

Tutor Support in an Open Distance Learning (ODL) Environment for Upgrading Teachers

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ABSTRACT Tutor support in open distance learning (ODL), which is beyond the scope of course material, is very important as it fosters collaborative learning and support in students. This support could be extended to that of an educational counsellor or tutor counsellor, career guidance, manager, assessor, facilitator, demonstrator, role model or pastor and the tutor could also act as a friend and advocate for the student within the ODL system. To this end, action research studies in the United Kingdom with Open University students have shown that students come to ODL courses with varying expectations of the levels of service and support they will receive from their tutors. It has been further established that specific expectations-led quality assurances that enable the sharing of these expectations before a course starts could be of mutual benefit to the student and the tutor, as well as generally improving the overall quality of tutor support provided by the distance learning organisation. This process, it is argued, would be appreciated by the students as it would help to shape their future and have beneficial effects on student satisfaction with tutor support, consequently reducing student drop-out and increasing course completion rates.

INTRODUCTION

One important characteristic of ODL is that teaching and learning are carried out in a situation where tutors and students are distant from one another both geographically and in terms of time. The process of Distance Education (DE), and its evolution over time, occurred because people were yearning for improved access to education and self-development. Within this mode of delivery, education becomes accessible to people who cannot attend regular classes due to social, structural or personal situations. As a force contributing to social and economic development, ODL is fast becoming an accepted and indispensable part of the mainstream of educational systems in developed and developing countries.

As a result, more and more traditional higher education institutions are rapidly transforming themselves from a single to a dual mode of delivery, recognising the importance of DE in providing students with the best methods of enjoying learning. Tutoring as a student support in ODL setting has sometimes been undervalued, with limited research done on this aspect, yet it plays a critical role in any ODL context (Lentell 2003). Understanding the importance of tutor roles and identifying the necessary tutoring skills is paramount for the success of DE. DE recognises the role of the tutor and also takes into ac-

count that there is a crucial interdependent relationship between tutors and students. This ongoing relationship enhances learning and helps students to articulate their learning needs thereby acquiring the skills of reflection and independence. Within this relationship, tutors facilitate and guide the learning process of their students so that students gain knowledge and understanding. To achieve this, tutors develop and practise a multitude of skills and strategies. Therefore, consistent and well-planned tutoring activities help DE students to feel that they are in a safe learning environment in which they can ask questions, reveal their uncertainties and explore new dimensions of their studies.

Objectives of the study

This study investigated the role played by tutor support for teachers upgrading their qualifications through the mode of ODL in higher education institutions. The study also captured the needs and views of ODL student teachers about tutor support provided to them during their studies at the University of South Africa (Unisa). Using a confirmatory research design with qualitative methods, data was drawn from 45 National Professional Diploma in Education (NPDE) students using focus group and individual interviews. The findings suggested that, tutor support plays a critical role in the studies

of teachers upgrading their qualifications through the mode of DE. Furthermore, literature studies, as will be demonstrated in the following section, emphasise that students studying through DE value tutor support very highly.

The Tutor: Coach and Mentor in an ODL Setting

The provision of ODL has entered a period in which education is regarded as a critical commodity. The price tag attached to it is determined in part by tutoring as an important learner support service in an ODL environment. Morgan and Smith (2001) assert that a tutor in an ODL situation provides developmental feedback and may also act as a coach and mentor, by certifying to the educational institution that their students have acquired certain skills to the specified level. The tutor, by virtue of his or her involvement in the teaching of the ODL course, may also become an external peer reviewer of the course material. This is so because it is the tutors' duty to facilitate the learning process such that the material becomes clearer and successful in meeting the needs of the students.

Moore (2003: 142) strongly contends that quite often, giving support to the ODL student is seen as one of the many functions of a tutor and "who would deny that learners will appreciate a teacher who communicates a mentorship and supportive style rather than one who is not supportive?" In support of this, Quakisa-Makoe (2005) observes that, ODL students, like everybody else, need tutor support as they go through life, especially when going through the big challenge of studying at a distance. With increased demand for access to higher education, institutions of higher learning are now challenged to radically improve their understanding of how students learn if they are to develop learning services or programmes that are supportive and responsive to the students' needs. Therefore, tutor support systems in ODL must indicate for whom they are designed and what is needed by the students. In turn, this should lead to determining how those needs can be met, within the constraints of costs, technologies and geography. It means that ODL institutions, through their course designers and developers, should show interest in responding to their students' needs by planning tutor support structures that respond to those needs.

Tutor support in DE can enhance enrolment, decrease attrition and provide for a well-rounded programme (LaPadula 2003). Therefore, high quality tutor support in DE remains a key issue in current thinking, debate and research, particularly in the twenty first century. Phillips (2003) and Barker and Crawley (2005) contend that this interest and need for high quality tutor support in ODL, is evidenced in a range of previous research projects, including Green (1998), Fletcher (2002) and Mcleod (2003). This renewed interest reaffirms the fact that nowadays tutor support is regarded as an integral part of the delivery of quality DE experiences (LaPadula 2003). As Barker and Crawley (2005: 3) argue, "the role of effective tutor support could be considered to be fundamental to the development of appropriate strategies to raise the retention and achievement rates of learners studying at a distance". Nemati (2008) asserts that a DE tutor is essential for success, and should understand his or her students and encourage them to concentrate on their studies more insightfully. Furthermore, Nemati (2008) cites the following as important characteristics of a good DE mentor or tutor:

- ♦ Be friendly and approachable.
- ♦ Plan carefully around students' needs, prepare thoroughly and know his or her subject content well.
- ♦ Facilitate learning and help students with academic and technological support in the related course of study.
- ♦ Mark assignments promptly and give high quality feedback to students.
- ♦ Communicate, guide and counsel students regularly in their studies and even in their private affairs.
- ♦ Assist DE students to develop time management and study skills.
- ♦ Know that students are unique and that they are autonomous learners.

These characteristics place a huge responsibility on the tutor; hence, he or she needs to be highly motivated, plans carefully and be disciplined. Equally, the characteristics raise critical issues salient to the quality delivery of distance learning. For example, these characteristics may help the ODL tutor to provide insights and encourage thought relating to people building and the assessment of quality in distance learning. Furthermore, it may provide some new ideas even to distance learning veterans and

may also provide a useful organisation of distance learning concerns.

The Model for Planning Tutor Support in an ODL Environment

Nowadays, serving the client has become the dominant principle in many spheres, such as education sector, as opposed to the earlier product-driven approaches and ODL is no different. The model suggested in this section presupposes principles that are to be borne in mind for the effective management and implementation of tutor support. They are:

Who Are the Students? This central question lies at the heart of the planning stage of the organisation of tutor support and yet it is often ignored by curriculum designers. ODL systems that start with the production of course materials in whatever medium can also ignore in important ways, the consideration of who their students are. Understanding who the students really are; their social background, their level of maturity, their average age, their level of understanding and their technological skills are of paramount importance in the planning of tutor support in an ODL context.

What Are the Needs of Students? Debate within an ODL institution about who its students are, or will be, provides the platform on which to analyse what they really need in terms of tutor support services. Although this may sound obvious, it is surprising how quickly one can find in one's own and other ODL systems, examples of practice which represent past rather than present needs, or top-down provision which has not resulted from analysis of who and what students really need. To challenge these practices can seem sometimes offensive within a professional framework to other colleagues, especially if students' wishes are taken as very significant elements in the design of ODL provision, which of course they should be.

How Will the Students' Needs Be Met? Fox (2003) indicates that tutors play an important role in addressing the students' needs to ensure education success in distance learning environments. For example, tutor's competency in addressing the students' needs in an ODL setting is crucial in ensuring the success of a distance education (Ustati and Hassan 2013). Crucial elements in the design of tutor services in ODL include the extent to which they can be provided

to students on a local, distant, individual or in group basis. These include the desire to have the tutor who is as helpful as possible to the student, a tutor who has clear insight of the programme of study and also who has the continuity of concern for the student on a longer than course-by-course basis. Social, cultural, economic and technological issues provide a range of factors in planning tutor support services. These services ensure that each ODL institution has a unique task, therefore, no general schemes can be drawn up on an international or even national basis. For example, different access pathways to technological infrastructure will demand different actions from the tutor in a particular learning environment in order to meet students' needs and aspirations.

How Much Will the Tutor Services Cost? Rumble (2000) comments that the cost of tutoring is either a direct student cost or semi-variable cost related to the number of students taken on by tutors. Clearly, the provision of such services represents a reversion to the labour-intensive methods found in traditional modes of delivery. However, by their very nature, tutor support services, which so closely relate to student numbers, and which represent the individualisation rather than mass production side of the total operation, work in reverse to the cost ratio of course materials which become cheaper per student the more students who are admitted.

In many ODL institutions, tutorial staff are hired on a part-time basis and the ratios in terms of costs can be seen as follows:

The varying of the ratios, that is, how much bigger the base is than the other two levels should be a significant element in determining the cost structures of tutor support services in ODL systems. The number of the students to be catered for will always inform the costs of the tutor support systems to be implemented.

How Will the Tutor Services Be Implemented? In terms of the implementation of tutor support, Fox (2003) addresses the needs for an effective instructional framework to ensure effective learning. To this end, Fox (2003) puts forth the five components of effective learning that should be seriously considered when implementing tutor support in an ODL environment, namely, that the tutor should be able to help students to solve real-life problems, activate students' prior knowledge as a precursor to undertaking new learning, take on board new knowledge through dem-

onstration and worked examples, help students to try out new learning by applying it in new situations and, finally, the tutor should integrate learning into the students' own world of experience. The suggestions outlined here indicate that during the implementation of tutor support, the tutor or the facilitator, in a distance learning environment, needs to be able to design his or her tasks so as to enable the students to understand, practise and relate the information to their real-life experiences.

How Will the Tutor Services Be Evaluated? The first edition of the major work on tutor evaluation in ODL by Thorpe (1998) mentions the term "quality control" only, pointing out the areas of concern that such a term omitted. Thorpe's work is notable in that it deals substantially with evaluation in ODL in the field of tutor support services in particular, providing case-studies of evaluation of tuition and counselling. Major conclusions reached by Thorpe (1998: 3) include the need for "tutor self-evaluation as well as system evaluation", in order to improve tutor responsiveness to the learner. The evaluation of tutor support, largely influenced by notions of quality assurance, means that tutor support has to be continuously examined, documented, reflected upon and innovated.

In the same breath, this study argues that tutor support is critical in any DE setting and it should be considered as an integral part of learner support services from the beginning, that is, during the planning stage of a particular course. Therefore, since tutor support, according to this study, is no more supposed to be regarded as an add-on to a predefined course, but itself defines what a particular course becomes, the popular model of course design first, tutor support at a later stage, as practised in many ODL institutions, should be questioned and possibly reversed. Thorpe (2002) supports this view when she asserts that ODL practitioners of each course should, during the planning stage, develop the term "tutor support" to identify a distinctive and important set of practices carried out by course designers from the beginning up to the use of collaborative learning, including evaluation stage as discussed above.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this study the researcher is seeking to answer the following two questions:

- ♦ What is the role played by tutor support in an ODL setting?
- ♦ What are the needs and perceptions of NPDE students relating to tutor support services used in their programme?

Issues raised in this regard are the importance of tutor support measures in an ODL mode, as well as the needs and attitudes of NPDE students towards the tutor support used in their studies. A qualitative approach was adopted, whereby the researcher built a complex and holistic picture, reported detailed views of informants and conducted the study in a natural setting (Merriam 2008). In this qualitative study, the voice of the individual is of cardinal importance (Denhart 2008). The researcher approached the use of tutor support strategies in an ODL setting from the point of view of NPDE learners, and therefore needed a methodological approach in which students' voices could be heard. Therefore, the qualitative approach was chosen to fulfil this particular need.

Sampling Procedure and Data Collection Methods

A purposive sampling approach was used in this study. Out of a target population of 155 Unisa NPDE final-year students, 25 were purposefully selected as a sample from four Unisa NPDE contact-session centres or cities, namely Durban (8 participants), Nelspruit (6 participants), Polokwane (6 participants) and Pretoria (5 participants). Contact sessions take place four times a year; for two days per session. The sample was representative of old and young teachers, males and females, those teaching in rural, semi-urban and urban areas and those teaching in primary schools. The four contact-session centres catered for students coming from all over South Africa.

The researcher had been an NPDE lecturer for seven years and therefore had complete access to all NPDE sites, and had also made informal observations with regard to the tutor support approaches used. Each group of participants from each centre was exposed to a semi-structured, focus group interview session. Thereafter, eight students, who were selected from the same group, were further exposed to individual interviews, that is, two participants from each centre. An individual interview (semi-structured) was used in order to obtain clarity

on certain issues and gain more in-depth responses from the participants; it also enabled the researcher to delve deeper into the subject areas to obtain critical information.

The researcher identified a skilled scribe who took notes of the resolutions agreed upon by the members of the focus groups at each centre. This approach freed the researcher to concentrate on asking questions and do the necessary probing. However, during individual interviews, the researcher took notes himself. In this study an audio recorder was deliberately avoided, so as to ease tension in the participants and also to allow them to air their views as freely as possible. Final-year NPDE students were regarded as information-rich, as they had been engaged in tutor support activities in their course for about three years.

Data Analysis

Data was recorded and organised based on an interpretive approach, derived from Wolcott's (1993) categories of description, analysis and interpretation. This approach enabled descriptions to be developed through a process called coding, and thereafter themes were developed and analysed and the meanings of the data were subsequently interpreted (Hennink et al. 2011). The findings under each theme will be discussed later so as to answer the research questions as mentioned earlier.

The next step was to summarise and interpret the data collected. In interpretation, the researcher went beyond the descriptive data to extract meaning and insights from data based on a study of the literature and his own experience. The researcher examined all entries with the same code and then merged these themes and categories into patterns by finding links and connections among them. This process further integrated the data, and the researcher could then make statements about relationships in the data. In that way, the researcher confirmed information he already had, as this was supported by the data, and by so doing eliminated misconceptions.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

As mentioned earlier, the data obtained from the focus group and individual interviews was

analysed. Responses were transcribed and coded, while similar responses were grouped together. The following themes emerged from the findings:

- ♦ tutor support during contact sessions
- ♦ tutor support through feedback strategies
- ♦ tutor support through technological resources
- ♦ needs of NPDE students and their perceptions of tutor support

During the interviews, comments made by participants in all four contact session centres were in line and congruent with what is found in the literature. In this section, the participants' responses to questions asked during the interview phase and the researcher's conclusions about each of the themes that emerged from the findings, will be discussed.

Tutor Support during Contact Sessions

The findings from the interview data revealed that the majority of the participants contended that, during contact sessions, most tutors offered good support and the majority of tutors came to class well-prepared. This was firmly confirmed by one of the participants from Pretoria, who stated that: *"NPDE tutors support us during contact sessions. We gain a lot of knowledge and we communicate directly with them. Our tutors support us. Each tutor takes time to explain and respond to our questions if we do not understand."*

Implicit in the above comment is the fact that most participants acknowledged the importance of tutor support during contact sessions. Tutor support is crucial in an ODL environment as it has a direct impact on the extent and quality of the relationship and transactional distance between the tutor and the learner. According to the participants, tutors are not only mediators of learning, but are also administrators of information, that is, facilitators and motivators who endeavour to unlock the setting that contribute to their success. This idea supports Lentell's (2003) assertion when he describes the role of the tutor as intensive, valuable and personal to each ODL student.

With the support from tutors, particularly during contact sessions, participants' active learning and professional development are promoted. The statement above is equally confirmed by the literature review, as Jasper (2006) indi-

cates that the positive role of tutors in DE assumes that all professionals should continue to develop throughout their working lives, that is, from becoming learner practitioners, to specialised and advanced professionals. Even the most highly motivated and self-directed DE students can find their experience lonely, difficult and sometimes daunting if they are not given adequate support and motivation by their tutors. In addition, social constructivism as the theoretical framework of this study, stresses the importance of the students' social interaction with tutors in any learning situation. From a social constructivist viewpoint, it is imperative to recognise the role of the tutor in the learning process, as this helps to shape the knowledge that the learner creates, discovers and attains in his or her intellectual development.

The participants' responses seemed to confirm what Lentell (2003: 66) advocates when she emphasises that *"the main responsibility of the tutor during contact sessions in a DE setting is to give guidance to learners, clarify issues, provide motivation and encourage togetherness as peers"*. In support of this, Lewis (1995) asserts that tutors in DE are regarded as the main source of support as they are supposed to cover areas such as facilitation of knowledge, study skills, careers guidance, motivational talks as well as educational counselling for learners. That is why Mays (2010) concludes that, through the support students get during contact sessions, tutors help to mediate learning. He also regards these sessions as a cornerstone of educational practices in all DE programmes.

Tutor Support through Feedback Strategies

The results focusing on written feedback strategies from both interview schedules showed that the majority of the participants felt that written feedback given after marking assignments was negative. One participant had this to say: *"The comments that we get from some lecturers are destroying us. One lecturer commented that my work does not show that I am an educator. This is discouraging indeed."*

In addition, some participants indicated that the feedback they received with their marked assignments was totally insufficient. Students echoed that tutors gave ticks and allocated a mark without adequate feedback comments. Participants also commented that that they some-

times obtained a high or a low mark without any feedback that justifies such a mark. Most students stated that at times they received their marked assignments late, that is, immediately before or after writing their examinations. For feedback to be effective, it has to be timely. Delay in providing students' feedback diminishes its value for learning. However, some students like those from the Pretoria centre mentioned that the feedback comments they received from tutors were positive and on time.

Another noteworthy finding is that most participants indicated that in some instances, written feedback was too generalised and was not related to the specific facts and observations. Therefore, such feedback comments did not count and did not give guidance on how to rectify mistakes made. Participants in this study were in agreement that, in their NPDE studies, feedback was a one-way process, from tutors to the students. For example, participants highlighted the fact that they were not given a chance to reflect on the contents of the study materials, let alone on the comments they got from their marked assignments. This is in conflict with Bedford (2007), who contends that in any ODL setting, the provision of a two-way feedback communication is of utmost importance as it builds rapport between a learner and a tutor.

Tutor Support through Technological Resources

ODL tutors are supposed to adopt the use of information communication technology (ICT) in order to support their distant teaching role and meet the growing demands of their students (Thatcher 2007). Most NPDE students mentioned that they needed the use of technological media, such as computers, projectors, e-mails and telephones, to be integrated into their studies. Participants also stated that they needed to be equipped with the technical knowledge and skills for using the technological equipment. Participants felt that these technical skills, like computer skills, would enable them to access and investigate facts and ideas, solve problems and reach meaningful conclusions as individuals.

With technological support at their disposal, students felt that *"lessons would be made more interesting, enjoyable and beneficial"*. This sentiment was expressed by a group from Durban. However, the majority of the partici-

pants indicated that most of their tutors did not use ICTs adequately. For example, during contact sessions, few tutors used overhead projectors as the only means of enhancing teaching and learning. According to them, the majority of the tutors used print (prescribed books or notes) and chalkboard as teaching resources. In their own words: *“at times those tutors trying to use power point presentations struggled to set up computers and data projectors and it seems as if they are not familiar with these technologies.”*

Participants felt that telephones, e-mails and faxes were not adequately used by their tutors so as *“to support us in updating and extending our knowledge”*. Some participants raised the issue that some tutors are not friendly when communicating by phones and that some tutors, rarely answered their office telephones. Some participants alluded to the fact that they did not have access to computers at home or in the immediate surroundings and therefore this negatively affected their studies and communication with their tutors. However, students highly commended the use of SMS messages and agreed that it is very effective. Ravhudzulo (2003) and Gulati, (2008) feel that using technology effectively, particularly in distance teaching, has become a global phenomenon as it makes learning more meaningful, interesting and valuable. To them, ICT support programmes conducted by tutors can provide ODL students with an opportunity to receive or access information, thereby enjoying learning, while at home or at their places of employment.

Needs and Perceptions of NPDE Students about Tutor Support

Participants in all centres were asked the following pertinent question: As an NPDE learner do you need tutor support in your studies? Participants confirmed the notion that tutor support is important in any learning situation as *“it assists us to facilitate own learning, enjoy our studies, gain knowledge and understanding”*. Furthermore, participants indicated that *“there is clear need for high quality information, constant advice and guidance. These, we do not get from most of our tutors, as we do not communicate with them as much as we could”*. Students stated that they need continuous help from the tutors, in planning their work-load and that they need information about their course struc-

ture and organisation, thereby gaining an overview of the course. They further stated that they themselves need to be disciplined in keeping to the plans they make to complete their course of study.

Learners were unanimous in that they need encouragement from their tutors; particularly at the start of each course, and that they need their confidence boosted throughout their studies. Participants also explained that they need tutors who can create a warm and accepting atmosphere as this could encourage them to exert themselves and could equally promote favourable attitudes to learning.

Participants echoed typical views such as *“some tutors are good and they really encourage us to work hard, they prepare for us and are ready to guide us properly.”* The above finding confirms what Holmberg (1989) states, that a positive student-tutor relationship and student achievement are guided by the tutor's ability to motivate the student. To Holmberg (1989), motivation and enjoyment in learning are inseparable and they both lead to success.

Most participants highlighted the fact that they had particular needs for information, such as study skills, how to form study groups, as well as how to pace themselves and plan their own work-load. The results also revealed that ODL students need help from their tutors in planning their work-load so that they are able to submit assignments on time. When probed further, participants said that accurate and complete information about their course structure and organisation could help them gain an overview of the course, thereby, helping them to plan their work and meet deadlines. Therefore, the ways in which students received information about their NPDE course, needed to include opportunities to reflect on and review the information they had received, how they used it and if there were still things they needed to know about their institution, namely Unisa.

Participants mentioned that as they were adults and DE learners, many demands are made on their time and they sometimes have to prioritise those demands. Therefore, their course may not always be their first priority. Life-work balance issues are a serious concern for DE students. For example, the pressures of work, money and family life could result in a lack of time for study. This could also result in stress that could result in the late submission of assignments. As

a result, participants stated that they needed tutors who could recognise those other demands (e.g. family commitments). This was confirmed by one of the participants who said that *“some lecturers just give us a lot of work; it seems as if they do not know that we have families and have to study at the same time.”*

What is evident from the above quotes is that tutors need to understand that tuition in an ODL setting has to be sensitive to the relevant context. This means that course design and tuition need to be built upon a strong DE culture that takes into account aspects such as the other life demands and time constraints facing students studying at a distance. The above finding argues that DE institutions, through their course developers, should show interest in responding to their students' needs by planning tutor support services that respond to those needs. In support of this view, Qakisa-Makoe (2005) emphasises that DE learners, like everybody else, need constant tutor support as they go through life, especially when taking up the big challenge of studying.

Some students, like those from the Durban centre, stated that they had other particular needs, such as dyslexia support and help with matters such as academic writing. The results revealed that some tutors did not support the students in this regard and, as a result, their studies were adversely affected. Some commented that they need tutors who are accessible at all times and who can provide one-to-one support when the need arises. These comments from participants suggest the need for quality planning, efficient provision, commitment and flexibility in the provision of tutor support in an ODL environment (Barker and Crawley 2005). This kind of support, argues Qakisa-Makoe (2005), will provide an environment that will improve students' commitment and motivation to learn.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the role played by tutor support in an ODL setting. It also captured the needs and perceptions of distance education students with regard to tutor support. Issues such as tutor support through feedback strategies, tutor support through technological resources and tutor support services during contact sessions in an ODL situation were dealt with in this study. The findings of this study provide

evidence that tutor support plays an important role in the studies of ODL students and that such students need constant tutor support in order to be motivated and successful. The participants' responses confirmed that the main responsibility of the tutor in an ODL environment is to give guidance to learners, clarify issues, provide motivation and encourage togetherness as peers.

Tutor support services, it has been argued, must address the question of whom they are designed for, and what is therefore needed by the students. In turn, this should lead to the determination of how those needs can be met, within the constraints of costs, technologies and geography. The implementation and evaluation of tutor support, largely influenced by notions of innovations, mean that tutor support has to be continuously examined, documented and reflected upon. With this study, those who are involved in tutor support services in ODL now find themselves at the centre of things and not at the periphery.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

- ♦ On-going planning, monitoring and evaluation mechanisms for identifying strengths, weaknesses and problems of tutor support services within an ODL institution should be put in place early enough. These programmes should seek ways of addressing anything that might affect the implementation of tutor support in any adverse way.
- ♦ Aggressive campaigns and training sessions in the use of ICT platforms like the MS power-point presentations must be established and such training must be made compulsory for all tutors. During these training sessions, the importance and the strengths of ICT facilities like computers as crucial learner support services must be emphasised. Students must also be encouraged by each department to register for the course in using the ICT facilities and to start using them to communicate and exchange ideas with peers and tutors.
- ♦ From time to time, line managers should moderate marked tasks such as assignments for quality assurance and follow up on the feedback responses given. Tutors can also

moderate marked assignments of other tutors in the same departments and regular report backs can be given during departmental meetings. Feedback should be regarded as a crucial learner support strategy in any DE course and should be exercised with the utmost care and importance it deserves. Therefore, tutors should be encouraged to give positive and corrective remedial comments at all times, even if a learner did not perform well. Students must be encouraged by course tutors to give feedback comments regarding mark allocation and the feedback comments given by a tutor on a marked task.

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