



University of Pretoria

Faculty of Education: Unit for Distance Education

DEFINING AN ACTIVE STUDENT IN THE DISTANCE EDUCATION PROGRAMME FOR SUBSIDY PURPOSES

An institution has to submit, on a predefined schedule, student and other information to the Department of Education (DoE) in order to enable the Department to calculate an institution's subsidy. For this purpose the DoE has developed an Higher Education Management Information system (HEMIS).

The Bureau of Institutional Research and Planning (BIRAP) is responsible for submitting the student information to the DoE via HEMIS and to ensure that the directives of the DoE are correctly implemented. For this purpose BIRAP meets regularly with the DoE to clarify key concepts and to establish best practices. Furthermore, the University of Pretoria annually appoints external auditors to audit the student and subsidy data, the process and the systems utilised by BIRAP to prepare the HEMIS data.

The administration of the process to compile the HEMIS data is complex and requires the full support of all stakeholders (management, academics and supporting staff involved in managing the data).

One of the items of importance (in submitting student information to the DoE) is the concept of an 'active student' and the requirement from the DoE that an institution should be able to prove that the student (in the period before collecting the data) was active, e.g. attending lectures, writing tests or submitting assignments.

Basic DoE requirements for student inclusion into the HEMIS data:

1. The student must first of all comply with the following criteria:
 - o He/she must be in possession of either a senior certificate with endorsement or certificate of exemption, or be admitted at Senate's discretion, and

- o He/she must be enrolled for a module which form part of UP's formally accredited study programmes.

2. The student must be registered for a module AND a formally accredited study programme under the following conditions:

Module registration:

- o The module is an approved component of the curriculum of the student's study programme.
- o On a module census date (usually set at a date midway between the first and last teaching day) the student is still eligible to be enrolled for the module, has not officially withdrawn from the module and has not been officially excluded from the module.

Study programme registration:

- o He/she satisfies the statutory entry requirements for admission.
- o He/she was, during the period 1 January through 31 December of the collection year, officially enrolled in the study programme.
- o He/she was, during the period 1 January through 31 December of the collection year, registered for at least one module that is a part of the curriculum of the study programme.

3. The student must be 'active':

- o The DoE defines an active student as a student to whom the university delivered an instructional service AND that an institution has direct evidence that the student was active in a module during the collection period.
- o The DoE has given notice to the external auditors (May 2003: Directives to External Auditors; 2003) that the Department is not prepared to accept registration on census day as sufficient evidence of student activity in a module. The practice of assuming that students, particular in the case of distance programmes, have been active in a module because they wrote the final examinations in that module will no longer be acceptable.

Actions implemented by the Unit for Distance Education to support students to stay active:

The Unit for Distance Education (UFDE) operates according to an open learning academic model consisting of six-month academic cycles. Examinations are scheduled at the end of each cycle, in April and October. In order to encourage students to hand in assignments and consequently sit for exams, the UFDE implemented a comprehensive student support system. Actions include:

- Providing the opportunity for students to attend a five-day contact session for each module in their learning programme.
- Encouraging the student to attend contact sessions in each Administrative and Tutorial Letter.
- Sending the student two tutorial letters in each academic cycle. One is sent with the learning materials at the beginning of each academic cycle and the other just before the examination at the end of each cycle.
- Sending the student letters about the structuring of studies. One such letter is sent when students are half way through their studies to encourage them to complete their programmes and another letter is sent when students have been inactive for two examination sessions. In this letter the student is encouraged to become active again.
- Sending approximately ten administrative and motivational SMS's at certain points during each academic cycle and sending five academic SMS learning tools to students carefully designed to fit into each learning cycle in such a way as to support their learning appropriately.
- Sending the student an administrative booklet at the beginning of his/her academic cycle. This booklet explains all administrative matters to students and encourages students to contact the university when in doubt.

Implementation agreement between BIRAP and the UFDE for inclusion of students into the HEMIS data:

A simple definition applies for inclusion into the HEMIS data:

- A distance education student is regarded as 'active' if the student sits for an examination during the collection period. However, the UFDE has the responsibility to prove to the external auditors that the student submitted both assignments (as pre-requisite to gain entrance to the examination). Thus, the submitting of both assignments is taken as evidence that the student was active during the collection period.

In addition BIRAP applies all applicable DoE directives (including the above points 1 and 2) for the distance education students in compiling the list of students to include in the HEMIS data.

In conclusion, it is important to note that students contribute in two ways to the subsidy received by an institution:

- When a student is active in a module, and
- When the student successfully completed his study programme.

The latter should not be neglected, as the subsidy allocated to this category is significant.