correlates the things with his/her past experiences, thinks logically, and reaches at certain conclusions. He/She is there with certain pre-defined goals and expectations. About expectations, s/he may or may not be aware but these influence, shape and determine his/her path of learning to a great extent.

We all are unique individuals who are different from each other not only in physical appearance and features, but also in our psychological traits and characteristics. We belong to different backgrounds and social set up. Besides heredity, the environment also makes us unique as we have distinct thinking and behavioural patterns even in a given similar situation. However, for the most part, we have certain common broad expectations from those at the other end. These have different effects and implications in various walks of life like learning. Hence, it becomes inevitable for us to have a clear understanding of the expectations our students have from us as practitioners of distance

education system. In this unit, we shall discuss the meaning and concept of expectations, the characteristics of a distance learner, various domains of expectations and learners' satisfaction.

1.1 LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- Identify the characteristics of a distance learner;
- Describe the concept of learner expectations;
- Explain major domains of learner expectations;
- Describe the concept of learner satisfaction; and
- Discuss the importance of learner expectations and satisfaction in the field of learning.

1.2 WHO IS A DISTANCE LEARNER?

As is now well known world-wide that the traditional education system cannot effectively meet the educational needs of all categories of aspirations due to its inherent limitations. Rigid entry conditions, impracticality of attending the classes in conventional institutions, and many other similar factors also lead one to find an alternative opportunity of studying further where there are no such hardships in maintaining job-study balances. And it is perhaps for this reason that the distance education system has emerged as an effective and alternative method of course delivery to cater to the educational needs of the masses. If we focus upon the characteristics of people who become distance learners, we shall find that most of them are the people who, for whatsoever reasons, could not get higher education in the conventional system after their schooling. The possible reasons may include various socio-economic conditions, geographical factors, physical constraints, job and family responsibilities etc. But, one thing which surely plays a significant role is that despite all such problems or difficult life circumstances, they had a desire and motivation to continue their studies and learning.

Throughout the world, an increase in enrolment in distance education institutions and programmes is being witnessed. Because of their specific job and/or family circumstances, more and more people are turning towards distance education not only to raise their educational attainment levels but also to upgrade their skills and improve their knowledge. But, do they possess the same characteristics as students of conventional system? In order to better serve this growing student community, it is very important to study their particular characteristics.

As far as distance higher education is concerned, the learners/students are generally above 18 years of age because most students who are enrolled in any bachelor's level degree programme are supposed to have 12 years of schooling. Hence, they can be regarded as adult learners of distance education system and one must be acquainted with the principles of adult learning before proceeding further towards studying their expectations.

To be effective, it is important for distance higher education to follow the way the adults learn, because they have special needs and learning styles. The credit for pioneering the field of adult learning goes to Malcom Knowles (1970) who highlighted the following major characteristics of adult learners. A minute reading of these might lead one to close understanding of the expectations these learners have.

- As the adult learners are mature, autonomous and self-directed, they tend to learn in a different manner than children do. They identify their learning needs, set their learning pace and like to take the responsibility of the same. They like to direct themselves for learning rather than get directed by others and act like more independent learners.
- Adult learners possess a reservoir of life experiences and knowledge. They need and like the opportunities to get full benefit of the same and to correlate their previous life experiences and knowledge with their current learning.
- Being mature learners, the adult learners set their own goals and are goal-oriented. They know how to achieve their targets and strive for the same depending upon their various life responsibilities like job, family etc.
- Adult learners are prone to find the reason and relevancy in learning something. Since they have enrolled in any programme on their own will and wish and to achieve any specific target, they wish to gain that is really helpful for them in their job and/or other related activities/responsibilities.
- Instead of aspiring for merely or largely theoretical knowledge, the adult learners are more interested in practical-oriented tasks/skills which might be further useful for them in their life and/or job settings. This aspect determines most of the choices they make regarding their programme/courses.
- Adult learners are to be treated respectfully just like all other learners. At appropriate point of teaching-learning, their past experiences and previous knowledge are to be duly recognized and utilised in various learning settings.

Apart from the above psychological characteristics of the distance learners, few demographic characteristics also need mention here. The characteristics of distance education students enrolled in universities for seven countries viz., New Zealand, Israel, Canada, Netherlands, Britain, Germany, and Spain have been reported in an international study (Sheets 1992, in Tucker 2003). Figures represent enrolment of students in respective open universities "in percentages":

Characteristics of Students in Open Universities

| | Massey U. N. Zealand | Evrymn U. Israel | Athabasca Canada | OU of Nthlds | British British | FeU FeU | UNED Spain |
|----------|-------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|-----------------|--------------------|------------|---------------|
| Age 24 | 85 | 69 | 67 | 92 | 95 | 73 | 76 |
| Male | 37 | 47 | 39 | 67 | 56 | 75 | 70 |
| Female | 63 | 53 | 61 | 33 | 44 | 25 | 30 |
| Employed | 83 | NA | 86 | 73 | 81 | 67 | 88 |

Explanations and Sources:

Massey University, New Zealand (Tremaine & Owen, 1984)

Everyman's University, Israel (Guri, 1986)

Athabasca University, Canada (Peruniak, 1983)

Open University of the Netherlands (Boon & van Enckevort, 1987)

British Open University (Rumble, 1983)

Fernuniversitat: Gesamthochschule, Federal Republic of Germany (Rumble, 1983)

Universidad Nacional de Educacio'n a Distancia, Spain (Rumble, 1983)

NA: Not Available

Various studies reveal that in comparison to the students in traditional education system, the distance learners have an average age of 25 years, females outnumber males, and most distance learners are employed and have family and higher income levels. Being in full-time employment is one of the biggest factors which do not allow them to get enrolled in face to face, regular education system. It has also been found world-wide that most of the distance learners are married and mature. Despite all odds, they have enrolled themselves further in higher education, which shows that they are internally motivated. The profile and demographic characteristics of the learners of Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), New Delhi, India, the largest Open University with 03 million (IGNOU Profile 2011) student strength at present, also reveal that distance learners, being a heterogeneous group, come from diversified backgrounds.

Check Your Progress 1

- Notes:** a) Space is given below for your answer.
b) Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

Why is it important to know the characteristics of a distance learner?

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1.3 LEARNERS' EXPECTATIONS

While going through the characteristics of distance learners in the previous section, you might have got a fair idea that they have a different set of expectations as per their level of maturity, life experiences and previous knowledge etc. Well, we all do have some expectations in our lives. But what actually do we mean by expectations?

Expectation means an act or state of expecting, anticipating or looking forward to anything/event which is about to or should happen as per our knowledge, experience and/or certain calculations/statistics. In the case of uncertainty it takes place with confidence/fear of fulfilment.

There are few things about expectations which need a detailed discussion before proceeding further.

- Do expectations take place *when there is uncertainty* or when we have no factual information or when final result is not in our hands? Say, a player has expectations that s/he may win the game. Why does s/he expect so? Because at the time of the start of the game, it is totally uncertain who shall win, because s/he has no factual information about winning the game, and because the final result of the game is not in her/his hands at the start of the game. So, it seems to hold true that expectations take place when there is uncertainty or when we have no factual information or when final result is not in our hands.

- Do expectations take birth in the case of uncertainty *with confidence/fear of fulfilment*? It shows that expectations are both positive and negative. The player in the example above has positive expectation with confidence of its fulfilment. But, the opponent, who is weaker and less prepared, may have negative expectation with fear of its fulfilment i.e., loosing the game.
- Do we expect certain things on the basis of our knowledge, experiences and/or calculations/statistics? It also seems to hold true because if we have knowledge of the past performance of the opponent and we find him/her weaker or less prepared, we may expect victory. Similarly, experiences, whether our own or of others, say that the chances of his/her winning against us are remote, we may expect victory. As far as calculations/statistics are concerned, this variable might act strongly where quantifiable attributes are associated as is done in case of stock markets and weather predictions.
- Expectation means an act or state of expecting, anticipation or looking forward to anything which is about to or should happen. It means that expectations belong to, for the most part, the events of very near future.
- Expectations are expectations only. These are not future or final results. These may be fulfilled. These may not be fulfilled.
- Expectations are associated with emotions of happiness, disappointment and surprise. When positive expectations are fulfilled (we won as expected) and negative ones are not fulfilled (we didn't lose as expected), we feel happy. Similarly, when positive expectations are not fulfilled (unexpectedly, we didn't win) and negative ones were fulfilled (we lost as expected), the disappointment is faced. And, if some positive outcome happens which was not at all expected, it turns out to be a surprise (unexpectedly, we won).

It is general human nature that we all do cherish certain expectations depending upon the particular circumstances and life situations. So do the distance learners. When a person turns to be a distance learner by enrolling in any distance learning programme, he/she might have expectations from the following spheres of his/her academic endeavour.

1.3.1 Distance Education in General

Coming back to basics, here the distance learner, who has opted the open and distance learning to achieve his/her goals, has definite expectations from the distance education system. As is clear by now that we know about the distinctive features of open and distance learning, the same features might have attracted a person to be a distance learner. Hence, he/she has expectations like:

- For entering a programme of his/her interest or needs, he/she should meet relaxed entry qualifications.
- He/She would be able to select the courses as per his/her desire and professional requirements.
- He/She would be allowed to learn at his/her own pace and place.

- There would be certain mechanism for two-way communication and s/he would not be left totally in isolation.
- He/she would get the specially designed self-learning print materials as well as he/she would be able to use non-print media also like radio, television, audio-visual lessons etc. for learning.
- And, that he/she would get the most efficient support services from his/her Regional Centre, Study Centre, Academic Counsellors, library services etc.

1.3.2 Study Materials

In the traditional education system, the students get instruction from their teacher in a face to face situation when they attend their class and use the text materials for learning. Whereas, in the distance education system, the learners get little opportunity of interaction with their teachers, counsellors and fellow learners. For learning, they depend heavily on specially designed and developed (or transformed) self-instructional and self-learning materials. Because the distance learner might not be able to be in continuous or regular contact with the teacher, the study material should perform the functions of a teacher. Keeping the above points in view, the distance learners may have the following expectations from their study materials which are in essence the various characteristics of self-instructional and self-learning materials:

- It should guide and motivate them, ask them questions and answer their questions, and lead them to learn in a desired way, just like their teacher would do.
- The study materials being *self-explanatory*, they should be able to learn from these materials independently and without much external support.
- The study materials should be *self-contained* so that the distance learner should not be required to explore supplementary learning materials.
- Fostering *self-directed* learning, the study material itself should provide all the necessary guidance and instruction to the learners.
- The study materials, being *self-motivating*, should act as a teacher to constantly motivate and encourage the learners for learning.
- The feedback has also very important role in learning. Hence, the study materials should also serve the purpose as *self-evaluating* by providing self-check exercises etc.

Access devices (title of the unit, structure, objectives, presentation of the text/content, diagrams and illustrations, glossary etc.) play a definite and guided role in the study materials by taking the course writer closer to his/her learners and taking the learners closer to the content which is there to perform the role of a distant teacher. Thus, the course writers in distance education have to be extra-cautious while developing self-learning, self-instructional materials which have to cater to the principles of adult learning as well as fulfil the above criteria so as to facilitate the learning of a distance learner. If the study materials do not come true to the expectations of the learners, it may de-motivate them from further study. So, a course writer has to always keep in

mind his/her target group, their particular characteristics and interests besides fulfilling the demands of the course.

1.3.3 Academic Counselling

The most important role in distance education and learning setting is played by the academic counsellors. They have to keep their students, who are studying at a distance, on the right track throughout their studies and to maintain them there until the course/programme is completed. By a general definition, an academic counsellor is a person who, using his/her interpersonal skills and knowledge, helps a learner resolve their various types of educational difficulties. This role, in distance education setting, becomes even more challenging because both the counsellor and the learner may even not be in direct contact at times.

The distance education system provides ample opportunities to the distance learners to meet and interact with their academic counsellor(s) at a given time, at a given place to discuss their various difficulties which they may have faced during the course of their studies. The students are attached at a given study centre and are informed of the counselling schedule well in advance. However, the prospective and present learners come there for wide variety of purposes which may include:

- **Information:** In many circumstances, the students visit their study centre and meet their counsellors to know about particular courses, fee details and about various last dates etc.
- **Advice:** Sometimes, in addition to information, the learners also seek or are to be given advice, which include the information about all the available options and suggesting the student about the best option for him/her.
- **Counselling:** Counselling, being learner dependent, requires helping the students make suitable and appropriate decisions for themselves by knowing and understanding their particular needs and motivations. Here, they themselves decide for the course/career best for them.

Counselling, by nature, can be both academic as well as non-academic and can take place at various stages like pre-entry, entry, during the course of study, examinations and post-study stage. What particular help (information, advice or counselling) a student needs depends on him/her. However, when a student approaches a counsellor, s/he may have the following broad expectations from him/her:

The counsellor shall:

- Listen to him/her attentively and personally.
- Help him/her learn the things effectively.
- Provide feedback on his/her learning.
- Identify his/her strengths and weaknesses and help him/her overcome his/her weaknesses.
- Monitor the progress of his/her learning and suggest the ways for effective learning accordingly.

- Guide him/her write assignments effectively and evaluate the same to monitor his/her learning.
- Help him/her prepare for examinations.
- Counsel him/her for further studies after passing a particular programme.

Most importantly, the learners expect warmth, acceptance, genuineness and empathy from their counsellors. They also expect their counsellors to be available to them as and when required for seeking their expert counselling and support. The media of counselling distance learners may vary as per the facilities available to the individual learners and to the institution/counsellors. The interaction between a learner and counsellor may take place face to face or thorough ICT tools such as mobile, websites, email, multimedia CDs, by mail, radio, television, and teleconferencing.

Check Your Progress 2

- Notes:** a) *Space is given below for your answer.*
b) *Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.*

What qualities do the learners expect in a good academic counsellor?

.....
.....
.....
.....

1.3.4 Assignment and Grades

Assignments have a very important role to play in the teaching-learning process in distance education. There may be long spatial distance between a learner and distance education institution which is bridged by sending assignments to the learners and requiring them to reply the questions there in. The learners answer the assignment questions and send back which are then evaluated by the evaluators/academic counsellors/distance teachers. The assignment responses reflect what the learners have understood and learnt. The assignments are then returned to the learners with the comments/remarks of the evaluator so that the assignment answers may serve the purpose of providing feedback to the learners and inform them their strengths and weaknesses. These comments carry the meaningful and constructive suggestions of the evaluator which further form the bases of successful learning. Thus, the assignments serve the purpose of two-way communication between the learner and evaluator/academic counsellors/distance teacher despite physical distances between the two.

TMA and CMA

Tutor Marked Assignments (TMAs) and Computer Marked Assignments (CMAs) are the two types of assignments that are generally used in distance education system. The assignments that are marked/evaluated by the distance teacher/tutor are known as TMAs and carry the comments of the tutor. While assignments that are marked/evaluated by the computer (generally objective type questions) are called CMAs. It is

another way to be in touch with the distance learner and monitor his/her learning. It is a two way communication to provide the learner feedback about the quality of his/her learning and to further guide him for effective learning.

From assignments' component, the learner has certain different types of expectations. Somewhere he/she knows that it is evaluation of his/her own past performance – the assignment responses he/she had submitted at his/her Study Centre. So, it is directly associated with it. It has the same value for him/her as any other term end examination. He/she expects good comments and good grades from the tutor. But, the tutor has to work objectively in order to lead the learner on the genuine path of learning. That's why, the role of tutor here becomes very crucial as he/she has to give feedback in a very positive and motivating manner. Furthermore, it is the tutor's comments which help the learner improve his/her study habits through his/her (tutor's) suggestions and counselling provided to him/her on assignment responses.

As we saw distance learners are adult and mature persons; hence we need to be careful in recording our comments on their assignment responses. It is highly important to write pedagogically purposeful comments on the assignments. These are positive and constructive comments providing a definite guidance to the learners and suggest them the ways to improve their weaknesses and performance. It is very important for the tutor to avoid the misleading, hollow and harmful comments. Since the learners expect a lot from the tutor, the tutors may use this unique opportunity to break the isolation the learners face and feel in distance education settings. They may write their comments in light of the performance by other learners. This may definitely boost up the motivation of the learners.

Just like most examinations, the assignments are evaluated and interpreted in terms of grades which, in a more reliable way, give us an overall estimate of the ability of the learner and tell us something about the quality of the performance of the learner. The learners here expect that the tutor, while evaluating their responses/assignment, will give due consideration to various characteristics of their responses like the content, form and presentation.

1.3.5 Technology Use

Media and technology have played a very significant role in the growth, development and spread of distance education and learning. The world has witnessed a very rapid progress made by the course design, development and delivery from the print media to web-based learning. And, the credit goes to the advances of technology. In simple terms, media here means the forms of communication which facilitate interaction and learning. Similarly, technology here means the hardware part and the mechanisms that help to convey the media message. As we can see, both are essential for the learning to take place. The audio-visual lessons on any given topic here refer to the media and the CD or DVD carrying these lessons refers to the technology.

With the advancement of technology, the learning opportunities have seen tremendous jump. Starting from the print technologies, we have now computers and satellites. As once the audio cassettes and learning from radio were very popular in various parts of the world, the rapid

urbanization and reducing costs of newer technologies are changing the way the world learns now. Dissemination of information through websites, affordability of mobile handsets and connections, and communication through email have had a deep, fast and ever lasting impact on almost everybody who once has come in contact with these latest technologies. And, most educational institutions are utilizing these technologies to deliver their content to their recipients.

The learners of the present age are more aware and alert than ever before. They know how and where to find out the desired content for learning and growth. It has posed a challenge to the educational institutions and teachers as well. They have to offer the best available - be it media or technology use - to their learners. As per the expectations of the learners, the institutions are utilizing more and more - the audio-visual CDs, radio and television, teleconferencing, interactive radio counselling, and educational satellite (EduSat) etc. to reach and deliver their media and content to their learners spread in every nook and corner under their jurisdiction.

1.3.6 Peer Group

By nature, in distance education set up, the distance learner is physically away from his/her distance teacher/institution and from his/her co-learners/peer group. The interaction among them takes place only in contact programmes held usually on week ends at the designated study centres and between the teachers and learners through assignment responses.

An individual distance learner, who otherwise lives in isolation, has certain expectation from his/her peer group ranging from information sharing to academic cooperation and discussions. First and foremost is to remove this isolation by developing a rapport with few co-learners. Only then he/she can expect vital information from them about important announcements, counselling schedules, examination pattern and preparations, others' progress, and post-examination activities etc. He/she has certain things which he/she wants to share as a student and expects other learners to listen to him/her seriously. If someone has some additional information or supplementary study material, he/she expects them to share it with him/her also. He/she also wants others to share with him/her the comments given by the tutor on their assignment responses so that he/she may also improve upon.

Taking it as a unique and rare opportunity, he/she has a strong desire to get the most out of these interactions in or out of the counselling sessions for learning purposes and expects others to cooperate from academic point of view because they all are there for a common goal and bear the similar isolation.

This peer group acts as a positive force to minimize the effects of feelings of isolation, help them survive the risk of dropping out and to sustain the motivation of a learner in studies. Thus the peer group plays a vital role in distance education. A group leader is not essentially required in such discussions but everyone can be encouraged to share their opinion in group discussions. Utilizing the latest technologies, the net-savvy learners may develop their own communities or societies by blogging or group-mails. Otherwise, sharing and discussing vital information with other learners on mobile phones can also serve the purpose effectively.

1.3.7 Institutions' Services

In distance education system, generally the student support services are provided at three levels: the Headquarters, regional centres and study centres. The Headquarters, for the most part, makes various policies and decides various modalities of implementing support services including admissions to examinations. Study centres are the actual points where the learners get the maximum academic support. Regional centres play the role of intermediary link between the Headquarters and the study centres.

The enrolled learners are attached to a Study Centre for various support services. These study centres are generally established in institutions of higher learning like colleges and universities. However, depending upon the nature of academic or professional programme, the study centres are also established in the institutions which have required infrastructure and facilities for holding practical sessions to provide practical training. For example, the computer programmes are run where computer labs are there with systems of latest configuration and internet connection, and health sciences programmes are run where training and surgical instruments etc. are available.

Although we know that the distance learner is independent and he/she can study on his/her own and at his/her own pace and place, yet he/she needs to clear few doubts from the counsellors about studies and assignments etc., and to get various other support services. To fulfil this purpose, the study centres are established. But, the effective and successful functioning of the Study Centre depends largely upon its support services staff which comprises of both the teachers and non-teaching staff. The Study Centre is headed by a Coordinator who is a senior teacher in the host institution. He/she may be assisted by a few Assistant Coordinators who again are teachers. For some clerical nature tasks to be performed at the study centres, there are few assistants who are from non-teaching staff of the host institution. Teachers from the host institution or outside are engaged for course-wise academic counselling of the learners.

The learners have a lot of expectations from their study centres which mainly include the following. The Study Centre would:

- provide them their study material and assignment question papers in time (if it is to be provided by the Study Centre as per the policy of the Headquarters).
- inform them about their counselling schedules (theory and practical).
- organise face to face counselling sessions for them.
- extend the available facilities for using audio-video programmes, teleconferencing and library facilities.
- receive their assignment responses, get these evaluated and return the evaluated assignments with tutor comments.
- attend to and respond to their queries.
- attend to their grievances effectively.
- provide pre-entry, admission-related, during studies, examination-related and post-entry counselling.

Thus, the Study Centre plays a very important role in the academic journey of a learner. If it provides effective support services, the learners will be motivated to complete their programme. And, if it does not, it would be wasting its valuable resources. The learners may also lose their interest in their studies and may drop-out.

1.4 LEARNERS' SATISFACTION

Can we say that once the system is in place and we provide the best services, will our target group be satisfied? Although satisfaction is a psychological phenomenon and may differ from individual to individual but can we make some broad, general rules for our target group's satisfaction? Well, satisfaction is a complex product of interrelated activities in an educational setting. Having a system in its right place, knowledge of learners' expectations, effective execution of policies, dissemination of information, and providing best support services can help a lot.

In an educational scenario, a wide variety of activities are to be performed by persons engaged at various levels or in different branches which have direct bearing on the learner. Be it admission, study material, assignment question papers, evaluation or any other related activity, every aspect has impact on the admitted student. Universities can make a full-proof system, no doubt, but as we just saw in Sub-section 1.3.7 that when it comes to providing support services, it depends upon the human beings who act as service provider. The major areas which need the most attention and are directly associated with learner satisfaction can be categorized as below:

- **Counselling Services:** Mostly a prospective learner first approaches its Study Centre in his/her vicinity for pre-entry counselling and after admission too, he/she contacts his/her Study Centre again and again for support services and academic counselling. Being an adult, he/she expects respectful treatment, better support and immediate redressal of his/her grievances. He/She observes minutely whether the Study Centre communicated the counseling schedule on time and the counseling sessions are well organized. Whether the academic counselors clear the doubts and provide effective counseling. He/She also wants the counseling sessions to be interactive feedback on his/her assignment responses to help him/her clarify the concepts. Project proposals, wherever applicable, are also to be clearly marked and discussed. Besides the academic counselors, the functioning of the study centre staff has also direct bearing on his/her satisfaction levels. Learner expects the staff at the study centres to be helpful.
- **Study Materials:** Since in distance education, the learner is in least contact with his/her tutor/counsellor and peer groups, he/she has also definite expectations from his/her study materials. He/She is influenced when he/she finds that s/he has received his/her study materials well in time and the concepts are clearly explained in the study material. The availability of supplementary study materials (like video/audio) also have a very positive impact on his/her confidence level.

- **Examination:** Just like admissions and studies, examination procedures also carry an important place in a learner's life. He/She needs to be well informed by the University about examination dates and patterns. Also, learner needs his/her results and grade card on time.

Besides better support services, the most important thing is that whether the purpose with which the learner got enrolled in a programme was fulfilled. For example, while studying in a particular programme or course did the learner get the desired/required knowledge of the subject or skills which could help him/her in his/her professional career and life.

Check Your Progress 3

- Notes:** a) *Space is given below for your answer.*
b) *Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.*

How would you measure the satisfaction level of your learners?

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1.5 LET US SUM UP

Just as the popularity of any television programme is judged by the numbers of its viewers, the success of any business product is judged by the number of its customers or users, similarly the number of students tells a lot about an academic institution/University. It is a reflection on both the system and functioning of that institution. The students enter an institution with some pre-defined mental set and expectations. It is very important for an institution to study those expectations and the level of satisfaction of its learners in order to improve upon wherever required and to strengthen its system.

The learners' expectations are shaped as per their personal characteristics and goals, and are associated with various academic activities. They have certain perceptions about and expectations from the institution they are entering, from their course materials, Study Centre and its staff, and from teachers and academic counsellors as well. Being adult learners, they expect recognition for their knowledge and experience and respectful treatment. Understanding a distance learner, studying his/her particular academic needs and providing him/her effective counselling are the most challenging areas of distance education.

In this present unit, we have discussed in details some characteristics of distance learners, their various expectations from distance education system, study materials, academic counsellors, assignment evaluation and feedback, use of various technologies, from other learners and from institutions providing support services. We also discussed the

major areas of learners' satisfaction in this unit as it is the satisfaction level of the learners which not only helps them to complete their studies and their programme but also helps the institution to expand and grow.

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1.7 FEEDBACK TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS QUESTIONS

Check Your Progress 1

It is very important to know the characteristics of a distance learner for the (a) policy makers to help them make effective policies for their proposed target group; (b) course writers to help them design and develop the study materials as per the expected past knowledge, background and experiences of their proposed learners; (c) support service providers to help them provide the support services in a better and effective way. Thus, to help each person in the educational set up perform as per his/her expected role and responsibility, it becomes crucial to have a clear idea about the characteristics of a distance learner.

Check Your Progress 2

The distance learners, being adult learners, when meet the academic counsellors for counselling expect warmth, acceptance, genuineness and empathy from the counsellors. If the counsellors welcome their learners with warmth, accept them as they (learners) are, are friendly and genuine, and empathize with their learners are going to win the confidence of their learners.

Check Your Progress 3

The most preferred method of measuring the satisfaction level of the learners is to develop a five-point satisfaction scale. First of all, you may list the various components/areas you wish to measure. There may be 15-20 questions in your scale covering these components/areas. The questions should be properly worded and should be clear and precise. Then the target group may be asked to rate their level of satisfaction on the five point scale: very satisfied, somewhat satisfied, neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, somewhat dissatisfied, very dissatisfied. After collecting the data/responses, the data may be statistically analyzed to reach the conclusion.

