

# A student helpdesk to ease computer use in a medical curriculum

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## **Abstract**

Since 1998, a team of student computer assistants exists at the medical faculty of the University of Geneva to help students use the computer equipment made available by the University. A medical computer scientist, a computerized teaching expert, and a technical engineer work in close cooperation to coach the team. The feedback that the student assistants receive from the users is implemented on several levels to improve the infrastructure and also the computer use in the medical curriculum. The need for this is underlined by a recent study where many medical doctors mention a lack of computer courses in their education [1]. Currently, 12 student computer assistants, most of them medical students, work part time to assure a helpdesk during the entire year, weekends and vacation included. The roles of the student computer assistants are manifold and include the preparation of computer introductory courses for other students, the production of brochures and small books to explain the particularities of the University infrastructure, to respond to urgent questions of computer users, to create and maintain web pages of courses including the scanning of references, and to conduct a yearly survey among the computer users in the library of the medical faculty. This survey allows identifying trends in computer knowledge, applications, hardware used, and particularly to identify problems with the existing infrastructure.

The information technology infrastructure and its use have changed strongly over the last years. With the introduction of dokeos<sup>1</sup>, an open source Learning Management System, the use of the computing infrastructure and particularly of the printers has risen strongly as most printed documents are now distributed in digital form. Starting from the academic year 2005/2006, the distribution of all coursework in all academic years is done via dokeos. Such an electronic document management system requires a functioning architecture and quick response times to all computer problems for students at the medical faculty. The student helpdesk provides these quick response times. It makes the contact with the students asking for advice easier as the helpdesk is situated within the library and run by students.

The yearly survey shows that the work of the student computer assistants is very appreciated by their peers. Other findings of the survey are an increasing use of the computers and that the balance between the computer use for private versus study affairs is rising in favor of the later. Printing services are the weak part of the infrastructure and are the source of most help requests. Unexpectedly, the computer knowledge (self-estimation) of the students decreased slightly, creating a need for additional courses on computer subjects.

The dependency that e-learning tools such as dokeos create on a computer infrastructure requires a functioning manpower and technical infrastructure, of which the team of student computer assistants plays an important role. We have made very positive experiences with a student helpdesk that also prepares courses for other students on several informatics subjects.

## **References**

[1] Katinka JAH Prince, Patrick WLJ van Eijs, Henny PA Boshuizen, Cees PM van der Vleuten, Albert JJA Scherpbier, General competencies of problem-based learning (PBL) and non-PBL graduates, *Medical Education* **39**:394-401, 2005.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.dokeos.com/>