Chapter 4 Supporting students

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Overview

In the UK context, where widening participation is high on the government's agenda and retention issues are increasingly related to funding, institutions are developing ever more extensive centralised student services to deal with a whole range of student needs. This chapter will illustrate the most common problems that students take to counselling and study support services. However, these services are often picking up the pieces after courses and teaching have failed to meet student needs, failed to adjust to student differences or failed to provide first-line support through teaching. In this chapter, we focus on the tutorial role, but it is clear that neither specialist 'remedial' work nor individual tutor interventions can provide a solution to the retention problem. A more systemic approach would place greater emphasis on designing learning more effectively, building support into programme design, encouraging students to support each other and ensuring that, where necessary, specialist student support services are taken up most effectively.

In this chapter, we will be exploring some of the different ways in which you might find yourself supporting students, particularly with reference to the tutorial role. We will consider the kinds of difficulties that you might experience in supporting students. The reflections should help you to explore how best to address these in your particular circumstances. The chapter outlines three main areas of student support and what roles you might find yourself playing in relation to each of these areas. Broadly, therefore, we will be concerned with:

- supporting students as an academic and/or personal tutor or practice supervisor
- supporting students through specialist support services
- supporting students through mainstream teaching.

The extracts for this chapter draw upon the work of both researchers and practitioners in the field. They are designed to introduce you to some of the approaches that are being taken within higher education to the important issue of supporting student learning, which of course has wider implications for your students' whole university experience.

Extract 4.1 by John Earwaker explores the different roles that you might find yourself playing as a tutor and suggests that it is important to make sure that you are clear about your roles and responsibilities. For example, he suggests that you need to recognise that being an academic tutor is not the same as being a counsellor. You may also find that being a tutor and being a teacher require you to take on different roles in relation to your students. Earwaker suggests that it is necessary for you to make sure that the boundaries of the roles you play do not become blurred. Once you have worked through the chapter, we will ask you to revisit Earwaker's work and examine whether you believe that it is possible to maintain the distinctions in the way that Earwaker suggests. You may wish to return to Extract 4.1, therefore, at points throughout the chapter.

Extract 4.2 explores the kinds of considerations that you need to take into account when you are tutoring students from different cultural
backgrounds. Wheeler and Birtle use a series of case studies to explore the sort of problems you might encounter as a tutor and the ways that you might usefully approach these. The focus of this extract is upon international students, but reading it should also help you to think about the kinds of cultural differences that exist for home students who might find that their own cultural experiences and expectations do not sit easily with those of your institution.

Extract 4.3 was specially commissioned for this chapter and describes the support services offered by the Study Centre at the University of Kent. Jan Sellers describes how, initially, when students come for support, they may not give the real reasons for their anxieties. For this reason she concentrates upon the need to be a good listener. Although she is talking about giving support in a specialist learning support centre, in your capacity you will be able to benefit from her descriptions of listening and supporting students.

Extract 4.4 looks at the issue of student withdrawal. It is estimated that the annual withdrawal rate of undergraduates is 4 per cent, although this is likely to be an underestimation since there are significant variations in the way that institutions define and measure their non-completion rates (HEFCE, 1997). Reported upon here is an HEFCE-funded research project which examines why students withdraw, and makes some suggestions for recognising students at risk and for offering appropriate support and courses of action to reduce withdrawal rates.

Extract 4.5 introduces you to a specialist support service that is available for most students – the student counselling service – in this instance, at the University of Birmingham. Barbara Rickinson explores the way in which active intervention in terms of counselling may be implicated for some undergraduate students in successfully completing their degrees. One of the focuses of the work reported upon here is the connection between academic concerns and personal concerns, and the extract suggests that an integrated institutional approach to student support would include an understanding of the interrelationship for students between their personal and their academic development.

The choice of extracts has been designed to enable you to think more broadly about student support, what part you may play in this, and what support you might expect to be available for your students from other specialist services. They should also help you to explore the different roles that you might find yourself playing, and how in practice the distinctions between different roles as illustrated in Figure 4.1 may be less clear-cut than John Earwaker suggests. It is of course not possible to offer any general solutions to the problems that might occur due to the overlapping roles that you might find yourself playing both as a teacher or tutor. You will need to approach each situation concerned with student support contingently.

The final section of this chapter suggests ways to create ‘learning communities’ within which students may help one another.

4.1 Supporting students as an academic, personal tutor or supervisor

It does not seem so long ago that the relationship between tutor and tutee was being caricatured by Willy Russell's Educating Rita, the slightly eccentric professor having all the time in the world to support Rita, a
mature student, through her struggles with academia. Today’s higher education is of course a far cry from such a romanticised and fictionalised version. Outside Oxbridge and a few specialist courses, the current reality is one in which we are teaching and supporting large numbers of students with small amounts of resources. Increasingly, undergraduates are expected to relate their study to work placements or, because of financial pressures, many students are, more or less effectively, supporting themselves through part-time work and studying alongside this work. This is the world within which you will be expected to offer a diverse student body support ranging from advice on writing, to help with understanding the fundamental epistemological claims and assumptions on which your discipline and subject area is based, through to advising on financial hardship, among other things. Your roles may well feel both unfamiliar and, at times, contradictory.

You may have had a fairly untroubled journey through academia. Initially, this might make it difficult for you to identify or empathise with the kinds of problems that students bring to you. At this stage, therefore, it is important to try to leave your own student days behind you and to consider carefully the actual experiences of the students that you are supporting: women and men, full-timers and part-timers, 18-year-olds and mature students, some working part-time, others coping with disabilities, students from overseas, students with family responsibilities. The diversity is endless.

Inevitably, this chapter is concerned with general principles: there is not space to explore all the different scenarios in which you will find yourself acting as a tutor in a learning support role. The different roles that you might find yourself taking on will be influenced by many factors completely outside your control, such as the kind of professional relationship you have with your institution (full/part-time, sessional or permanent), the sort of institution (new/old, urban/campus), and the nature of the student body that you work with. You will probably be aware that support mechanisms also vary widely. Obviously, therefore, you will need to think very carefully about your own circumstances when relating the ideas explored in the extracts below to your own tutoring.

You may be teaching either full or part-time, and this will to some extent determine both the tutoring roles you are being asked to undertake, and those that you are actually able to perform. If you are teaching part-time, then your tutoring roles may be very limited: for example, they may be restricted to seeing students when you hand back their assessed work. Nevertheless, from the students’ perspective, you are still the person they feel they need to see when things are not going right and they need academic support. You may be just one of a relatively large number of first-year tutors, but it can still be extremely frustrating and demoralising for students if they are unable to get hold of you except during the contractual teaching times. Part-time lecturers need to have a clear understanding of how they are going to support their students within the contractual constraints of their own teaching. It is important that you clarify with your head of department or line manager how you are going to provide the requisite support to your students.

If you are teaching full-time, you will always be working within a specific set of institutional constraints, and in order to fulfil your tutoring role as effectively as possible from the student point of view, you need to be
aware of what these constraints might be (and what other demands may be competing for your time).

Models of student support

The three accounts of different models of support below should prompt you to think about how support is provided in your own context. You are then asked to review what kind of support your students can expect to get, and from whom.

Model 1  Personal tutoring

Each teacher is allocated 24 students to look after: eight first-years, eight second-years and eight third-years. Tutors are expected to meet their first-year tutor group of eight, as a group, in week one and then fortnightly during the first semester and twice more in semester two. These meetings are for the broad orientation of students to university study, and may focus on the demands of coursework, course choice or the balancing of personal and academic matters. It is expected that:

- course content issues will be dealt with by course teachers;
- personal matters will be dealt with by tutors making appointments to see students individually;
- emotional and study skills problems will be referred to specialists in the Student Counselling Centre.

Personal tutees in the second and third years should be seen at least once, at the instigation of the tutor, to review overall progress. The tutor should also be available to meet tutees at their request at short notice, and is the first point of contact for any student with a problem. Records should be kept of tutees’ progress. It is the tutor’s responsibility to be aware of any cause for concern, such as persistent absence, non-submission of assignments, failing a course, illness or drug taking.

The personal tutor deals with any correspondence from the student’s family or employer. Requests for late submission of assignments or mitigating circumstances in poor examination performance should be made to the personal tutors who should provide written advice to the examinations committee.

Model 2  Year tutors and tutoring within courses

Individual teachers have no ‘personal tutor’ responsibility for individual students, but a ‘year tutor’ oversees the progress of all students in one year of the course. Teachers should refer students to the year tutor for advice on course choice, and the year tutor may make requests to teachers for information about individual students (for example, about attendance or performance). All courses are expected to contribute to developing students’ study skills, and teachers are expected to put aside time within seminars or problem classes for this purpose. Thus all teachers are to some extent involved in this aspect of support; however, no individual attention is required.

In addition, all teachers are expected to put aside two ‘office hours’ a week for each course they teach for open access to students on that course, for any matter the student wishes to raise.
Model 3  Skills tutors

There is a first-year programme of group sessions for all students, concerned with learning to learn independently. Every teacher is involved and each convenes a weekly workshop session for 24 students using a common set of workshop plans and materials. This ‘skills’ role includes giving feedback on assignments, focusing on processes (such as writing) and helping students to develop a ‘profile’ of their skills. Personal matters are often discussed in the workshops, but this is not part of the formal programme. Teachers have no role in relation to individual students outside these workshops and there is no support function in years two and three.

Activity 4.1  Identifying your responsibility in student support

None of the three models, above, may match how student support is managed tutorially in your organisation. Pause to describe the system of student support in your own institution and department, highlighting your own responsibilities for:

the welfare of individual students
their academic progress
developing their learning skills
taking the initiative or being responsive
referring students to others with special support roles, to support services and to specialists.

It may also be useful to list what you are not responsible for, and who is responsible for these things.

Creme and Lea suggest that a comprehensive student support system might:

create a working environment that is concerned with the needs and progress of all students
encourage students to make use of fellow students as resources
enable appropriate action to be taken on matters which may impede students’ progress
provide information about specialist services within the institution and refer students if appropriate.

Some of these are items that the individual tutor can attend to, but others are a function of the whole institution. Student support may come in the form of both pastoral and academic provision, some of which is carried out through institutional systems such as learning support services, student health, advice and counselling provision, accommodation and careers services. One of your tasks as a tutor may be to direct students towards these other services. It can be easy to feel a major responsibility for aspects of your students’ lives that may not really be your concern, and that you, as an individual tutor, cannot solve. Reading this chapter will help you to question and understand how far you should feel responsible for students. As you read on, notice where it might be possible to encourage your students to help each other more effectively.
Considering your different roles as a tutor

In practice, it is often very difficult to make clear distinctions between your different roles as a tutor; the extracts below are all in some way concerned with the blurring of this distinction, particularly from the student's perspective. Wheeler and Birtle (1993) suggest that tutors may take on a number of different roles, as Figure 4.1 shows.

![Diagram of roles of a tutor]

**Figure 4.1 Roles of a tutor**

The idea of having to take on so many different roles may appear rather daunting.

In Extract 4.1, below, John Earwaker makes the point that it is important to keep the different roles that you find yourself playing as a tutor as distinct as possible. He suggests that what makes the tutor–student relationship unique is that it is prescribed by a particular institutional context, and this context determines the positions that both tutors and students take up. He argues that the role of a tutor is not one of a friend. He does however concede that it is often difficult to make the distinction between academic assistance and personal support, however much one might attempt to keep these separate. Earwaker is concerned to mark the boundaries for tutors more clearly. He insists that they are not counsellors, however much they might find themselves in the front line of support.
The tutorial relationship

We have seen that teaching staff in their support role have to cope with a range of ambiguities, tensions and conflicting responsibilities. They are, therefore, in quite a different position from that of professional support staff. On the other hand, their position needs to be distinguished from that of a friend. For a member of staff in an institution of higher education to give help and support to a student cannot be equated with one student helping another. Why not?

It is the institutional context which sets limits to the nature of the relationship. A tutor and a student may belong to the same institution, but they belong there on different terms. For both it is their workplace, but whereas for one it is the place of employment, involving a commitment to deliver a service according to a contract, for the other it is the place where the particular services they seek are to be obtained.

It is not just that each occupies a distinct role; the roles are related to each other in such a way that the tutor is presumed to know things that the student does not yet know. This is a necessary consequence of setting up social encounters of this sort where two people come into contact in order that one shall learn from, and with the help of, the other.

This does not, of course, mean that each cannot respect the other; a context of mutual respect is often required for optimum learning. Nor does the student’s tacit acknowledgement of the tutor’s status with respect to a specific context have to be generalized to cover any more than is covered by the course. It might be possible to think of the teaching/learning relationship as quite detached from everything else, a purely functional affair, so that one consults one’s tutor rather in the way that one goes to get one’s hair cut. Clearly, this is affected by the subject and level of study; it is very hard to conceive of higher education as narrowly as this. Consequently, there will almost certainly be elements of role strain when tutor and student meet informally outside the classroom and especially when they meet on the specific understanding that the tutor is to offer the student some kind of personal help, whether in the form of advice, guidance or support, since it is the teaching relationship that will be the determinative one. They meet as tutor and student in what is essentially a working relationship, not a social one. [...] 

The tutor’s role

If students are required to explain why they have not completed course requirements they are bound to reveal some details of their personal circumstances. So even a tutor who does not find this part of the job particularly enjoyable or rewarding and who is reluctant to get involved in students’ personal lives, nonetheless, finds it impossible not to do so. Yet, interestingly, even when tutors feel overburdened with students’ problems they rarely react with criticism of the students (‘they should learn to stand on their own two feet’), but nearly always with self-criticism (‘perhaps we should draw the line at this’). Thus, tutors are constantly blaming themselves for not drawing a clear enough line between academic assistance and personal support, or for not drawing it firmly enough, or for not drawing it in the right place. All this suggests that the boundaries of the role need to be marked out much more clearly.

Front-line support

The value of the help and support tutors give students is rarely spelled out. What is their distinctive contribution, and how does it relate to the other supports available? The image is sometimes used as tutors acting as the ‘front-line’ of student support, with other more specialized supports available and waiting in the wings ready to become involved if necessary. Before we can see whether this picture makes any sense or not, let us consider just what can usefully be done by a tutor who has no special training in counselling or in social work, but who wants to be helpful to his or her students.
One might suggest as a minimum requirement that tutors should be willing to listen carefully to what their students care to tell them about themselves. Those who lack specialist training often have no idea how useful it can be to simply offer a listening ear. They sometimes allow themselves to feel de-skilled by the fact that there are others with special skills in these areas. It is, therefore, worth noting just how much help can be given simply by allowing someone to talk and offering them your attention. If nothing more were asked of teaching staff than that they be prepared to listen to students who chose to speak to them (no special availability, no insistence on approachability, no special training given, no skills presupposed) a great deal of help and support would thereby be offered to students. Often this is all the student requires to find his or her own way of dealing with some problem.

Tutors need not only to appreciate just how helpful attentive listening can be, but also to know when it is unlikely to be enough. If problems go back a long way; if the student cannot articulate the problem; if the student cannot express his or her feelings adequately or appropriately; if the student blames everyone else and is unwilling to make any personal change; if the student is expecting someone else to decide the matter, or wave a wand to put it right; if the student appears to have problems in virtually every department of life; if the student either resists help or quickly comes to rely on it; if the student is isolated from others, or behaves oddly, unpredictably, or dangerously: then in all these cases tutors should probably consider involving someone else. [...] 

Roles and relationships

What is offered in a tutorial, we have been suggesting, is a relationship. From this point of view, there is no fundamental difference between an ‘academic’ tutorial and a ‘personal’ tutorial. A member of teaching staff in an institution of higher education carries responsibilities for providing both kinds of help and support, and does so most effectively by relating to the student personally. In this respect tutoring differs from both interviewing and counselling.

Interviewing is a matter of skilled performance, of putting the other at ease, of allowing the interviewee a certain amount of rope, of focused questioning and of timing; it does not offer much in the way of a relationship. Indeed, a relationship with the interviewee might be thought to get in the way of the functional task that has to be done; in job interviews interviewers may withdraw from the interviewing role if it is felt that their relationship with the interviewee could compromise their objectivity.

Counselling, in a rather different way, eschews relationships. It has long been recognized that transference can take place within a psycho-therapeutic relationship. Opinions among counsellors differ as to whether this kind of situation should be avoided or used creatively, but the canons of professional behaviour tend to discourage personal relationships between counsellor and client. Counselling is sometimes described as simply offering the client a ‘mirror’, a process of reflecting back to the client almost mechanically; others would more readily accept that counselling offers the client a personal relationship. The fact remains, however, that counselling theory has difficulty with the idea of a relationship between counsellor and client. Counsellors often take refuge in the distinction between a personal and a professional relationship; the latter is intrinsic to the counselling process, the former is to be avoided or at least discouraged. Tutors may take refuge in the same way, yet perhaps with less justification.

The word ‘role’ is important here. What distinguishes a member of teaching staff from, say, a counsellor is not that the latter has specific training (some academics may indeed have training in counselling) or deals with more serious or persistent problems (though that also may be true); it is that the two roles are different.

To show this, it is only necessary to consider what is involved in going to see someone you do not normally meet: the encounter immediately becomes a ‘consultation’ in which the stakes are considerably raised. While a student may be able to chat to his or her tutor quite casually, and in the course of such a conversation may raise and explore a matter [of] some personal importance, there are many opportunities for retreat on both sides. The problem can be broached obliquely, mentioned casually, even just
hinted at, to see whether the tutor is observant enough to notice, willing to pick it up, concerned to try to help. If the tutor approached handles the matter clumsily, makes too much of it, or is over-interested, it will be relatively easy for the student not to pursue the matter. Similarly, the tutor, in asking for an explanation why a piece of work has not been completed on time, may stumble on some personal problem. In these kinds of encounter, precisely because they are ill-defined, both parties have escape routes; it may turn into a quasi-counselling session or it may not, but at least in principle either tutor or student by opting out of the discussion at any point can ensure that it does not.

It needs to be said that academics are not there primarily for this. However important we think student support to be, and however much we would like it to be closely integrated into the teaching role, it remains a secondary function. Teaching staff are primarily there to teach; their role certainly includes helping and supporting students, but it includes much else besides. In this respect they are unlike professional support staff, for whom support is the central focus of their role, and who usually have no other function within the institution but to help and support students.

Equally, students are not there primarily for this either. Higher education institutions are not therapeutic communities; they want to be able to take certain things for granted (students’ health and general well-being) in order to get on with other things, such as the students’ education. Sometimes the relationship between the two is very close, so that it is almost impossible to distinguish them; but often students present ‘problems’ the resolving of which is a prerequisite for their studies to continue rather than being itself part of their education. [...]
become involved, the stronger their supports need to be; so the resources available for tutor support may serve to set limits on what tutors may safely undertake.

Sixth, there are matters of which most teaching staff have no knowledge or experience: legal issues, such as the threatened deportation of an overseas student, require legal advice; matters such as violence, crime or drug abuse, may have to involve the police; suspected mental illness probably needs to be referred to a doctor. Most tutors quickly become out of their depth on all these matters.

All of the above considerations have the effect of restraining tutors from becoming over-involved and suggest ways in which the role of tutor might be limited to more manageable proportions. There is no intention here to prescribe precisely how the role should best be carried out, but to make it more straightforward, less of a blank cheque. Because it has been ill-defined, the tutor's role has sometimes been too easily equated with some other role, for instance that of ‘advocate’, which has seemed to offer a clearer specification. However, the role of tutor does not necessarily require that one takes sides with the student against the institution, or against an Examination Board, though of course it might. It is a truism to say that the interests of the student are paramount, yet the fact remains that tutors have responsibilities to the other students, to their institution, to their profession, to their discipline, to themselves and their own integrity. The role of tutor is *sui generis*, not to be defined in terms of one or more other roles. [...] What is important is to establish a more realistic conception of the role that tutors might reasonably be expected to fulfil. It is necessary to insist that it is above all a professional role which, however defined in particular contexts, has a territory of its own. It does not allow, still less encourage, amateurish dabbling in a range of other professional roles such as counsellor, social worker or pastor. Clarification of the role benefits all concerned, but especially perhaps tutors themselves who often feel uncertain of what is expected of them. Like anyone asked to fulfil an ill-defined role, tutors sometimes get into very deep water because they do not know where to stop or where to draw the line; alternatively, fearful of not knowing where to stop, they are over-cautious and reluctant to get involved with students at all. Both these states of affairs are seen as symptoms of an underlying confusion about the role and about where to set its boundaries.

Possibly the most important skill for you to develop as a tutor is that of listening. This relates to the point we made earlier that the students who seem to have the greatest need for support are likely to be having a very different experience of higher education from yours. Listening to what students are telling you gives you an insight into how students are experiencing the learning process and how you can best support them.

Extract 4.1 makes the point that in practice there may well be little difference between 'academic' and 'personal' tutoring; a more important distinction is that the role of a tutor is always different from the role of a counsellor. Earwaker suggests that your primary role is that of a teacher and that student support is a secondary role. By the time you have completed this chapter and read the extracts from the other contributors you may well feel differently about the clarity of this distinction and we will return to this point later.

**Activity 4.2 Your tutoring roles**

Having read Extract 4.1, and thinking back to Figure 4.1 with its catalogue of roles, make a list of the different roles you have found yourself playing in your work as a tutor. What conflicts or tensions have you experienced between these different roles?

Which roles do you feel most and least comfortable with, and why? (You might like to consider an incident where you felt unsure how well you were dealing with boundary setting. Do you think there are ways in which you could have dealt with this more effectively, from both your own and the student's perspective?)

Most tutors find themselves playing very different roles, among which being an academic advisor, assessor and counsellor are often prominent. One major area of difficulty is found in setting boundaries in terms of where one role should stop and another begin. For example, in your role as an assessor of your students' work how far do you take into account a particular set of difficulties and problems that a student might have in meeting submission deadlines? You may find yourself acting in the role of counsellor if you become too involved in a student's request for an extension of a deadline. Being aware of the different roles you could be required to play should help you to consider how you could act more effectively in situations where you might feel compromised. You may, rightly, be sceptical about your ability not to get drawn into roles that you would rather not take on. In practice it is unlikely that you will be able to maintain boundaries in the way that Earwaker suggests, and you need to develop your own strategies for handling such situations as effectively as is possible. It is always worth talking with colleagues and your head of department about how they handle difficulties with boundary setting.

At a practical level, Creme and Lea, in their contribution to this chapter, suggest that you can help reduce students' dependence on your individual attention by providing systematic or general resources.

- Use an e-mail list to deal with frequently asked questions.
- Have information about specialised support services readily available.
- Help students set up self-help study groups.
- Provide a selection of study guides for your students to consult.
Chapter 4  Supporting students

Supporting students from diverse backgrounds

It is in the nature of higher education that widening participation has become one of the key requirements of institutional policy, encouraged by enhanced funding from government. These changes may be fairly recent in your work, or it may have always been part of the nature of your institution or organisation but it is increasingly likely that you will be working with students who come from a wide range of different backgrounds and therefore bring very different assumptions to their learning.

You are increasingly likely to have a high percentage of mature students on the courses you teach, some of whom may draw on wider experiences of life than you may bring. You may find that students have arrived on your course after following Access courses; these students may have become used to an intensive level of tutor intervention, which could affect their expectations about the kind of support that you will be able to give them. Mature students may be managing very different problems from those experienced by younger students. As Blaxter and Tight (1994) illustrate in their study of mature women students, juggling academic study and personal commitments is often a continual struggle, and failure to manage this effectively can easily result in withdrawal from a course. If you are tutoring mature students, you may well find it difficult to support them without having at least some awareness of the circumstances under which they are studying.

In contrast, ‘traditional’ students coming to university straight from school will be dealing with a different set of problems and difficulties. This may well be the first time that they have really worked independently and they may need guidance on how to use the different resources that are available to them. They may be dealing with financial problems or living away from home for the first time; their parents may be separating just as they are first coming to university. They may be dealing with their own relationship problems and issues around sexuality. All these issues are inevitably going to impinge upon their academic study and you might find yourself being asked for extensions to deadlines as a result of these additional pressures. You need to develop your own strategies for addressing these kinds of requests.

You may also have to support students who have particular study needs resulting from disability. This may well be an area with which you are unfamiliar, in which case it is important to seek help from the specialist support services in your institution. If you are working in the UK, you will find that all HEIs are considering approaches to compliance with the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (2001) (SENDA). All will be concerned as to whether the nature of understanding, distribution of responsibility and dedicated services in their university are complying with that law. The bottom line of this statutory requirement ensures that students with certain disabilities can expect institutions to provide special equipment or resources to ensure that they can study on an equal footing with other students.

This has two possible implications for your work. Firstly, you do need to acquaint yourself with the specialist services that your institution can provide so that you can advise on, what support is available. But this will no longer be sufficient: in designing learning experiences for students, you will need to find ways for your specified learning outcomes to be achieved by students in a wider range of ways, taking into account their different
educational needs. Embedding this sharper focus on student diversity in
design for learning at all levels will, inevitably, draw on the
understandings of how we might improve student learning, and may
improve the student experience across the board.

In a recent press article (2002) Barbara Lloyd Smith, Associate Director of
the National Disability Team at Coventry University, cites a project at
Cambridge University to show how it is possible to integrate effective
policy with a specialist support centre while emphasising how important it
is to engage the expertise of academic staff:

The project has ... set up a Disability Resource Centre and
appointed a small team of staff to consolidate the work done
by the previous Disability Co-ordinator. However, there is a
clear understanding at Cambridge ... that the key to
successful student experience is strengthening the whole
institution’s capacity to retain students by increased
commitment to developing understanding, skills and
confidence, predominantly in academic staff. One effective
route to this is to encourage academic departments to audit
their own courses, discussing fundamental aspects of their
subject as well as delivery and assessment.

Cultural differences and learner support

Extract 4.2 by Wheeler and Birtle explores the kinds of difficulties that can
be experienced by students from different cultural backgrounds. They
suggest that tutors need to be particularly aware of and sensitive to
cultural differences, and to recognise that the cultural norms we tend to
take for granted may feel very unfamiliar both to overseas students and to
home students from other cultural settings. Additionally, tutors need to be
aware of the cultural perspectives that students bring with them from
other education systems. Later, in Extract 4.3, Jan Sellers refers to a student
whose ideas about contributing in seminars were completely different from
what is usual in UK higher education institutions. Exploring this difference
in some depth with the student enabled him to feel more confident about
seminar contributions. In this case, the specialist learning support staff had
the time to explore this difficulty with the student, rather than drawing
misguided conclusions about the student’s academic ability.
EXTRACT 4.2
TUTORING STUDENTS FROM CULTURALLY DIFFERENT BACKGROUNDS

Sue Wheeler and Jan Birtle

The student population of British institutions of higher education is multicultural. Britain is a mixed society and ‘home’ students come from a wide range of ethnic minority cultures. Similarly, students from many countries ‘overseas’ are increasingly encouraged to choose Britain for their studies. While it is important to treat all students as equals and to give them the help and attention they deserve, an awareness of and sensitivity to cultural differences is both necessary and rewarding, both in the classroom and when tutoring students.

‘Home’ students from ethnic minorities are likely to have been born in Britain, are used to the education system and do not need to adjust to life here. Nevertheless, there may be times when their cultural expectations or religious beliefs demand informed understanding. ‘Overseas’ students require the same specialist understanding but in addition they have to adjust to a new lifestyle and education system.

Students who have a different cultural background from their tutors, the majority of whom are white British, experience all the problems commonly encountered by students. These [...] include difficulties with study skills, development issues, relationships or life crises. In addition they may have further difficulties arising from a cultural dimension. This should be taken into account by their tutors and teachers.

Inevitably we tend to judge people and situations according to our own life experiences, personal and cultural values. It is sometimes easy to come up with ideas and solutions that would fit our own framework. However, to take account of another set of cultural norms and values requires the use of advanced empathic skills in order to understand a problem from the other person’s perspective.

Example: Jinda was a bright, successful pharmacy student of South Asian origin who had lived all her life in Britain. She had enjoyed her university education but became depressed and withdrawn in her final year. She eventually confided to her tutor that she was anxious about going back to live in her parental home. She enjoyed the freedom of being away from home and had a white boyfriend. Now she was expected to return home and marry the man her parents had chosen for her. She had met several possible suitors; her parents were flexible in allowing her to choose between them, but she felt controlled and constrained.

Example: Ali was an overseas student from Jordan. He was studying engineering and in most respects coped with the course very well. However, he did not submit any assignments for his mathematics module and did not attend either lectures or tutorials on the subject. At the end of the first year, he failed the entire course because of his performance in mathematics. When his tutor, who was a man, discussed this with him, Ali declared that he was not willing to have any work marked by a woman, as was the mathematics lecturer.

In both cases of these examples, the tutor is faced with problems that are rooted in the cultural background of the students. A solution that would make sense in a white British culture is not tenable according to the student’s cultural values.

Jinda’s problem is difficult to handle but is one often encountered by personal tutors. Jinda is caught between two cultures and this produces internal conflicts for her. She has adopted the values and lifestyles of her peers while away at university but her parents hold their traditional cultural values. They expect her to conform to these and she knows that not to do so would bring shame on the family in the eyes of the community she comes from. This would be intolerable for her parents. She sees her choice as being between going along with
the wishes and expectations of the family, or leaving them altogether. Either option would cause extreme distress for the family and herself.

The personal tutor in whom Jinda confided would be unable to provide an easy solution to her dilemma. The tutor’s role in this instance would be to listen and communicate understanding of the predicament Jinda faces. Jinda will need to come to terms with whatever decision she makes about her future lifestyle. The tutor may be tempted to make a judgement about the behaviour of her parents or the decision that Jinda should make, either of which would be unhelpful. If Jinda became very distressed or depressed, it would be appropriate to refer her to the counselling service for more in-depth help.

Ali had been brought up in a culture that does not allow women to hold positions of power or authority. For him to defer to the authority of a woman is a personal insult to him. His family had firmly reinforced this value system and he had been told when he came to Britain he was not to allow himself to be degraded by women. The personal tutor again had a difficult task in helping Ali. It was not possible to change the lecturer for the mathematics course and academic standards would not allow Ali to pass the course without the mathematics module. Although the tutor may not agree with the values and expectations that Ali holds, it is essential that the tutor tries to understand Ali’s point of view. Thereafter the tutor may be able to help Ali make some kind of bridge between his own culture and that of the society he has chosen for his higher education. Ali is unlikely to be able to survive three years of a degree course without encountering women in authority. As well as lecturers he will meet female housekeepers, wardens, police, doctors and so on and he must make some adaptations to his current environment.

It would be easy to make judgements about Ali as being wrong, misguided or even sick, and Ali might make the same judgements about the host society or culture. Handled with sensitivity and understanding, both parties may be able to learn something about cultural differences and cross-cultural communication.

In these two examples, the personal tutors involved have to be cautious in their response to the students and not be drawn into cultural stereotyping, making assumptions based on their experience of students of similar ethnic origin. Because one young girl of South Asian origin experiences conflict over an arranged marriage, it does not follow that all such girls will experience similar problems. Families of South Asian ethnic origin in Britain vary in the extent to which they adhere to traditional cultural values.

Similarly, it would be wrong to assume that all Jordanians are likely to avoid women in authority. Cultural values are not fixed, they change over time and Jordanian cultural values are no exception. While it is useful to have knowledge about different cultures to aid awareness, it is imperative to avoid making stereotypical assumptions and to allow for diversity. Consider the British cultural caricature of someone with a ‘stiff upper lip’ who is cold, obsessed by the weather, eats fish and chips and watches cricket! Not many people fit this caricature.

It is difficult to convey an accurate message about cultural sensitivity; the only safe guideline that can be offered is to listen carefully to what is being said and to be alert for the cultural framework that influences attitudes and behaviour. Colour is not necessarily an indicator of cultural difference.

Example: Joe was a white American studying in Britain for a year on an exchange programme. He enjoyed his stay but found the university teaching programme very different from his experience in Florida. He had always done well ‘back home’ and was dismayed at the poor marks he received for his assignments. When it came to examination time, he was in a panic because he had to write essay and all the examinations he had taken previously were made up of multiple-choice questions. He expected to be encouraged for the work that he had produced and he felt put down by the lecturers.
Example: Sarah was a black student whose biological parents were of Nigerian origin. She had been adopted at birth by a white English middle-class family living in Norwich. She had an East Anglian accent and had been brought up in the same way as her white adopted siblings. She had never been to Nigeria and said that she had been unaware of being black or ‘different’ until she was about nine years old. She was very irritated during her first weeks at university when people continually asked her where she came from and assumed that she was an overseas student new to Britain.

Joe was treated as though his background experience was similar to the home students although in many ways he felt quite alienated from the culture he found himself in. He looked similar, spoke the same language and assumptions were made from these superficial factors.

On the other hand, Sarah had the opposite reaction. Her experience, cultural and educational background were essentially British, but because her skin was black other assumptions were made about her which distressed her.

Home students may be influenced in their choice of study by their particular cultural background and experiences, and may therefore have a very specific orientation to their course which may, potentially, conflict with that of the tutor. Creme (1998) uses Perry's ‘Scheme of Intellectual Development’ to explore the experiences of a student of Caribbean origin following a BA in Education and Caribbean Studies:

[This student] 'had difficulty in meeting academic requirements and showed enormous difficulty dealing with this [...] she had expressed difficulties with her Caribbean Studies unit because it was 'distanced', requiring objectivity in a way that she could not operate with. Her own work, she thought, was judged 'too near the bone or whatever', too emotional or personal.'

Creme, 1998

If you are an academic tutor, you may wish to focus on supporting your students' learning within a specific disciplinary perspective. You may find it difficult to bridge the gap between your expectations and understandings of a subject matter and that of your students, particularly if this is influenced by their own specific cultural perspective. In a situation such as that cited by Creme, you, as the tutor, need to explore the most appropriate way of offering academic support to the student without undermining their confidence.

**Reflection 4.1 Consider your responses to case studies**

Look again at the case studies illustrated by Wheeler and Birtle in Extract 4.2. If you had been the tutor in these circumstances would you have taken the same approach to these students? What might you have done differently, and why?

It is worth exploring the kinds of approaches that you would have adopted to these very sensitive issues. You might find it valuable to discuss these cases with colleagues to see how they would have handled them.

What formal training and support is available in your institution to help you understand and develop the necessary skills to manage racial equality in practice? The Race Relations (Amendment) Act, 2000, requires public authorities, in the UK, to eliminate racial discrimination, promote equality of opportunity and promote good relations between people of different racial groups. If you work in the UK, there are now specific duties required of higher education institutions that should make it possible for you to find out how your institution addresses these issues in policy and practice, and to consider what positive contribution you might make to such agendas in your support of students.

Alongside the global monitoring and compliance functions required by legislation, this chapter has suggested that you focus on the individual students in your care. Glynis Cousin offers some interesting insights into the complexity of students' perceptions of ethnicity and race (Cousin, 2002): her research critiques statistical analyses of ethnicity and suggests that students may feel excluded by the categories identified by government.
Supporting students with language difficulties

Many tutors are surprised to find themselves having to support students who display various language difficulties in both written work and oral presentations. You may well find that many of the students you are responsible for do not have English as their first language, and this is not only the case for overseas students. A few years ago at the University of North London, the learning support staff examined the initial referral forms for students who had attended a general ‘Learning Support Workshop’ which had no particular focus upon language problems. They were surprised to find that more than 50 per cent of the students stated that they regularly used more than one language on a day-to-day basis. It is important to be aware that many students speak a number of different languages at home and may find writing in English unfamiliar. This is something to bear in mind when marking students’ written work. You will need to acquaint yourself with the ways in which language difficulties can manifest themselves in both written assessment and oral presentations. Talk to the staff responsible for providing language support services in your university. They may have other information available for academic staff, such as the material on identifying dyslexic students in Appendix 1.

This section has been concerned with providing support for different groups of students. Although it can be valuable to address the needs of groups of students in the ways outlined above, it is necessary to exercise some caution. It is all too easy to label students on the basis of a particular characteristic – mature, disabled, dyslexic, overseas, ESL, etc. – and to pack them off to a remedial unit for specialist help. Such categorisation ignores the fact that students are individuals with their own particular learning styles and needs for support and it can, therefore, be unhelpful to perceive students’ need for support as arising from their membership of a particular group. As we said earlier in this chapter, what is important is to develop the art of listening to your students and understanding their individual needs for support.

4.2 Supporting students through specialist support services

Each institution will have a different range of support services to offer students. Figure 4.2 below indicates some possible services to which tutors can refer students when they feel it is appropriate.

Listening to students’ understanding of learning and study is fundamental to the approach taken by Jan Sellers in Extract 4.3, where she outlines the kind of work that takes place at the Study Centre at the University of Kent. She makes a really important point: any student can have study problems. The unit is not seen as remedial but is there to offer specialist support to anyone who needs it. One overall aim of the unit is to demystify the academic process. Sellers also focuses on the importance of listening to students as a first line of support.

![Diagram of specialist student support services]

Figure 4.2 Specialist student support services
Since 1993, the Study Centre at the University of Kent at Canterbury has provided a resource for students from all disciplines who would like to strengthen their study techniques, or talk about study problems, with someone outside their own Department. The Study Centre is part of the Education Support Services at the University, and is designed to supplement the work of individual Departments in supporting student learning development. Issues addressed at the Study Centre include essay and report writing, the planning and organisation of longer assignments, effective reading, problems with concentration and motivation, revision, examination strategies and other study-related topics. Four types of help are provided: information (books, audio and video tapes to borrow and leaflets on a wide range of study issues); individual advice appointments; a programme of two-hour workshops, sometimes supplemented by short courses and lectures; and a referral service for students with other problems affecting their studies.

The Study Centre also provides occasional seminars within Departments on request.

Other support services on campus, with whom we work closely, include the Counselling Service, the English Language Unit, the Medical Centre and Sick Bay, Student Welfare and the Students Union.

The Study Centre is not a remedial service; we believe that anyone can run into difficulties or learn to strengthen a particular aspect of study, and our users range from mature students struggling with their first essay, to doctoral students having difficulties with time management. Some 25% of users are postgraduate students, and any student on an award-bearing course at the University is welcome to use the Centre. The Centre is run by a team of three part-time staff, and students are encouraged to use the information and workshop provision where feasible, with appointments being offered to those most in need.

What are the study issues that students ask about? One indicator is the voluntary participation at Study Centre workshops, which are open to all with no booking required. Workshops include practical advice, information and discussion of issues on a

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Workshop topic</th>
<th>Average attendance</th>
<th>Total number of attendees</th>
<th>Number of workshops</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Report and/or Essay Writing</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effective Reading</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time Management/Getting Organised</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accelerated Learning</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effective Revision</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning Dissertations, Long Projects and Extended Essays</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Examination Strategies</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seminars (Participation and/or Presentation)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enhancing Concentration</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lectures and Note-taking</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thesis Writing [...]</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
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</table>
specific topic. They often attract a wide range of participants including mature students, students from overseas, and both undergraduates and postgraduates from various academic disciplines. The programme changes from term to term, and is modified in accordance [with] student interest and demand, and staff requests. Table 1 shows the workshops and topic covered (highest average attendance first) in 1997-98.

The most popular topics concern reading, written assignments, time management and 'Accelerated Learning'. This pattern of attendance was similar to that in 1996 to 1997, though 'Time Management' and 'Lectures and Note-taking' were both more popular that year; attendance is invariably affected by the order in which workshops take place (very high numbers in the surge of enthusiasm at the beginning of the academic year; lower numbers of students, and higher anxiety levels, as examinations approach) and by other factors including time of day, conflicting events and prevailing weather! 'Accelerated Learning' was advertised as 'exciting techniques to extend the range and speed of your learning abilities' and – in addition to curiosity on the part of students – interest in this may be related to time management and revision, with students anxious to maximise the effectiveness of study time. Despite staff encouragement, attendance at workshops (and) seminars has invariably been very low. Whilst some students doubtless have no difficulty with seminars, it may be that others (though experiencing difficulties) are not prepared to discuss the issues in a group. For example, in the Autumn Term 1998, only three students attended the workshop on this topic, but five came for individual appointments on the same theme.

In 1997–98, 89 individual students had a total of 120 appointments between them; of these 82 (93%) had one or two appointments only, and the remaining seven students (8%) had three or more appointments. Seventytwo students (81%) were undergraduates and sixteen (18%) were postgraduates. The main topics addressed in these appointments can be listed as follows (and will add up to more than the number of appointments, as multiple issues were often raised).

The picture presented by this list of themes, however, is very incomplete. The individual appointments were very different from the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2</th>
<th>Key issues in advice appointments 1997–98</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Topic</td>
<td>Appearing as key issue:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Essays and writing generally</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stress, anxiety and personal problems affecting study</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revision and examinations</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time management, getting organised, workload</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health or disablement affecting study</td>
<td>14</td>
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<tr>
<td>Motivation and concentration</td>
<td>13</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dissertations and theses</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

workshops, in that they provided an opportunity for students to express confidential issues and to put their study concerns in a broader frame. Stress was a key factor, with students experiencing difficulties due to childcare and family commitments, low confidence and anxiety about examinations. In some instances, the levels of stress and anxiety were acute and students were referred to the Counselling Service. Some students, experiencing trouble with managing their time (or with a backlog of essays, sometimes caused by health problems) needed support in re-establishing contact with academic staff, whom they had been avoiding. For others, the first essay was a major hurdle; some mature students had not written an essay for many years, and a few overseas students had no experience at all of essay writing, as their academic performance was assessed in other ways in their own country. Some postgraduate students needed support in building confidence as they moved from one level of study to another, and this was also the case from time to time with students moving from the first to the second year of university study and for students coming from A level or Access courses where they had been accustomed to high marks, feeling bewildered at their apparent lack of success in a more demanding environment. In some cases, this difference in performance, combined with warning signs related to essay writing, reading or time management, indicated that dyslexia might be a possibility. Other students, already
aware of their dyslexia, had study strategies that had worked for them at school or college but that needed further refinement to cope with university requirements. Responsibility for specialist dyslexia assessment and guidance does not lie with the Study Centre, and in these instances students were referred for specialist help. They were, however, encouraged to draw on advice from the Study Centre where appropriate (some aspects of study guidance covered by the Study Centre are of value to any student, dyslexic or otherwise).

One overseas student commented that he felt slow in relation to his seminar group. It emerged that within his cultural tradition, discussion involved highly focused listening, followed by reflection on the points raised, and it was only after this time of listening and reflection that one would speak to contribute further to the discussion. We have seldom experienced such a quality of concentrated attention within an advice session; it took a while to explore the cultural differences and to reflect back to the student his strengths of concentration and focused thought, whilst considering how he might be able to contribute in the fast-moving seminar discussions that dismayed him.

At the Study Centre, one of the most important roles of the advisers has been to listen. It is important to demystify the academic process and to boost confidence, to try to ensure that students leave with feasible, mutually agreed ways forward and with knowledge of other sources of support, where appropriate. However, it has proved crucial to ensure that students felt heard and understood. In some instances, students were grappling with severe difficulties. Seven students in 1997–98, and eleven the previous year, had three or more appointments at the Study Centre. These students were almost invariably dealing with serious health difficulties, with disablement (sometimes new to them, or increasing) or with personal problems including bereavement. For these students, the network of support across the University played a crucial role in helping them to keep going, when appropriate, or to take a break from their studies and return with renewed energies and commitment. It was moving to listen to these students and to recognise the strength of their desire to successfully complete their studies against the odds. Whatever the difficulties and barriers faced by students, the rewards of working with them in their learning development are tremendous, and contribute greatly to the knowledge and experience of those of us involved in student guidance.

Written for this chapter by Jan Sellers (1998)
Reflection 4.2 Comparison with your context

Were you surprised by the range of workshops offered by the University of Kent Study Centre?

1. Is there a facility like this in the institution(s) in which you work? If so, do you know what the referral procedures are?

2. Is there any specific faculty provision? If so, when would you use this?

3. Under what kinds of circumstances would you use a specialist support service rather than providing your own support to your students?

4. It is interesting to see that problems with essay writing come high on the list for individual appointments. What kinds of strategies do you employ to support your students with assignment writing in your courses?

One drawback to the provision of this type of service (which in most respects is excellent) is that academic staff may expect students to seek support from these specialist services rather than from their own tutor. In reality, there are serious limitations to the kinds of generic study advice that 'Study Units' and similar services can give to students. Academics and practitioners are the experts on how their discipline 'works', and they are usually the best people to support students with appropriate learning strategies. In practice, too, it is very difficult to separate skills and knowledge within a discipline. We return to this idea again later, when we explore supporting students through mainstream teaching.

Students at risk of withdrawal

It is inevitable that sooner or later you will come across students who are thinking about – or have already decided to – withdraw from their course. There is now widespread concern about the numbers of students who do not complete their degrees and differing research findings about why students 'drop out'. The data in Appendix 2, taken from a study of undergraduate non-completion in England carried out by Professor Mantz Yorke and his team (HEFCE, 1997), throw some very general light on the reasons students give for withdrawal.

Extract 4.4, by Jenny Ozga and Laura Sukhnandan, is taken from the second part of the HEFCE report referred to above. The study, which was carried out at a 'civic', a 'campus' and a 'new' university, examined the reasons for non-completion by undergraduates. The extract is a part of a broader case study, which explores non-completion at a campus university. 'ST' numbers in the extract identify responses from particular interviewees.
Departmental early warning and student support systems

The majority of departments used: (1) module registration, and (2) assessment, as their primary early warning systems that a student may be experiencing difficulties. However, the majority of departments did not have a formal process of module registration and therefore relied on module tutors’ abilities to identify absent students – a system which was thought to work well with small groups but caused a notable degree of concern with larger ones.

In practicals and lab. sessions we soon see weakness – there’s no formal monitoring. Tutors will then refer students for ... additional classes. (ST4)

Attendance registers are kept in tutorials/seminars – but because we have very large groups (25–38) ... there is no policy of attendance checking by name calling. (ST14)

Most of the departments’ (10) monitoring of students’ progress occurred through assessed work at the end of the first semester. In the remaining four departments, students’ progress was monitored through formative assessment of small-scale practical tasks in the first few weeks of the semester.

The reliance by departments on both module registration and formal assessment of students’ progress as early warning mechanisms appeared to be inadequate, as the majority of non-completing students (NCs) withdrew before submitting work to be assessed – which usually took place at the end of the first semester. However, nearly half of the departments stated that, in addition, their secretarial staff were important figures in identifying students with difficulties, but only two departments offered any evidence that they may be alerted to such difficulties more informally.

... the secretaries are very good at referring students and are very good at identifying student problems. (ST14)

... we have just opened up a student office which provides a central point where students can go for both technical and general help ... it is run by a non-academic female [stressed] so the students should be happy to use it. (ST12)

All of the departments sampled used tutoring systems as their main form of student support -- six departments used personal tutors, seven year tutors and one module tutors. The variation between departments’ choice of tutoring system usually related to the size of the department. Consequently, the large departments expressed some concern over their ability to provide effective student support.

We have a year tutor system which moves with the cohort, usually the course tutor feeds to the year tutor who then goes to the head of department. Because it’s such a small department ... it’s all rather centralised and too many things get passed up the line too quickly – the year tutors could do with having a little more authority, perhaps. (ST3)

We don’t have personal tutors and the new university demands cannot be met ... the numbers are just too big for appropriate feedback and monitoring. (ST10).

Although all of the departments implemented a tutoring system none of them provided tutors with a formal induction into issues regarding student support. Instead many heads of department stated that they simply relied on colleagues to reflect their own position of positive support, while recognising that:

there are still recalcitrant colleagues ... the load is not evenly distributed. (ST7)

In addition, all of the departments offered office hours, or their equivalent, although there was no monitoring of their use or effectiveness. A minority of departments
(3) claimed to operate an open door policy.

... all members of staff should have two consultation hours a week ... Most actually have an open door policy so that students can drop in whenever they like. Students use consultation hours and it seems to be an effective procedure although there is no direct feedback or monitoring of this. (ST15).

Most consider themselves available to students 9 to 6 ... we don’t think students have difficulties getting hold of the staff they want. (ST12)

Only two departments offered any evidence of informal student support in terms of providing regular social events.

In relation to students experiencing difficulties, the majority of departments appeared to take one of two approaches. If the ‘problem’ was academically related, most of the departments stated that they would implement intervention strategies such as the provision of additional support. However, if the ‘problem’ was of a personal nature, nearly half of the departments expressed reluctance in engaging directly with such issues, and two departments explicitly held the belief that it was inappropriate to combine academic and personal issues. Only one department clearly recognised that academic and personal problems were inter-related; however that department also expressed concern about ‘getting in too deep’.

Awareness and utilisation of general student support services

Although Campus university has official guidelines regarding the role and uses of their comprehensive range of Student Support Services, these appeared to be inadequately implemented at the level of departmental staff as the interviews revealed the existence of a rather patchy understanding/utilisation of these services. The majority of departments appeared to refer students with non-academic ‘problems’ to Academic Administration, as most departments had only a vague notion of who (the department or Academic Administration) was responsible for what type of ‘problem’, and an even less clear understanding of which specific support service they should refer students with particular problems on to. A small minority (3) of departments expressed concern over some elements of the support services; for example, one department criticised counselling for being ‘partisan’.

We use counselling and will alert the Dean of Students if we are concerned about a student ... but there is a need for clarification between academic department responsibility and university responsibility. (ST11)

The problem seems to be that because there is no central organisation that actually deals with individual students they are bounced between individual services/departments who are interested in specific parts of the student’s life and no one takes responsibility for the whole. (ST9)

In contrast, students had a much greater level of awareness (usually over 70%) of most of the student services. [...] Inevitably students’ levels of utilisation of these services were notably lower than their levels of awareness and varied considerably according to the specificity the service provided. For example, over 50% of students used the accommodation centre and the sports facilities while less than 30% used counselling and Nightline. The students expressed a high level of satisfaction (70% or over) with the majority of services that they had used.

Although the statistical analysis of the questionnaires highlighted a number of significant differences between non-completing and completing students’ levels of awareness and utilisation of Student Support Services, it is difficult to assess these variations in any meaningful way because of the difference in the length of time that NCs and Cs were enrolled for at Campus. [...]
procedures were in place. Furthermore departments, generally, had only a basic understanding of the roles and responsibilities of Campus's wider support services and this was evident in their poor use of onward referral for students who were experiencing problems.

Although students were aware of the support services available to them they too had little understanding of the different services' roles and responsibilities. They therefore failed to utilise these services effectively and reverted to informal — and often inadequate — sources of support and advice regarding withdrawal. […]

At the institutional (HEI) level, the study indicates the need for:

- improved internal record keeping;
- improving the quality of introductory information for students; at the moment promotion dominates and there is a need for more explicit attention to defining the orientation of each HEI to teaching and learning, and to discussion of the quality of student experience;
- clarifying policy in relation to mature student recruitment. These students are well prepared, but vulnerable to externally produced disruption of study. They may need better institutional support, including greater flexibility in credit accumulation, if they are to be retained;
- improving staff responsiveness through improvement in assessment practice, raising awareness of diversity of student expectation;
- improving the promotion of student support services;
- redesigned student support to cater for specific needs, with the use of a central help desk for onward referral;
- developing guidelines on transfer/withdrawal for staff departments and students;
- improving flexibility in course transfer (within institutions);
- developing early warning mechanisms in the first part of the first semester/term;
- encouraging greater explicitness in academic demands made on students;
- developing activity/group-based learning in early stages of degree;
- requiring initial training for academic staff.

Extract 4.4 highlights the importance of student support in preventing withdrawal but also suggests that present systems are far from perfect. For example, departmental early warning systems seemed to be heavily reliant on tutors identifying absent students. Additionally, the reliance on formal assessment as an early warning system was inadequate since most non-completing (NC) students withdrew before submitting assessed work. It is interesting that the report notes how important the departmental administrative staff were in identifying students with difficulties. In the light of this finding it would be worth liaising directly with the administrative staff in your department and asking them to inform you if they think that any of your students appear to be having difficulties.

How far you become directly involved in supporting students who are thinking about withdrawing depends very much upon the procedures in place in your institution and your own department. However, it will still be useful for you to understand the broader issues and to consider your own role in providing support when these kinds of difficulties arise.

One major cause for concern arising from the HEFCE report on undergraduate non-completion is that academic staff appeared to have such a patchy knowledge of the support services. In Extract 4.3 Jan Sellers indicated the kinds of support services that are available for students. Extract 4.5 below explores the value of just one of these services, the counselling service at the University of Birmingham, and its role in preventing student withdrawal.

It is worth taking the time to find out what different services are provided in your university and what the referral procedures are. Ideally you should make direct personal contact with the individuals who run the services; this will help you to integrate your own support strategies more closely with the institutional provision. The HEFCE study (Extract 4.4) indicates a need for changes in procedures at an institutional level to support students at risk of withdrawal. In the list of final recommendations it suggests that there is a need to improve both responsiveness to the diversity of students’ expectations and the development of departmental guidelines. These recommendations could well have important implications for your own practice at both an individual and a departmental level. The research cited here, along with related initiatives, has generated enormous interest in issues of retention – at institutional and government level.

Academic and personal problems

Earlier in this chapter, we made the clear distinction between being a tutor and being a counsellor. In Extract 4.5, below, Barbara Rickinson explores the effectiveness of a university counselling service intervention at two important transition points in an undergraduate career: first-year entry and final completion. The extract highlights how, out of 43 final-year undergraduates who had consulted the counselling service, 21 perceived their problems as ‘both academic and personal’. Forty-one of these students suggested that their academic performance had been affected by their problems prior to the counselling intervention. This finding would suggest that it is very difficult to make a clear-cut distinction between ‘personal’ problems and ‘academic’ problems. This clearly relates to Jan Sellers’ observation that students attending for individual appointments at the Study Centre were given the opportunity to express confidential issues and to put their study concerns in a broader frame, again highlighting the relationship between academic study and broader personal issues.

How do you think your various contacts with the support services and the information that you have about individual students would enable you to identify students at risk of withdrawal?

What services are available in your institution to help students who are thinking of withdrawing?
EXTRACT 4.5
THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT COUNSELLING AND SUCCESSFUL DEGREE COMPLETION

Barbara Rickinson

Introduction

Institutions of higher education are examining effective means of increasing student retention and completion rates. In the absence of definitive evidence, the value of undergraduate student counselling in this context is being questioned. This research note focuses on the educational implications of a recent four-year study (1993-97) which explored the relationship between undergraduate student counselling and successful degree completion.

The university experience for undergraduate students is one of transition, a process of continual engagement and disengagement as they negotiate new academic and personal challenges. The study focused on two important points in this transition process: first year entry and final year completion. These points were chosen because their successful negotiation raises anxiety and for some students induces a crisis which can affect their withdrawal/completion behaviour. Counselling intervention at these crisis points is based on awareness that transition holds both danger and opportunity for each individual student. In particular, for the 18 to 25-year-old undergraduate, there is often an interaction between learning transitions and the developmental challenges of late adolescence. The study was conducted against the background of literature and previous research relating to relevant developmental challenges, for example the psychological separation/individuation process of late adolescence (see Blos, 1968) and the task of establishing a balance between an autonomous self and commitment to one’s roles in society (see Erickson, 1968).

Transition point 2 – final year completion

Final year self-assessment questionnaire

For final year students a self-completion questionnaire was chosen as the most practical method of assessing the perceived effect of students’ problems on their academic performance both prior to, and following, counselling intervention. [...]

Results

Of the 43 students fulfilling the criteria for inclusion in the study, 30 had self-referred and 13 were referred via their tutor or doctor. Twenty-one students recorded having consulted the Counselling Service with a problem which was ‘both academic and personal’, while 10 students perceived their problem as ‘academic’ and 12 students thought that their problem was ‘personal’. Forty-one of these 43 students (95%) perceived their academic performance as having been affected by their problems prior to counselling intervention.

Following counselling, students recorded their perception of the degree of change in their academic performance and the degree to which they felt better able to deal with their problems. Of the 43 students, 39 (91%) thought that their academic performance had improved following counselling. Forty-two (98%) of these students recorded that counselling had assisted them to deal more effectively with their problems.

Final year degree status

All 43 students in the clinical sample completed their degree programmes successfully with no resits required. One student obtained a first class honours degree, 19 students an upper second, another 19 a lower second and four students a third class honours degree.

Discussion

The results of this study highlight the educational implications of high levels of psychological distress for undergraduate students. The university learning process, by providing the stimulus of new knowledge and experience, challenges students’ existing level of development. However, for students to take full advantage of this developmental opportunity they need to tolerate the
temporary loss of balance necessary as one level of understanding is relinquished and a new one created. At important transition points in the undergraduate learning process, students' inherent drive for maturation and academic success may come into conflict with their fears of losing control. This conflict can result in high levels of psychological distress as displayed by the students in this study. Perry (1970), in his work with undergraduates, demonstrated the importance of maintaining the optimum balance of challenge and security at each new learning point and highlighted the detrimental effects of excessive anxiety on the learning process. These insights have relevance for both tutors and counsellors in facilitating student learning and development. [...] 

No direct correlation can be made between counselling intervention and successful degree completion. However, this study strongly suggests that counselling intervention assisted 15 students, at risk of leaving in their first term, to adjust to the new social and academic demands of the university environment. Subsequently, all these students progressed to successful degree completion. The significance of these results should be considered in the context of the relatively high number of undergraduates who withdraw from UK higher education institutions in their first term.

The capacity of a student to adjust to the new academic and social demands of the university was identified as a major factor affecting withdrawal/persistence behaviour, based on data from a large-scale questionnaire survey of the new undergraduate intake to the University (1993–94). The ability to change and adjust to new situations varies from individual to individual. It requires the ability to contain anxiety well enough to tolerate new learning. This capacity is influenced by a complex interplay of factors (see Rickinson and Rutherford, 1995). It also needs to be remembered that entry to university provides students with an important developmental opportunity to improve their adaptability. Institutions of higher education need to focus on ways of supporting students in the use of this opportunity.

Another important point highlighted by a follow-up study of students withdrawing from university in their first year (1993-94 intake), was that vulnerable and distressed students do not usually take the initiative to access the help that is available to them. In view of this a strategy was developed, in consultation with senior academic tutors, for monitoring the adjustment to university of first-year undergraduates (see Rickinson and Rutherford, 1996). This system aimed to identify students requiring additional academic or personal help at an early stage in their first term.

[...] At the second transition point, the effect of psychological distress on academic performance was demonstrated by the fact that 95% of final year students in the clinical sample of 43 perceived their academic performance as having been affected by their distress prior to counselling intervention. Counselling intervention seems to have been effective in the vast majority of cases, judging by the students' self-reports. The findings agreed with those obtained, for the same sample of students, by independent analysis of changes in level of psychological distress using the SCL-90-R [Derogatis, 1977]. A dramatic fall in levels of psychological distress was demonstrated within the clinical sample of 43 individuals post-counselling. In contrast, there was no significant change in levels within the control sample of 65 individuals, students who did not have counselling intervention, during the same period (see Rickinson, 1997). The results therefore, strongly suggest that counselling intervention was instrumental in reducing the level of psychological distress within this particular sample of students. [...] 

Implications for institutions of higher education

The findings point to the valuable contribution which a professional counselling service can make to the following institutional goals:

(a) the enhancement of students' university experience;

(b) the containment of students who are psychologically vulnerable (high levels of psychological distress may precipitate suicidal action);
(c) the facilitation of students’ engagement with, and successful completion of, their degree programme;

(d) the development of an integrated institutional approach to student support and guidance (such an approach fosters a close and creative relationship between the support and guidance systems in academic departments and the central support services, and includes an understanding of the interrelationship between personal and academic development); and

(e) the provision of staff development and training programmes for academic staff responsible for undergraduate students, to support them in their important tutorial role.

Activity 4.3 Your professional comfort zone

Draw up a set of criteria that you could use as a guide to help you decide when you would refer a student to the counselling service.

What do you think are likely to be the differences between student problems and concerns at different points in their programmes: first year, final year and postgraduate?

You may feel very uncomfortable having to become involved in students' personal problems and prefer to refer students on to what you feel is a more appropriate source of support. On the other hand, the counselling role may be something that comes easily to you. What is important is that you feel comfortable in your tutoring role and do not let yourself be drawn into something that needs professional expertise.

4.3 Supporting your students through mainstream teaching

The final section of this chapter is concerned with the ways in which you can use mainstream teaching as a way of actively supporting your students' learning. One way of doing this is to get students to use each other for support. At the Open University, where students have little face-to-face contact with their tutor, students are encouraged to set up informal study groups where, among other things, they can discuss difficulties that they are having with their course. Recent developments in communications and information technology (C&IT) have provided us with new ways of peer support through collaborative learning.

Peer tutoring and peer support

Magin and Churches (1995) describe an engineering course at the University of New South Wales where peer tutoring was used in order to introduce students to a 'state-of-the-art solid modelling designer's package'. In this instance, more experienced students provided tutorial assistance to other students. In a questionnaire 46 per cent of the students reported that 'peer tutoring was definitely more effective', and 43 per cent that 'peer tutoring was probably just as effective', as lecturers doing the tutoring. Only 2 per cent suggested that they found 'peer tutoring less effective'. Magin and Churches found that students reported that peer tutoring resulted in 'increased interaction because of the greater availability of individual and continuous assistance'. Additionally:

[...] having a fellow student in the role of instructor had resulted in a learning climate which fostered open communication and inquiry and (ii) having a student who had recently gone through the same process of acquiring proficiency in using the package had resulted in an empathetic understanding of the difficulties experienced by tutees, and of what assistance is needed to overcome these impediments.

Magin and Churches, 1995

Peer tutoring is, of course, just one of the different approaches that can be built into course design in order to support student learning. The papers in John Dolan and Andrew Castley's (1998) book Students Supporting Students
demonstrate how peer-supported work can be valuable in various situations, including:

- small group learning
- mentoring within induction programmes
- the impact of student supported learning on programme design and pedagogy
- using peer support to respond to the needs of part-time students and those with particular needs as a result of disability.

All the contributors to *Students Supporting Students* demonstrate the value of using peer support to help make learners aware of their own processes of learning and to show them how they can take control over their learning.

**Incorporating skills into mainstream courses**

Much of your tutorial work will be concerned with supporting students with what may well be new and unfamiliar study practices. These are commonly referred to as study skills, and there is a continuing debate as to how far the development of skills should be an integral part of the mainstream curriculum or supported through tutorial work or taught within learning support units. There are also further debates around the notion that skills are transferable from context to context and therefore need to be identified as key components of mainstream course design. In Pack 4, Chapter 1, Extract 1.3 by Rob Pope explores the way in which an English course was designed in order to develop student proficiency in subject-based skills. He focuses upon the specific skills and ‘knowledges’ that students taking English studies are required to master. He is not concerned to draw up a list of ‘core skills’ for students studying English but rather with the variety of different practices that students will engage in during their studies. He also makes the point that the relationship between skills and subject knowledge is blurred.

At the University of Sussex the social anthropology subject group has been experimenting with the use of project logs, records of study and learning journals for their undergraduates. The idea of using these forms of writing has been to foster students’ engagement with both their course material and their study more broadly. Overall, the focus is on writing for learning rather than writing as an end product of learning:

> The aims of the new forms of writing in the two courses related to the aim of the degree as a whole: to enable students to see and construct the world from an anthropological perspective – ‘we want students to learn to think like anthropologists’, as one tutor put it. While there are disputes within anthropology about its nature and interests, to which students have to pay attention, nevertheless it is seen as a particular, bounded way of knowing and thinking about the world, with its own disciplinary assumptions about what can or cannot be said. The new forms of writing developed for the [...] two courses were seen as one of the ways of developing students’ anthropological thinking.

Creme, 1998
As a tutor you are likely to find yourself supporting your students in coming to grips with particular ways of ‘doing things’ in your discipline. There will often be specific conventions that you need to help them become acquainted with, for example ways of writing for assessment. These may well be different from the conventions in other modules that your students may be taking, and this can often be confusing for students. Part of your role as a tutor is to support your students in grasping what you want them to do in your course. For example, in terms of written work, you may be asking for a rather traditional essay format and, therefore, want to introduce your students to specific conventions for using the first person, the passive voice, headings, footnotes and endnotes. It may or may not be appropriate to outline in the introduction what an essay is going to explore. It may be acceptable to use material from non-academic sources, for example, newspapers. Personal interpretation of texts may be appropriate, as may the use of personal or professional experience. In contrast to the more traditional essay, you may have specific requirements for report or summary writing and you will need to be clear about these conventions in order to make them obvious and accessible to your students. It is useful to make a list of the conventions you need your students to follow when they are completing written assignments in your particular subject area.

It is important to remember that your students are likely to be studying other modules which will be drawing upon other contrasting and sometimes conflicting conventions. Students may be confused when they find that such academic conventions are presented as a need to learn ‘academic study skills’ and yet find that different modules, courses, units, subjects, and indeed tutors, have their own requirements. This can also be confusing because students may, not unreasonably, believe that they mastered the appropriate academic skills before coming to university. When you integrate skills into course design you need to be aware that these are likely to be subject, if not module-specific and this needs to be made explicit to your students.

Activity 4.4 Skills and conventions for your students

What do you see as some of the most important academic conventions for your students to learn in your subject area? How could you build the teaching of these into a specific course?

Identify a unit in which you would like to introduce a skills component. At what stage in the unit would you see it as appropriate to introduce these disciplinary skills?

How could you use the resources of students working together to support this work on skills?

Make a list of the writing conventions that you expect in the kinds of written assignments your students have to complete in the modules you teach.

The examples we have referred to are primarily from the humanities and social sciences, which frequently rely on a traditional essay format for assessment. The kinds of writing tasks that students have to undertake in the courses you teach may be very different. They may for example involve various kinds of report writing, reflection on professional practice, summaries, bibliographies or site reports. Whatever kinds of writing your
students are undertaking, there will be specific conventions you need to explain. You may well want to focus attention on these conventions and practices into your own course design. Of course, before you can do this you yourself must understand the conventions, and just as importantly – how they differ from those of other courses and modules that your students may be undertaking.

We hope that reading this chapter has given you the opportunity to reconsider your role as a tutor. It is important to remember that learner support is not all a one-way process; supporting students as learners can also be part of a learning process for you. Although supporting students can be an onerous task and extremely hard work, it is ultimately a valuable resource for you as a teacher. The better you understand your students’ experiences of learning, the more adept you will become at designing courses that effectively meet both the epistemological demands of teaching the discipline and the learning needs of your students.

Reflection 4.3 Clarifying your roles in learning support

In the light of your study of this chapter, consider:

1. How far do you believe that you can maintain a clear distinction between the different roles that you might be required to play as a tutor in relation to supporting your students’ learning – in particular, between being an assessor and being a counsellor?

2. Do you believe that you can identify clear boundaries (as Earwaker suggests in Extract 4.1) between teaching and providing learning support?

In practice it is of course very difficult to be clear about the roles you have to undertake as a tutor, and this lack of clarity can make you feel uncomfortable about whether you are giving the most appropriate support in your particular circumstances. Because each institutional context is different, you will need to clarify in your own mind what your own particular roles are. We think that many tutors would find it very difficult to say definitively when teaching stops and learning support begins. It would be useful to discuss this issue with colleagues.

4.4 Students supporting each other

This section draws on current thinking about learning as social practice, which has been the driver for an increasing value being placed on collaborative, rather than individual, student work in curriculum. As you read, you may want to make positive connections between the notion of mutual support for student learning and any support you may find through your own membership of a community of teaching professionals.

A decade ago, undergraduate students were commonly bound together in a quite small year group that stayed together throughout many of their courses, at least in the first year or two. They may have known most of their fellow students at least by name. They may have had frequent discussions with teachers, and even known some by their first name. There may have been a student society for the subject area and open seminars and social events which students from all years attended. The department within which their studies took place may have felt like a community. Learning communities of this kind can provide a sense of security and
belonging which encourages intellectual confidence, and social contacts that generate frequent opportunities for informally discussing course-related matters.

Such communities can also provide motivation: people are motivated to value what the communities they belong to value, and to learn to do what people in their community know how to do. (Becoming a mathematician is partly about becoming a member of the mathematics community, behaving like a mathematician – and perhaps even dressing like one!)

Today students often find themselves members of groups so large that they cannot hope to know, or even meet, everyone else. They may be in a different group for every course or module. These groups may persist for only one semester, after which they are fragmented as different course choices are made and students are scattered across different modules in different departments. There may be little social coherence to students’ lives and little sense of belonging. They may establish few relationships with a teacher. They are more likely to live at home, and/or to be working part-time rather than spending time socialising with other students. Instead of feeling part of a learning community, they may feel alienated, isolated and disengaged.

However, you can do much to foster the sense of a learning community even within the scope of one module by:

- encouraging students to get to know each other, especially in your first sessions with them, and perhaps through social events such as an introductory party;
- giving students the opportunity to get to know you and to see you individually for tutorial support;
- using learning activities both in and out of class that require collaboration between students – ‘buzz groups’, sharing of learning resources, shared assignments, joint seminar presentations, group projects, and so on;
- making the outcomes of learning public, for example through exhibitions or ‘poster’ presentations;
- using peer assessment or peer tutoring, in which students with special expertise or knowledge assist others, or where students divide up a topic and teach each other their part of it, thus creating interdependence and a sense of responsibility to others.

The first session

Your teaching groups may be large but it is still possible to create a sense of a learning community from the outset. Remember that the social aspect of a university course is very important for many students and that they look to classes to forge such contact. You need to think of ways in which you can make even one short teaching unit or module into a ‘mini’ learning community.

In the first session you can help create a friendly and purposeful atmosphere by being organised about course structure, and by setting the scene:

- talk to some students individually as they come into the room;
introduce yourself; say something about yourself, for example, why you are interested in this particular subject, to remind the students that you are a person not just a source of knowledge;

make introductions: in a large lecture, ask students to make themselves known to their neighbours; in a large seminar, get group work going early on;

get students talking to each other, for instance, about their thoughts on the course. Try to be inventive – for example, give them a quick quiz about the meaning of one of the important concepts on the course, with students answering in pairs;

encourage students to form self-help learning groups (see below);

if possible, learn names – or if impossible, use name cards. One way of helping everyone to learn names is to ask each person to state something they think identifies them. If the group is large then make sure that students introduce themselves to at least a few others;

set up a course e-mail list and encourage its use by introducing yourself and the course, and opening a discussion – such online conferencing arrangements can build a sense of collaborative learning, even where students are unable to meet in person.

Helping students to help each other

One simple way to structure peer support into courses is to turn individual assignments into group assignments. An individual seminar presentation provides more opportunities for learning when made by two students who have prepared materials together, or an individual practical exercise in a laboratory into a research team task. Students can undertake extended project work in groups of four instead of alone. In terms of student support, group assignments have several advantages:

learning resources are shared, so fewer students are chasing the same books or equipment at the same time;

group work provides a framework for discussion, informal teaching and critique;

working with others can create a safety net for weaker students, who receive help (groups produce work of a higher standard and of less variation in quality than do individuals);

for hard-pressed tutors, there is the additional advantage that the workload is reduced – there are fewer groups than individuals to look after.

Extended group work requires careful planning and students may need extra briefing and guidance if they are unfamiliar with collaborative learning (see Gibbs, 1994).

Supplemental Instruction and proctoring

Supplemental Instruction (SI) is a particular form of peer tutoring in which students who have done well on a course in the past act as additional tutor
support for the current year's students. SI is well developed, with standard training for the student tutors, and there is a good deal of research evidence about its effectiveness: it usually increases students' performance by one grade. Proctoring also uses more experienced students as a teaching resource to run individual or group tutorials. Leeds University has used proctoring to improve student performance and retention in large first-year philosophy courses.

**Tutorless groups**

It may be possible to arrange for students to meet as tutorless groups either before (or even instead of) larger seminar or problem classes. They can draw up their own agenda, for example listing the items on the problem sheet that members of the group would like help with. Students can often answer the questions other members of the group ask and in subsequent meetings the teacher only has to deal with problems which no-one in the group can tackle.

**Self-help groups**

Students often collaborate spontaneously, for instance reading each other's essays, and when revising. Increasingly, they are being required to collaborate in preparing projects or presentations; the spin-off is greater cooperation for other purposes. Such work is much more likely to happen in a collaborative learning setting. Open University tutors encourage their students to set up self-help study groups. Students are in telephone contact with each other and can also meet to discuss issues such as writing assignments. Computer conferencing is now being used by some students for the same purpose. You can encourage students to set up self-help groups simply by giving them the idea, and perhaps by providing a space to meet (some institutions make space available for informal group work). This is turn encourages other students to work in the same way.

**Peer assessment**

Students often feel dependent on feedback from tutors, but you may be unable to provide as much feedback as they would like as often as they would like it. However, students are perfectly capable of providing useful feedback to each other. Students, with appropriate guidelines and criteria, can be asked to:

- provide supportive feedback on each other's drafts before they are re-worked and submitted for assessment
- mark and give comments on regular assignments such as laboratory reports or problem sheets
- give evaluative comments on seminar presentations or posters
- assess the relative contributions of other members of the group to group project work.

The additional advantage of working together is that grading criteria and guidelines become shared and internalised, so that students may better understand what is expected from high-stakes assessment.
Activity 4.5

Considering one or two of your current assignments, how might you devise a way for students to provide peer tutor support and peer feedback? What are the implications of this strategy in practice?

In order to make such peer support work you are likely to have to:

- explain to students why it makes sense for them to support each other rather than relying solely on you
- brief them on how to go about it
- monitor carefully for problems with the method and to identify students who are still slipping through the net
- provide incentives for students to take their peers seriously, perhaps through the form of assessment you adopt.

Summary

In this chapter we have introduced you to a number of different considerations and perspectives relating to how you can support your students’ learning. Policies, practices and conventions vary widely and inevitably the examples we have chosen represent only a limited number of very specific disciplinary and institutional perspectives. If you are a tutor with your own academic and/or personal tutoring responsibilities, you will need to generalise from these examples to your own institution and your own role in that situation. The extracts have been chosen to give you a general feel for what is going on elsewhere in higher education in the area of student support. In your own teaching work, you may find yourself needing to focus on a different set of priorities. You may be working with a student body that includes a large cohort of part-time students; you may have to support a particular student with a specific disability; you may be working primarily with younger campus-based students; many of your students may be from overseas. Supporting students appropriately makes a significant difference to their success. We hope that you will be able to apply some of the principles explored in this chapter in a positive way to your own individual practice in supporting your students. However diverse your students are, and whatever balance you decide to adopt between your different roles, you should now be better equipped to ensure that as many students as possible complete their studies successfully.

Further reading


This book is designed to make students more aware of the complexity of writing university assignments. It explores disciplinary diversity, the use of the personal in academic writing, and the relationship between reading and writing at university.


This is a collection of accounts of peer support mechanisms, from a range of institutions and subject areas, in which students help to support each other.
during induction, through proctoring, mentoring and peer group learning. It also contains two accounts of peer support for disabled students.


Explores the kinds of help offered to students at university by examining the problems that students have and how these can be addressed from the perspective of the personal tutor. The book looks in some detail at what is involved in the tutorial relationship and the complexity of the tutor's role in this.


This book encourages the development of skills in reading and evaluating texts, and in developing a clear and effective writing style and a cogent argument.


A practical guide to providing economical forms of support for large classes, including targeting support, providing support through documentation and developing students' independent learning skills.


This article explores the difficulties that students experience with writing as they switch between courses and modules. It suggests that problems can arise as a result of the different expectations and understandings of staff and students in terms of both writing requirements and written feedback on students work.


This article explores the development of reflective practice through the keeping of a learning journal by students, both full and part-time, in a modular degree programme. It outlines two models for reflecting on personal, academic, professional and evaluative development.


This best-selling practical book helps students with general study techniques. It is valuable for social science students and particularly mature students and those returning to study after a break. Versions have been produced for students of the arts, science and management.


Explores the problems that students can experience and what tutors can do to help. It takes a counselling perspective and recognises the way in which students' intellectual and personal development is interconnected.


This book draws on numerous small vignettes to examine the kinds of difficulties that students present you with and the possible approaches that you might find yourself taking as a personal tutor in responding to these difficulties. Emphasis is placed upon the different roles that you might find yourself playing as a tutor.
References


Appendix I  Recognising dyslexia

How can dyslexia be recognised? Dyslexia is characterised by a pattern of difficulties, which vary from person to person. However, tutors noting several of the following features might reasonably refer a student for assessment:

- discrepancy between verbal and written performance
- severe problems with spelling
- misreading or miscopying of words or numerals
- reversals of letters or numerals, in reading and writing
- messy, poorly constructed or immature handwriting
- persistent problems with sentence structure
- punctuation and organisation of written work
- word omissions
- difficulty in 'seeing' errors (proof-reading)
- immature language in relation to ideas being expressed.

Problems may not be immediately apparent to tutors from coursework, as students may have rewritten the assignment many times or may present work which has been typed using a spell check. However, difficulties may become apparent when the student is placed under pressure, as in examinations, taking notes from lectures or being asked to read a piece aloud in a seminar. Although some of these difficulties may be similar to those of inexperienced students, dyslexia may be suspected when they are persistent and intractable.

Appendix 2 Undergraduate non-completion in higher education in England

Table 3.2 Influences on the decision to withdraw for 1478 full-time and sandwich students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Proportion indicating moderate or considerable influence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chose wrong field of study</td>
<td>.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of commitment to the programme</td>
<td>.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial problems</td>
<td>.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Programme not what I expected</td>
<td>.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insufficient academic progress</td>
<td>.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching did not suit me</td>
<td>.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Needed a break from education</td>
<td>.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Programme organisation</td>
<td>.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inadequate staff support outside timetable</td>
<td>.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of personal support from staff</td>
<td>.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of teaching</td>
<td>.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Programme not relevant to my career</td>
<td>.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal health problems</td>
<td>.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficulty of the programme</td>
<td>.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stress related to the programme</td>
<td>.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional difficulties with others</td>
<td>.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workload too heavy</td>
<td>.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of study skills</td>
<td>.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institution not what I expected</td>
<td>.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class sizes too large</td>
<td>.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accommodation problems</td>
<td>.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demands of employment whilst studying</td>
<td>.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dislike of city/town</td>
<td>.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Needs of dependants</td>
<td>.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of personal support from students</td>
<td>.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travel difficulties</td>
<td>.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of personal support from family</td>
<td>.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timetable did not suit</td>
<td>.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homesickness</td>
<td>.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional computing facilities</td>
<td>.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear of crime</td>
<td>.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional provision of social facilities</td>
<td>.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional library provision</td>
<td>.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional provision of specialist equipment</td>
<td>.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficulty in making friends</td>
<td>.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problems with drugs/alcohol</td>
<td>.07</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Valid numbers per item range from 1,464 to 1,469.
Factor analysis of the matrix of 36 provided possible influences 1,478 cases indicated that eight factors accounted for 58.7 per cent of the variances, as is shown in Table 3.3. The eight factors can be interpreted as follows:

**Table 3.3 Factors underlying the withdrawal of full-time and sandwich students**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Component items (abbreviated)</th>
<th>Interpretation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Inadequate staff support, both within and outside timetable; teaching quality; programme organisation; teaching not suited; class size too large, programme not as expected</td>
<td>Unsatisfactory experience of the programme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Accommodation problems; dislike of city/town; homesickness; fear of crime; difficulty in making friends; travel difficulties</td>
<td>Unhappiness with the locality of the institution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Programme difficulty; workload too heavy; lack of study skills; stress; insufficient academic progress</td>
<td>Inability to cope with the demand of the programme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Chose wrong field of study; programme not relevant to career; lack of commitment; programme not as expected</td>
<td>Wrong choice of field of study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Institutional provision of library, computing, specialist equipment and social facilities; institution not as expected</td>
<td>Dissatisfaction with institutional provision of facilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Financial problems; demands of employment whilst studying; travel difficulties</td>
<td>Problems associated with finance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Health problems; needed a break from education; problems with drugs/alcohol; lack of commitment</td>
<td>Health-related problems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Emotional difficulties with others; needs of dependants; lack of support from family, students; difficulty in making friends</td>
<td>Problems associated with relationships</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Factors with loadings numerically greater than 0.30 [were] included. A few items loaded on more than a single factor.

It should be noted that, although problems related to finance appeared in a small sixth factor, they should not be inferred to be relatively unimportant: Table 3.2 indicates that finance was the second most frequent moderate/considerable influence on withdrawal.