

## Online learning support services for distance education students: Responding to and maintaining the momentum

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### *Abstract*

*The development of online delivery of support services provides many opportunities for expanding the range of academic learning support services available for extramural students. However, it is important that these service improvements are sustainable rather than being temporary initiatives that cannot be adequately resourced on a long-term basis. This paper describes the creation and development of online learning support services designed to improve access to learning support for Massey University extramural students. Reasons for the initial momentum leading to the creation of the online services are discussed. The stages of development, and progress made so far with the construction and implementation of the online services are outlined. Features described include an evening and weekend instant communication service; an Internet-based assignment writing pre-reading service and the provision of online learning support resources. Intended future plans for sustaining the initial developments and making further improvements to online learning support services are outlined.*

### **Background**

Massey University is a multi-campus institution with campuses in Palmerston North, Wellington and Auckland. It is New Zealand's largest university by way of enrolments with some 37,300 students including 19,200 students studying extramurally. Massey has a tradition of providing quality extramural services enabling access to learning for students who might otherwise be excluded from the opportunity to participate in University education. Provision of academic learning support services is an important feature of this tradition.

In the 1980s and early 1990s learning support services for extramural students were provided by a dedicated service unit, the Centre for University Extramural Studies (CUES). Extramural students received coordinated, targeted support from a network of Regional Advisors who offered face-to-face course advice and assistance with study skills. The disestablishment of CUES in the mid 1990s and the restructuring of the former Regional Advisory Team, which directed CUES' work away from the support and advisory role to a marketing and recruitment focus, led to a decline in the learning support services offered to extramural students (Prebble, 2000).

### **Reasons for the creation of online support services**

As a consequence of the structural changes occurring in the mid 1990s, the university did not have a centralised, national system for the delivery of academic learning support. Rather, the three regional campuses (Auckland, Palmerston North and Wellington) each had their own regional Student Learning Centre. Collaboration between these three centres to promote equivalence of delivery was not based on a regular, structured or formal system. It relied very much on the occasional co-operation and collaboration of learning support staff. Essentially, each centre provided its own resources and programmes for students in its catchment area. This created difficulties of access for many extramural students, as some students lived long distances from a campus, others were working full or part-time, and many had family responsibilities making it difficult for them to visit a campus even if it was located close to their home.

Another challenge facing the centres was that of funding the development of new initiatives that could be sustained in the long-term. Services for internal students were funded from a levy paid by all internal students. However, extramural students were not charged a levy and, as such, the Student Learning Centres were without adequate long-term funding for developing extramural services.

By 2002, there was growing concern about the retention and completion rates for extramural students and shortcomings in the provision of learning support services to these students. Reports highlighted a number of weaknesses, especially the lack of a centralised support system for extramural students since the disestablishment of CUES and lack of adequate resourcing (Meyer, 2003; Prebble, 2000; Prebble & Pullar, 2002). The reports noted the necessity for the development of a comprehensive support policy for extramural students. In response to this gathering momentum for change to the provision of support services, the university decided to centralise delivery of extramural support services and to charge extramural students a levy to fund these services. A Massey University *Review of learning support services* (September, 2002) recommended that online learning support services be developed and delivered from the Palmerston North campus Student Learning Centre. In August 2004, the University Council approved an extramural student services levy of \$25 for all extramural students to be introduced from 2005.

In September 2004, the Palmerston North Student Learning Centre, in consultation with the Auckland and Wellington Learning Centres, began work on planning a number of initiatives to deliver services to students. Staff from all three centres attended a meeting in December of 2004 to consider and comment on the plans. The outcome was an agreement that the Palmerston North staff would proceed with leading the development of a series of online and regional outreach initiatives to be introduced in 2005. The Auckland and Wellington staff assisted with resource preparation, inclusive of helping with staffing for some regional outreach programmes, such as exam skills workshops. The online initiatives included an evening and weekend instant communication service, online workshops, an Internet-based assignment writing pre-reading service, and the provision of online learning support resources. This process was assisted by the appointment of two new staff, an Online Learning Consultant and an Extramural Learning Consultant, to the Palmerston North Learning Centre in January 2005. The funding from the levy, the new permanent staffing, and the support of the staff on all three campuses, gave a basis for long-term planning and helped to ensure that developments were likely to be sustainable in the future.

### **Research that informed the development of services**

Research suggests that a constructivist learning environment enables learners to gain knowledge more effectively than an instructivist one (Sims, 2000). Rather than simply placing existing written resources on a learning support site in a way that would encourage the transmission mode of education, the Student Learning Centre Consultants wanted to encourage students to develop learning skills in an active and reflective way. Laurillard (1993) provides an outline for an effective use of technology to encourage active learning. She argues that teaching materials, audio, audiovisual multimedia and print must be used as integral, rather than supplementary, parts of the teaching process.

Research provides evidence that integrated learning skills services that offer students an opportunity to learn how to study within the context of their subject area are more effective than generic study skills material (Chalmers & Fuller, 1996). Similarly, Tait and Entwistle (1996) suggest that study skills taught to students separately from course content may not be easily transferred to their own personal course contexts. Tinto's (1995) research shows that integration of learning advice with faculty content is a key factor in academic success.

The consultants also were aware of the need to research frameworks and models for providing support services online. Oliver (2001) provides a very useful framework for the design and development of online resources. Clerehan, Turnbull, Moore, Brown, and Tuovinen (2003) also supply a useful description of the development of the Online Student Resource Centre site at Monash University. Tait (2000) offers a framework for the development of a planning tool for student support services. He also reminds those of us working in the field that there can be 'no universal blueprint for the design of student support services' (p. 287). Overall, Tait and Mills (2003) provide a comprehensive and very useful source of information on developing and delivering learner support services.

### **The stages of development**

In January 2005, an Extramural Working Group was established to oversee the development of services for extramural students. Included in its brief was the design and delivery of learning support services. A decision was made to base many of the learning support services online. This had a number of advantages: easy access for students regardless of where they lived, after-hours availability, and sustainable services in terms of funding and staffing resources. The planned timeline for the introduction of the online services was as follows:

- January 2005 Improvements to an existing online learning resource service, *OWLL* (Online Writing and Learning Link).
- March 2005 An *Online Assignment Pre-Reading* service for undergraduate and postgraduate extramural students. This service allows extramural students to submit up to two assignments per semester to a writing consultant for pre-reading (to obtain comments on structure and style) before submitting the assignment for marking.
- May 2005 *Online Connection* — a real-time communication service that enables extramural students to have real-time contact with a member of the Student Services staff at set times on some evenings and at weekends. Staff provide general advice and help with learning strategies, academic writing skills, tests and exams, and managing the demands of study. Student Services staff are online Tuesday and Thursday (7–9 pm) and Sunday (3–5 pm).
- August 2005 *Online workshops* — real-time workshops for general writing and study skills.

At the time of writing this paper (June 2005) the deadlines for the introduction of the first three services (OWLL, Assignment Pre-Reading and Online Connection) had been met. Planning for the introduction of the workshops in August 2005 is proceeding and on target for meeting the deadline.

### The process of construction

Once the ideas and timeline had been approved by senior management, the next stage was to get the necessary hardware and software in place so that the plans could be implemented.

The Online Writing and Learning Link (OWLL) was already in existence. It had been created in 2004 using Macromedia's Dreamweaver and had been made available to students on the Massey web server in August of that year. Due to limited time and resources available, this had been constructed hastily and ongoing development had stagnated for six months after the departure of the learning centre staff member responsible for developing and maintaining the service. However, the appointment of an Online Learning Consultant in January 2005 resulted in significant improvements to the OWLL web site, especially to the site's structure, usability and appearance. The site runs at relatively low cost in resources and staffing requirements. The Online Learning Consultant is constantly developing the site and other learning centre staff are providing new resources.

The next online service to be implemented was the Assignment Pre-Reading Service. This service enables extramural students to submit an assignment for checking before they send it in to a tutor for marking. The submission page was constructed in collaboration with Massey University Information Technology staff and staff from the Student Information Unit. Essentially, the service uses an email-based system whereby students submit an assignment in rtf or doc format through a submission page for a learning support tutor to assess. These submissions were restricted to these formats so that the tutors' computers could recognise and open the files.

An easy-to-use system, using Microsoft Outlook, has been developed to keep track of student usage. This system involves saving the original emailed document, using track changes to review the assignment, and then saving the assignment as a new document with a similar title under the student's name. The reviewed assignment is then returned to the student, along with the original assignment, usually within three working days. Consultants comment on the assignment throughout, and provide an overview at the end, addressing structure, presentation and focus. While some suggestions about grammar and punctuation are given, students are advised that this is not a proof reading service. Some assignments are outsourced to tutors working from home, thus helping to lower costs for operating the service. Limiting the time given to each review to a one hour maximum, and restricting the number of assignments that each student may send in to two per semester, has helped to ensure that numbers using the service are manageable. This outsourcing and restricting of use has contributed to the service's long-term viability. So far (as at June 2005), the Assignment Pre-Reading Service has been popular with students. From late March to mid May, just over 200 students had made use of the service.

An IBM Lotus Instant Messaging and Web Conferencing, 6.5.1 application, called 'Sametime', was used to run the two other new services, Online Connection and Online Workshops. The Sametime application was researched and trialled by Information Technology Services staff and Student Learning Centre staff. It was installed on a new server. The reason for purchasing the new server was to ensure that the project had the best chance of success by using reliable equipment. It also helped facilitate the seamless transfer from the trial stages to live status. The server is also entirely Student Services owned, and is, therefore, able to be used for other possible future projects. The server is situated in the ITS server room, which means that any

maintenance can be performed by ITS staff, rather than having learning centre staff spend too much time trying to do it themselves. Once the server was in place and operational, the next stage was to ensure that Sametime would work on the server, and with the Massey University Network.

This was achieved by creating a test page, in which staff at Massey could enter and then use the messaging service. This page was not linked to any other and could only be accessed by invitation. After a two-week trial period, learning centre staff were satisfied with the development and the service was made 'live'.

The idea behind the Online Connection service was to create a webpage that students could use to 'talk' to Student Learning Centre staff members for advice and assistance with learning support issues and concerns. The page used HTML and Java Scripting to create a web presence, which allows students to see if a support tutor is available. The tutor's names were shown on the page and if the tutor was available to offer advice, their name was in bold green, which could be clicked on to bring up a conversation box. Students can submit their enquiry through the submission box and then wait for a response from the staff members available online. Six hundred extramural students were surveyed to research the most popular times for the delivery of the service. In response to their feedback, the service was made available on Tuesday and Thursday evenings from 7 pm to 9 pm and on Sunday from 3 pm to 5 pm. The Online Connection service is relatively new, having been launched in late May 2005, but early indications are that the service is very popular with extramural students.

## Future developments

### **Online workshops**

The Sametime application used to develop the Online Connection service will also be employed to deliver a series of Online Workshops for extramural students. As with the Online Connection service, the workshops will be made available on weekday evenings and in afternoon time slots on weekends. The topics will be advertised and students will be asked to pre-register so that the tutor teaching the workshop can successfully manage the number of students. This development has been allocated funding, and once again staff from all three learning centres have agreed to collaborate to produce resources and teach in the workshops. It is intended to trial these workshops in July, with the aim of being fully operational by late August 2005.

### **Virtual orientation**

This resource would comprise of an 'online' presentation, which interactively enables students to 'walk' through the appropriate campus. The services visually displayed may be useful for orienting students to the campus where they would participate in their contact courses. Likewise, it may be useful to show students the accommodation facilities, library facilities, and lecture theatres that they will be using whilst on campus. On campus student services could also be highlighted in this way, with sections on the library, all support services, free software, IT information and campus maps. The cooperation of other university staff, for example library staff, and adequate funding would be necessary to make this idea a reality.

## Conclusion

Online services offer the promise of improved levels of service for distance education students. Careful planning and adequate resourcing, especially long-term funding and staffing, are necessary to ensure the long-term viability of providing worthwhile learning support services via an online medium. It is also essential that the services are researched to ensure that they are meeting the needs of students.

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