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Editorial

'We hope' as one of our founding co-editors, Rupert Bristow, said in our first editorial, 'that this publication makes connections for you'. Sharing good practice and ideas has always been a hallmark of how student services has operated, both through professional areas and, increasingly, through AMOSSHE.

CONNECT aims to play a significant part in this.

If you would like to help in developing this by contributing an article or review, or suggesting potential contributors, or new formats, or subjects you would like to see covered, do please contact one of the Editorial Group indicated at the foot of this editorial.

Copy deadline for the next issue is 28 February, and 31 May for the next but one.

Warm thanks to our contributors: Susan Aldridge and Jennifer Rowley, Esther Yu, Helen Flemming and Gill Troup, Allan Birchenough and Sheilagh Gunston.

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Student's Charters: Communicating with Students

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Introduction

New Public Management, a generic label for a group of policy and administrative solutions emphasising competition, disaggregation and incentivisation, has revolutionised the public sector services, so that virtually all aspects of public service production have been brought to more closely approximate those in private industry (Dunleavy 1994). Contracts and markets have been central to this new concept of public service

The Citizen's Charter Initiative 'Raising the Standard' was launched by the British Prime Minister in 1991, with the objective of raising the standard of public service, up to and beyond the best at present available. The Department for Education published a Charter for Higher Education, entitled *Higher Quality and Choice*, in 1993, (DFE, 1993), which explains the standards of service that students, employers and the general public can expect from a University. The culture of contracting extends through the public sector, embracing internal customers in addition to end-consumers. However, the focus of this paper is on the end-consumer.

Charters are, essentially, a formal contract between the public service provider and their customers. Charters are written and publicly available statements of the standards of service that the user has the right to expect. The first Charters set a baseline; feedback from customers will lead to the continuing enhancement of services. A Charter is only a standard against which service can be measured. Feedback from customers is necessary in order to establish whether performance matches the Charter's claims and to identify any enhancements in performance that can

realistically be incorporated into subsequent versions of the Charter.

In addition, as with all feedback or control systems, it is important that:

- the process being controlled and the relationship between inputs and outputs are understood
- it is possible to sample the inputs and outputs of the process in a repeatable way and within suitable intervals, so that the decision taker can decide which inputs to vary
- there must be an effective communication channel between sensor and actuator (decision taker)
- standards must be specified in a form compatible with that in which the output is measured
- there must be a comparator, that is a process for comparison and appropriate decision taking device.

Quality in the public sector, in general, is particularly important since it is not merely concerned with customer retention, and reputation, but is uniquely associated with service to the community; public services should contribute to the development of the community, its values, and the individual's experience as a member of that community. Education has a unique role in developing the skills and knowledge base of the members of a community, including those skills that shape the economic and social contribution that members are able to make to their community. Higher education needs to respond to its various stakeholder groups in seeking to understand and offer the benefits that those groups seek and the expectations and perceptions that those groups hold or develop.

In a public sector service such as education where resources are finite and are not, in general, determined by the direct recipient of the service (in this case the student) but rather by other stakeholders through a complex network of different avenues and decision making processes, it will not always be possible to respond by aligning service quality in accordance with current students' expectations. Accordingly, it is arguably incumbent upon higher education institutions to seek to manage students' expectations and perceptions. How might this be achieved? Student Charters are an element in this management of expectations and perceptions.

The Project

In the course of using and defining a student charter for Edge Hill University College, the authors conducted an initial informal pilot analysis of a few Student Charters from institutions of higher education. This revealed significant differences in various aspects of those Charters and suggested that further investigation into the nature and contents of Charters might provide further insight both into how institutions saw their services, and also how the Charter is used to communicate their progress to students. A Student Charter is an important communications document, which conveys significant messages about how the institution wishes to be viewed by its customers, and reveals aspects of values and culture. Student Charter documents were collected from 18 institutions. These are listed in Figure 1. Charters were collected from a wide variety of different institutions and those listed in Figure 1 vary in size, geographical location and nature of institution (eg 'old' university, 'new' university or college).

A range of features of these documents were analysed. It is intended that this analysis might provide a useful checklist for institutions in the design of their Charters, so that they are more conscious

of the implicit messages that are conveyed by the Charter document, and are in a position to make conscious, rather than unconscious decisions.

The analysis in this article seeks to identify some specific indicators in Charters, which reveal the institution's perceptions of the purpose of the Charter, and some of the central values and expectations of the institution.

Ownership

Many Vice Chancellors and Principals introduce the prospectus of their institution and thereby demonstrate their personal commitment to the success and quality of its activities. A commitment to the Charter might be reflected in a similar manner through an introduction from such a figurehead. Interestingly, there is little evidence in the sample of Charters analysed here to suggest that such top management commitment is made appropriately visible. In addition to the person introducing the Charter, many Charters also gave a contact point for queries or complaints. Partnership is sometimes explicit where introductions or other indications of ownership were offered jointly by the Senate or Vice Chancellor and the Students Union. The variability of acknowledgement of ownership across institutions is fascinating, ranging from anonymity through Directors of Student Services, Teaching Quality Assurance Units, Students Unions, to the Vice Chancellor. This may suggest different perceptions of the role of the names individual which in some institutions may be viewed as the contact point for complaints and in others as the person assuming corporate responsibility for the quality of the student experience.

Message

What is the message of the Charter? There are two clear indicators of the message: the title, and the form of statements about rights and responsibilities. Titles used by the Charters in this survey are summarised in Figure 1. The term Student Charter is clearly preferred, but a number of institutions have also added sub-titles, which often include the word partnership, and, in some cases, the word learning. There are two significantly different approaches, which illustrate different ways of approaching a Charter. Some Charters, such as that of the Manchester Metropolitan University, identify only what the University should do, for example, 'The University should provide information about...' Most Charters, on the other hand, identify both institutional and student rights and responsibilities. The types of phrases that are used to introduce rights and responsibilities. These range through statements that are 'expectations' to those that are 'pledges' or 'responsibilities'. However, in general, the message is one of partnership in the context of a creation of a community. Leeds Metropolitan University for example, takes this a little further by making explicit the purpose of its partnership in learning as being to:

- 'reflect our commitment to working together with our students in the pursuit of learning;
- assist in the setting and attaining of appropriate standard in all aspects of University activity;
- help stimulate continual improvement in standards by examining how we do things now, receiving feedback on what is already good and how the rest could be done better, and working towards the ideal year by year.'

A Charter might be viewed as a legal document, in that it sets out rights and responsibilities, but its primary role is more likely to be concerned with 'making the rules of the game explicit'. Institutions, as

communities, have a new influx of members each year, and it is necessary both to seek to influence their expectations and to explain the institution's expectations of them. This will have the twin effects of enhancing student to student compatibility and also influencing the students' own perceptions of satisfaction and quality. Other roles that Charters might be perceived to adopt include:

- information provision - we explore this more fully below in relation to content
- setting service standards, and
- establishing a code of conduct, in the sense that Charters can be viewed as an attempt to influence behaviour.

Who is the message for? The Charter document is a communication document intended for its customers. One group of customers are students, but charters may also be addressed to other stakeholder groups, including parents, employers, the Governing Body, and competitors. The audience for the Charter, or, more specifically, the groups of students that it is designed to cover is variable, and possibly related to the management structure of the originating institution. So, for example, an institution that manages postgraduate and undergraduate students separately may generate distinct charters for undergraduate and postgraduate student groups, possibly originating from different parts of the organisation. Some Charters explicitly identify their audience as full time undergraduate students, for example, Roehampton Institute, or full time students; this is the approach adopted by the University of Teesside. Others are intended to be generic, or may include a separate section for specific categories of students, such as research students, for example, University of Liverpool. Indicators suggest that there is an emphasis on full-time undergraduate students with varying level of attention to part-time students, and post-graduate students and other groups.

Scope

There are two significant dimensions on which the scope of charters may vary: topics covered, and the extent of information provision. Typically, the types of topics include a wide range of student services including recruitment and admissions, teaching and learning, support services (such as student accommodation, and finance, and student services), and student involvement in academic decision making. Table 2 shows some examples of the scope of Student Charters. A contact person or telephone number or location for complaints is usually offered; some charters explain in full the complaints procedure, whereas in other institutions this would be the subject of a separate document. Some charters also include the procedure relating to academic appeals. Policy statements on issues such as equal opportunities and access may be included. Other corporate statements, such as the mission statement, appear in some charters but not others.

There is variability as to the extent of the information embedded in the Charter. Some Charters are little more than a statement of rights and responsibilities, with variable amounts of detail on the services on offer. For example the University of Leeds Charter simply lists the support services that the University will seek to offer. Others give much more detailed information about the services on offer, including details such as opening hours, and response times. Whether such data are part of the 'contract' or implied 'service level agreement' or are just provided for information, is not usually clear. In some institutions such information would be provided separately in a Student Handbook. The relationship between the Charter and the student handbook is one which might merit further attention in many institutions. Since the two may originate from different parts of the institution, there may need to be more evident collaboration, than the basic co-

ordination that is dictated by adherence to corporate style and identity guidelines.

The University of Hertfordshire Charter incorporates the 'Charter' and 'Handbook' into one document. Reference to other related guidelines, such as the University Regulations and Codes of Practice, for say, Research Degree candidates, is also variable. Some charters introduce the role of the Students Union. This acknowledges the Students Union's corporate role in shaping the student experience and working with the institution to support students. A very necessary but unusual inclusion in the University of Nottingham Charter, is information on parking, transport and cycle stands. Car parking and transport are issues that are often overlooked, and which are a significant aspect of the student (and staff) experience of the institution. Charter document may include a campus map and term dates. The University of Hull's Charter gives a detailed grid showing the sources of different types of information that might be of value to the student before, during and after the completion of their studies in the university.

Typically the sequence of topics covered by the Charter follows the path of the student experience, commencing with admission and continuing until after the student has left the institution, thereby embracing the total student experience.

Presentation

Presentation and design of charters is important in drawing the document to the student's attention. Most Charters are relatively slim documents extending to around 20 pages or less. Virtually all show evidence of adherence to a corporate identity, at least at the level of the cover. Covers are usually glossy, thin card or paper and use the corporate colours.

Some have special design features, such as drawings, but the majority resemble internal documents rather than external publicity.

Perhaps more attention devoted to design would enhance the value of the documents as communication and marketing documents, and thereby capture students' attention and enhance the likelihood of the Charter being successful in communicating values and culture to students.

Conclusion

Many institutions of higher education have sought to respond to the initiative embedded in *Higher Quality and Choice*. Their missions often state a commitment to partnership and quality. This commitment is more specifically encoded in their Student Charters. The study has examined a number of such Charter documents with a view to:

- exploring the extent to which these documents reflect the varying missions and cultures of the institutions.
- exploring practice, with a view to providing information that might inform the design of subsequent Charter documents.

It is important to remember that the Student Charter is a formal contract. The service contract between the institution and the students must embrace formal, informal and psychological components. The Charter, is then, one component in the communication process between students and the institution. It has an important contribution to make in relation to the sharing of expectations. Its message must, however, be consistent not only with service delivery, but also with the informal and psychological contracts that operate between students and various agents, or service providers within the institution.

This article has focused on charters in higher education. In the sense that a charter encodes the expectations that the managers of the institution would like to cultivate in students, the charter acts generally as a summary of the expectations that will be adopted by the student body. Further studies which examined charters in other contexts, either in other countries, or in the school and further education sectors would offer an interesting comparative study of student expectations in different contexts. In particular, students leaving schools and further education might bring a set of expectations concerning education into higher education that have been shaped by their previous experience in school and further education. A comparative study of charters across sectors might offer interesting pointers concerning the transition that students experience between on entering higher education.

References

Department for Education (1993) *Higher quality and choice: the Charter for Higher Education*. London: Department for Education.

Dunleavy, P(1994) *The Globalisation of public service production: can government be 'Best in World'?* *Public Policy and Administration* 9 (2), Summer, 36-64

Figure 1 : Student Charters Collected**Institution, Title of Charter**

University of Northumbria, *Partnership in Learning*
 Liverpool John Moores University, *Student Charter*
 University of Teesside, *Charter for full-time students*
 Bradford and Ilkley Community College, *College Charter*
 University of Leeds, *Student Charter*
 University of Liverpool, *Student Charter*
 University of Sunderland, *Student Charter*
 University of Hull, *Student Chart: towards partnership with students*
 Manchester Metropolitan University, *Charter Statement*
 Bolton Institute, *Student Entitlement Statement*
 Leeds Metropolitan University, *The University and its students: Partnership in learning*
 University of Humberside, *Student Charter*
 University of Greenwich, *A Charter for Student Services*
 Edge Hill University College, *Student Charter*
 Roehampton Institute, London, *Undergraduate student charter*
 University of Nottingham, *Partnerships in learning: a guide for students*
 University of Hertfordshire, *Student Charter and Student Handbook*
 University of Derby, *Student Charter*

Table 2: Some Student Charter Sample Contents Lists*University of Sunderland*

Before you arrive
 When you arrive
 Your programme of study

- Taking part in university life
- Research students

Learning support
 Student support

- Careers service
- Accommodation
- Childcare
- Catering
- The Government Student Loan Scheme
- Access fund
- Sports, social, cultural and leisure facilities
- Counselling

Complaints.. if all else fails

Manchester Metropolitan University

Introduction
 Charter Statement
 How the University seeks to fulfil the requirements of the Charter for Higher Education
 Applications
 Finance
 Quality & Courses
 What to do if things go wrong

University of Nottingham

Introduction
 Academic Studies
 Student Responsibilities
 Academic Services
 Student Services
 Students' Union
 Financial assistance
 Equal opportunities
 Data Protections
 Complaints
 Lost and Found Property
 Useful Telephone numbers

**Asia Pacific Student Services Association
Conference Proceedings - Sydney 1996**

**The Challenges of Changing Student Needs
- A Coping Model**

*Esther Shuk Wah Yu, Director of Student Affairs,
City University of Hong Kong*

The Context

Until the late 1980's, Hong Kong Government's higher education policy was one of elitist provision. Government found it cheaper to provide local students with scholarships and financial assistance to acquire overseas higher education in specific disciplines, and overseas graduates in fact filled 65% of the graduate jobs in Hong Kong. In 1984, only 3.3% of the 18-20 year age group were provided with degree places, and the percentage slowly rose to 8% by 1989 when Government announced an ambitious expansion programme to achieve a participation rate of 18% by 1994-95. Such expansion practically means that any student who gets matriculated will be able to gain admission into the universities. Consequently, within the last eight years, there is an observed change in the profile and needs of the students in higher education. Earlier strategies to educate the 'cream' need to be adapted and changed in order that this new generation of students are able to benefit from the educational opportunities provided for them.

1 Students' socio-economic profile, language ability and learning motivation

There is an observed lowering of standards in students' language ability and learning motivation in the last eight years. Being relatively new, our

University normally isn't selected as a priority choice by potential applicants. Surveys in the last two years showed that roughly half of the students admitted had repeat experience in either Form 5 or Form 7. Academically, they tend to be passive learners, less-confident of their intellectual skills, inhibited because of their less successful experience in high school, having difficulty adjusting to the essentially vicarious learning tasks of tertiary education, and having a low tolerance for ambiguity and delayed gratification. In terms of socio-economic background, approximately 60% of students come from families living in government subsidised housing, with about 10% of the fathers having had tertiary education and 30-36% secondary schooling. Therefore the majority of the students come from lower classes with extremely limited exposure and narrow perspectives and with little guidance from the home-end on the values, norms and etiquette of the middle class which they aspire to join after graduation. They see tertiary education as a means to a better life than their parents have experienced, have high expectations that the University degree will yield tangible rewards like a secure job and a greater salary earning potential.

In terms of personality characteristics, the typical student nowadays is less confident than their peers five years ago, more dependent on authority figures for structure and guidance, unprepared to sort out different viewpoints and ambiguities, and hesitant to seek out help and advice which they drastically need in order to derive benefit from tertiary education. When faced with difficulties or frustrations, they often become passive, discouraged and quit further efforts easily.

2 Interaction between students and staff

However, within the University, some objective factors have worked against the building of an environment of close interaction between students and staff. Budget cuts have resulted in a moratorium for student affairs and academic support units since 1990, though student numbers continue to grow, while faculty/student ratios continue to decrease. Tutorial classes have become larger, while the emphasis on research as the key factor for consideration of faculty substantiation and promotion has significant impact on faculties, more and more of whom are becoming less prepared to spend time to talk with students and respond to their individual doubts and problems. The caring environment that most students require is therefore not readily available on campus. Also, the absence of student residences in the University results in greater difficulties for students to build up mutual support systems and networks among peers, between seniors and juniors. Overall, students' sense of identity with the Academic Departments and University is fairly weak; and it is noted that tremendous efforts would be required to change the campus ecology.

3 The community's expectation of University graduates

On the other hand, the community's expectation of University graduates has risen. The information explosion, the flattening of management structures in commercial/industrial enterprises, the increasing globalisation because of improved communication and transportation technology all account for the changing demands on graduates' qualities for employability. Life-long career and loyalty with a single employing organisation is becoming a myth, replaced by high job mobility arising out of rapid economic changes and organisational survival strategies. Transferable life skills and aptitudes such as decision-making, flexibility, communication, critical/creative thinking, personal drive, life-long learning assume equal weight as the technical know-how and professional knowledge which the University degree purports to guarantee. In fact, a survey of employers' selection criteria for fresh graduates in early 1995 shows that the weighting of communication skills and working attitudes far surpass professional knowledge. Moreover, the massive return of emigrant professionals, the possibility of tapping on the graduate pool in China, the overall economic consolidation policies in the field as well as the increased supply of locally educated graduates results in keener competition in the employment market.

4 Student Development - new mission for student affairs

It is obvious that the University is faced with an unprecedented challenge of how to process an input (which is of lower quality than in earlier days) and add value to it so that the output meets the rising demands of society.

On the part of Student Affairs Office, we have re-defined our role and philosophy. Instead of *in loco parentis*, we have adopted the student development philosophy for all services, programmes and activities. Specifically, our whole personal development model combines both the aspects of spiritual, intellectual, physical, social and aesthetics as espoused by the Chinese as well as aspects of emotional and occupational as espoused by the Westerners. We have moved away from merely service providers to take care of students' welfare and remedial workers to iron out students' problems. Increasingly we assume a proactive educator's stance, being conscious that education of students occurs as much outside the classrooms as within. Programmes and activities are designed and delivered to promote students' whole personal development. To ensure competence in the new role, staff training and development is encouraged. In the past four years, more than 13 staff have acquired additional qualifications, in Counselling, Business Administration, Information systems, Psychology, etc. Empowerment of staff is also achieved through arrangement of in-house training workshops, encouragement of participation in local/overseas short courses, conferences, familiarisation visits to comparable institutions, etc.

5 Student orientation

One initiative made is heavier involvement in student orientation. It is noted that university education demands higher level of cognitive and coping skills on the part of students if the latter is to derive maximum benefit from the experience; but given the characteristics of the majority of students as described earlier, we feel that more intensive investment in student orientation will be cost-

effective. Therefore the Orientation Programme has been revamped to include Seminars on Whole-Person Development, Learning to Learn, University Life and Wellness. Topics covered include active learning, note-taking, time-management, coping with tutorials, early career planning, activities participation and quality campus life, physical wellness and health. Also, open house and guidance sessions are arranged at the Library, Computer Services Centre, Language Institute Self-Access Centre; while some academic departments are supported to conduct familiarisation and rapport-building activities with new students. Academics and senior students are involved, with the aim of building up a network so that new students can feel a sense of identity with their lecturers and senior peers, and know where to seek support and resources for their educational/developmental tasks. The above enhanced Orientation activity is a conscious effort instituted this year to strengthen the caring environment that most students need, as well as to equip new students with study attitudes and survival skills for a successful university educational experience. The extent of the impact of the strengthened Orientation programme will be better assessed in future.

6 Development of scholarship awardees

Initiatives in promoting whole person development of students may be demonstrated in how we work with scholarship awardees. At the University, scholarships are awarded mainly on the basis of academic merit, but one cannot assume that the awardees have other desirable transferable qualities that success in modern society needs.

The awardees were encouraged to stage an exhibition to share their Achievement - Joys and Pains with their fellow students, as well as to serve as co-leaders in study skills workshops for new students. In the reflective and action process, many awardees came to realise their narrow knowledge base and inadequacies in areas such as communication and social skills, leadership and teamwork, independent thinking and decision-making, etc. So programmes were organised to gear them to develop the above, as well as to stimulate curiosity in multi-discipline reading. Also the awardees were encouraged to form into a Scholars' Club so as to provide mutual support for continuous improvement and possible service to fellow-students. Similar developmental programmes are being discussed and planned targeting at the Captains and Vice-Captains of University sports teams. It is expected that such initiatives will benefit not simply the individuals involved, but also other sports team members and their individual and collective performance.

7 Careers Service: training and development role

Career service with simply information and placement services is no longer adequate to prepare students to meet the rising demands of employers. The image of the career resources centre has been changed from that of an information centre (of vacancies, employing organisation and further study institutions) to being a training and development centre. Interactive computerised package on helping students to identify their aptitudes and interests are available. The Centre is used as a regular hub for small group discussion on different career issues under the guidance of career counsellors. Also many career programmes have moved away from

simply information-giving on different careers, to focusing on helping students to involve in career planning and develop career management skills and transferable life skills. It has also been recognised that internalisation of skills takes time, so efforts have been made to introduce career education to students earlier than their final year. This year, we have proposed a career education module 'Workplace 2000' as a credit-gaining general education subject for first year students; and planned Career-education Day as co-curricular activities with a few academic departments. It is envisaged that with the push from academics, overall students' responses would be more positive and the impact on the masses would be more significant.

8 Student partnership and mutual aid

The student partnership and mutual aid concept is being actively promoted. The idea is to train up a core group of students with outstanding skills so that they may serve as role models, assist and motivate other fellow-students in the pursuit for continuous overall improvement. Some examples of such intensive programmes are Achievers Training and Peer Counsellors. The Achievers Training is a 5-day empowerment programme aiming to equip students with presentation and social skills, win-win and vision-building concepts. Achiever alumni are encouraged to meet regularly to offer mutual support and encouragement to implement goals set on graduation of the Training, as well as to maintain their motivation of continuous improvement.

Activities they organise include practice sessions on public speaking, review of best-sellers read, high-table dinners involving successful graduates to share with them their experience on how the acquired skills and attitudes have helped them in their career adjustment progression. The alumnis are also encouraged to invite other fellow-students to participate in these sessions and join in the self-improvement pursuits. Peer Counsellors' Training is a year-long programme, starting with a 5-day course on enhancing participants' personal awareness and growth, as well as developing micro-counselling skills. Then participants are invited to form into pairs and to plan out programmes whereby they may render service to fellow-students. Peer counsellors are found to be particularly useful in serving as co-leaders in induction workshops for new students, such as making friends, budgeting and financial assistance, prioritising and managing time, making best use of the University experience. While such programmes spread throughout the year, under the supervision of our counsellors, the peer counsellors are also required to further review and sharpen their helping skills through a number of structured practicum sessions and talks. With heightened sensitivity to human behaviour, peer counsellors have been found to be extremely useful serving as feeler network, detecting and making early referrals of anxious or 'problem' students to us for appropriate assistance. Their initiatives have helped to build up a more supportive campus environment.

9 Students' responses to these initiatives

Student responses to the above initiatives have been encouraging. All the programmes are over-subscribed,

and students' active participation is observed throughout the training period. The post-training mutual-aid groups, however, require the occasional 'push and kick' in terms of both ideas and efforts on our part in order to maintain the students' enthusiasm and commitment. It is hoped that the enhanced Orientation Programme could have a significant impact on building up a more caring campus ethos overall. The collaboration with academic departments in conducting career programmes and the formalisation of career education in credit-gaining general education courses point to new hopes of greater impact on reaching out to significant numbers of students in their year one and heightening their sensitivity to early career planning. Coupled with the existence of a critical mass of highly-motivated students with outstanding personal skills and concern for service, it is expected that in future, the new students would have an easier time adjusting to the transition from secondary school and deriving maximum benefit from the University education.

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Student Withdrawal Report

By Helen Fleming & Gill Troup, Glasgow Caledonian University

This article gives a brief summary of work on reasons for student withdrawal conducted by Glasgow Caledonian University.

Introduction

From December 1994 - October 1995 the Department of Student Services (SSD) conducted a survey with two main aims: i) to gather information about non-academic reasons for students withdrawing from programmes at Glasgow Caledonian University and about the support they were given; ii) to use the information provided by this group of students to help develop and improve the support available for future students.

Method

A questionnaire was sent out to a total of 713 students who, as notified to Registry, had withdrawn from their programme of study during this period. Of the 344 returns, 30 were returned, not known at the address. To increase the return rate reminder letters and second questionnaires were sent and follow up phone calls made (215 calls in total).

In addition to asking for information from the questionnaire, Student Services invited students to take part in a group discussion. As a result two focus groups were run to explore their experience in more depth.

Students were also offered the opportunity of a follow up advisory interview - all students who requested this were offered an hour long session with an appropriate member of staff (e.g. Careers Adviser, Funding Adviser, Counsellor).

Additional comments from the questionnaires grouped by programme and faculty are available and have been distributed to Deans. This information is not available for general distribution to protect the student identity.

In the full report of the project, where applicable or possible, the information gathered for this survey is compared with the University as a whole using statistics from the Student Profile 94/95 document.

Reasons for Withdrawal

Students were asked to rank in order of importance their reasons for withdrawal from 1 to 4, with 1 being the most important reason.

Reason	1st & most important	no. & % of students reporting the following reasons as being at least one factor contributing to their withdrawal
	Actual No. & %	
Unsuitable course	60 (19%)	108 (34%)
Financial	50 (16%)	102 (32%)
Health	36 (11%)	55 (18%)
Gained employment	26 (8%)	49 (16%)
Stress/Anxiety	25 (8%)	86 (27%)
Pressure of work	17 (5%)	46 (15%)
Domestic commitments/ responsibilities	17 (5%)	65 (21%)
Other	16 (5%)	18 (6%)
Didn't feel you could cope	11 (4%)	61 (19%)
HE not what expected	11 (4%)	33 (11%)
Failure	8 (3%)	19 (6%)
Transfer to other courses at Glasgow Caledonian University	7 (2%)	10 (3%)
Transfer to other institution	6 (2%)	19 (6%)
Homesickness	5 (2%)	15 (5%)
Moved away from Glasgow	4 (1%)	9 (3%)
Wrong choice of university	2 (1%)	23 (7%)
Accommodation	2 (1%)	16 (5%)
Pressure from others	1	17 (5%)
No reply	10 (3%)	

Comment:

The above table shows reasons for withdrawal. A comparison of the total, or cumulative column on the right hand side to the column with the first and most important reason for withdrawal indicates that for most students a number of factors contributed to their withdrawal.

Considering GCU's Student Profile (i.e. high proportion of mature students, students with dependants) it is not surprising that factors such as **financial pressures, health and domestic commitments / responsibilities** feature significantly.

Summary of Findings

The following are the main findings from the survey and comparison with the overall student profile of the University:

- Principal reasons for withdrawal in rank order are - unsuitable course; finance; health; employment; stress/anxiety/pressure of work
- Only 50% of students who withdraw will not return to complete their course of study
- The majority of students who withdraw contact teaching staff before they do so
- A very small proportion of students who withdraw make use of central University support services and only 10% are referred on by the host department for further support
- Awareness of services available in the University is average, and poor about the Students' Association
- Very few of the respondents indicated that they had been given relevant information
- The view was clearly expressed that information and support provided at programme level and centrally was poor
- A small minority (14%) said that they would not recommend GCU to a friend
- Academic and careers advice were seen as beneficial by more than half of respondents

- Students who withdraw represent the University profile in general, the only exception being that they may tend to be older and/or with dependants
- The majority withdraw in the first year of study and in the months of January and February
- A minority of students who withdraw work on a part-time basis

Conclusion

The survey results and evidence from student discussions and comments identify several issues for further consideration by the University which may have wider implications for HE provision in general *viz*:

- If unsuitable choice of course is the principal reason for withdrawal, what steps can and should be taken to ensure that intending students make well-informed and appropriate choices prior to registering on GCU programmes?
- Once existing students have identified that they are unsatisfied with their course choice what mechanisms are and should be available to ensure that, if at all possible, they can transfer within GCU into other programmes?
- Why is there so little referral of students at the point of withdrawal to other University and non-University agencies? What can be done to rectify this?

- If there are potentially 50% of students withdrawing from courses who might return then it would appear to be critical to ensure that some form of systematic follow-up or exit counselling is offered. Should the University be doing this centrally or at programme level? If this is to be done professionally, where is the expertise in educational guidance within the University?
- What more can be done prior to and in the first Semester of the first year to improve student experience, furnish them with the necessary skills and support them past the critical January/February period?
- Should the University continue this follow-up of student withdrawals on a longitudinal basis?

As a result of the withdrawal study, Glasgow Caledonian University's Student Services Department has set up a working group to look at follow up activities. In particular, the department intends to conduct a second study, using the same questionnaires, for current students and those who withdraw in 1998/99.

The Personal Tutor: Drawing the Line

Allan Birchenough and Sheilagh Gunston

Introduction

Most UK higher education institutions have in place systems which attempt to identify a member or members of academic staff to whom students may turn in times of difficulty. Such staff are variously referred to/designated as course tutors, year tutors, personal tutors, etc., but may in practice be any member of staff. Issues on which students seek advice can be academic, but are just likely not to be.

Academic staff who bear the burden of student enquiries are usually employed because of their academic subject expertise and do not necessarily have qualifications, expertise or ability to deal with other than academic subject issues, (though some may say they have "experience"). Whilst there may be helpful texts which attempt to broaden expertise (e.g. Ref. 1), it is valid to question a tutor's effectiveness in giving non-academic advice, both on behalf of the tutor and of the student.

This paper gives a cautionary view in regard to the extent of tutors' involvement in advising students' on non-academic problems and offers an example guidance note for such tutors.

Background Study

To get a "feel" for the scope of students' expectations of tutors, a small number of tutors (13) at the authors' institution were asked to indicate typical issues on which students approach them for advice. Examples of issues given are classified under nine headings below (headings and classification added afterwards):

A	17
Financial Problems	
fee payment	
grant problems	
access fund	
benefits agency	
disability payments	
fellow students extreme poverty	
	4
B	10
Accommodation	
eviction	
personality clashes	
structural problems	
	4
C	21
Health/Psychological	
eating disorders	
depression/suicidal tendencies	
self mutilation	
highly stressed	
sports and other injuries	
alcoholism	
drug abuse	
cancer/lumps	
	18
D	17
Domestic/Marital	
bereavement	
separation	
family commitments	
incest accusation	
domestic violence	
	11

E	
Personal	18
sexual problems	
relationship problems	
pregnancy	
abortion	
homesickness	
harassment	
burglary	
	11
F	
Institutional Inadequacies	4
car parking	
canteen	
library	
	3
G	
Career/Professional	7
course transfer	
progression to higher course	
interview preparation	
careers advice	
job application advice	
	0
H	
Study Problems	21
dyslexia	
mental blocks	
workload	
other tutors	
difficulties in understanding	
work experience	
catch-up after absence	
stolen notes	
exam panic	
other students talking in class	
missed resit	
disputes over marking	
balancing study with work	
	2
I	
Other	3
travelling	
work problems	
	1

It is notable that, with the exception of Accommodation, the above categories align themselves closely with reasons given for student withdrawal (Ref. 2).

The numbers at the top right hand corner of the above boxes indicate the number of times an issue within the classification was given as an example of a student enquiry. Whilst this background study cannot be, by its very nature, quantitative, and whilst the numbers referred to are not frequency indicators, they do represent "spread".

Tutors were asked which issues they found to be inappropriate for them to deal with by virtue of their (lack of) expertise. The numbers in the bottom right hand corner of the boxes above indicate the number of times topics with the classification, out of those given in the top right hand corner, were cited by tutors as being inappropriate for them to deal with.

It will be apparent that whilst tutors on average felt comfortable dealing with queries on study and careers/progression and uncomfortable dealing with queries on health/psychological matters - quite clearly and understandably - there would also appear to be little reluctance to engage in accommodation problems, financial problems and problems stemming from institutional inadequacies. Further, there would appear to be a degree of perceived appropriateness in regard to dealing with queries of a personal nature and of a domestic/marital nature.

Information from the small sample of tutors indicated that on average each student seeks between one and two advisory meetings per year and that some 30+% of such enquiries are adjudged by tutors to be inappropriate.

The authors, because of the observations in the above paragraph, would estimate considerably higher than 30%.

In regard to where personal tutoring enquiries are dealt with, whilst some were said to be in a confidential environment, others were in a shared office (sometimes with thin walls), a store room, at the end of a lecture or practical class, in corridors and under a stairwell.

In general, the sample of tutors had no training in "personal" tutoring, apart from in one case attendance at a workshop, and most felt that their greatest need for undertaking the role of personal tutor was not training but referral information.

Interestingly, two completely opposing views emerged from two tutors, one discouraging staff from becoming too involved in counselling activities/personal problems because of the possibility of compromising academic judgements, the other encouraging close relationships between staff and students.

A further observation from one of the tutors sampled, passed to the authors subsequently to the survey, is that sometimes helping with one problem means that the tutor becomes the first port-of-call with all subsequent issues. The student becomes dependent upon the tutor and this can be very time-consuming, wearing and possibly compromising.

Summary of Background Study

The above cannot be claimed in any way to be representative in regard to experiences in the authors' institution, let alone across the UK higher education system. However, combined with day-to-day feedback and knowledge of other institutions, it is claimed to be indicative. What emerges is that personal tutors (or whatever the designation):

- are approached by students to deal with/advise on issues which are often non-academic in nature;
- are for the most part not qualified or trained to deal with/advise on non-academic issues raised by students;

- nevertheless get involved with attempting to deal with/advise on such non-academic issues;
- have differences of opinion in regard to whether they should or should not involve themselves in non-academic issues;
- by no means always have available confidential/appropriate surroundings in which to be consulted by students.

Given that all institutions have specialist student advisers - such as counsellors, welfare staff, medical staff - one might ask why students feel the need to approach an academic member of staff on a non-academic problem, and why an academic member of staff should feel the need to try to help directly as opposed to recommending advice from elsewhere. However, students' non-academic problems impinge upon their study and there is a need for tutors to adopt a caring attitude, students know their tutors whilst they may not know specialist advisers, and there would be dire volume consequences for specialist advisers if "don't get involved" edicts were to emerge.

Matters for Consideration

Any personal tutor faced with an approach for advice from a student on a non-academic problem needs to ask him/herself questions relating to:

- relevance of own qualifications/training;
- confidence in the accuracy of own knowledge on the issue;
- level of severity of the problem
- consequences of giving inappropriate/inaccurate advice/information (legal; for the student; for self; for the institution);

- what other sources of specialist advice/information exist within the institution and the availability of such specialist advice
- what other sources of specialist advice/information exist outside the institution and the availability of such specialist advice
- having examined the above, am I (the tutor) the best person to give advice/information or take action?

These are complex questions, the answers to which cannot be formula driven, but will result in a more reasoned approach to tutors deciding whether to become involved or to refer the student to someone else. It may be of interest to note that case study research by Adams (Ref. 3) indicates that, in a survey of withdrawn students, the vast majority had approached course staff for advice prior to withdrawal.

Perhaps the most important aspect of the personal tutor's role in regard to students seeking advice from them is, as was pointed out in one of the background study responses, to listen. This not only helps to clarify and focus upon what the problem is, but also provides an opportunity for the tutor to ask himself/herself the above questions and to demonstrate to the student that somebody cares, irrespective of any decision to deal with or refer the problem.

Answering the questions above raises issues regarding the knowledge tutors and students have about institutional services available. Such information undoubtedly exists but may not be referred to in a convenient format or single document. This, perhaps, promotes the need for a reminder or guidance note as suggested in Annex 1, which gives such a note compiled for the authors' institution.

It will be observed that the guidance note refers to actions which should/may be taken

by the tutor even though he/she will not personally give the required advice/assistance - such as consideration of extending work hand-in times and providing mitigatory information to the Examining Board. It also stresses the need to maintain a record of meetings, which may be assistance should the matter result in a student complaint or academic appeal; such occurrences are an increasing phenomenon (see, for example, Ref. 4).

References

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Thomas, T., Adams S and Birchenough A. (1996) "Student Withdrawal from Higher Education", *Educational Management and Administration*, 24 (2): 207-221.

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(1996) "Student Hearings - Procedures are Paramount", *Insight Education Law Update Autumn Term*, Eversheds.

ANNEX 1**Personal Tutoring - Guidance Note****1 Introduction**

1.1 This note is intended to provide guidance for members of academic staff who are approached by students seeking advice or assistance in regard to problems of a non-academic nature. Individuals approached may or may not be designated personal tutors; however if approached they, to all intents and purposes, may be deemed to be in the position of a personal tutor.

1.2 The note does not cover instances where students seek advice on academic issues. It is assumed that course staff have no difficulty in dealing with such issues in accordance with any procedures advised by the tutor's School or Faculty.

1.3 For the purposes of this Guidance Note, "academic issues" pertain to those aspects described within the validated course document and are exemplified by matters concerned with:-

- course curriculum and course delivery;
- course organisation (teaching timetables, etc.);
- assessment and assessment regulations;
- work placement.

1.4 Issues other than those contained within the generalisation of the above are deemed to be non-academic.

2. Communicating the Personal Tutor Role

2.1 UWIC has a range of facilities for specialist student pastoral care. As a personal tutor, at induction and at the beginning of each session for returning students, tutors should arrange to reinforce to students information on such facilities. This is contained mainly in the Student Handbook.

2.2 Tutors should also indicate to students the rationale by which they will undertake their personal tutor role, as advised in this guidance note.

3. Levels of Action**3.1 Administrative Level**

Personal tutors meeting with students who approach them on non-academic issues should:

(i) listen considerately to the student's problem in appropriately confidential surroundings, and assist the student in focusing upon the issue or issues which constitute the problem;

(ii) decide with the student if an extension to work hand-in deadlines is appropriate in terms of alleviating the problem, and if so, organise such an extension;

(iii) decide with the student whether to inform the Examining Board regarding the problem at its next meeting, and if so convey relevant information to its Chair;

(iv) maintain, with appropriate confidentiality, a record of the meeting.

In the case of (ii) or (iii) above, bearing in mind fairness to other students, it is necessary for tutors (and Examining Boards) to be convinced by virtue of documentary or other evidence, as to the validity and severity of the problem.

3.2 Consideration Level

(i) if required above the administrative level, give consideration as to whether to advise on or deal with the problem or to refer it to others, taking due cognisance of:

- the relevance of the tutor's own qualifications, training and, where demonstrably effective, experience, in relation to the problem;
- the perceived level of severity of the problem;
- the compromise or dependency effect that dealing with the problem may have;
- the legal, student, personal or institutional consequences of giving the student inappropriate or inaccurate advice or assistance;
- the availability of specialists or specialist information within or locally outside the institution.

3.3 Action Level

(i) if, having addressed the above questions the tutor deems it inappropriate to deal with/advise on the problem, he/she should

refer the student, assisting with the referral as necessary, to the most appropriate source of advice or help. The Annex to this guidance note will be of use in identifying the most appropriate source in the first instance; the source may thereafter direct the student elsewhere;

(ii) if, having addressed the above questions the tutor deems it appropriate to deal with/advise on the problem then he/she should do so with the agreement of the student undertaking such follow-up meetings/action as necessary and keeping an appropriately confidential record of such meetings.

Sources of Advice/Information - Student Non-Academic Issues

Nature of issue	Example	Source of advice/information
Financial	general fee information/payments problems grant issues access fund benefits problems disability payments problems	Student Handbook Academic Registry/Faculty Office Welfare Officer/Faculty Office Academic Registry Welfare Officer Welfare Officer
Accommodation	general Halls problems Accommodation search Eviction Structural Problems Personality Clashes	Student Handbook Halls Manager Accommodation Officer Accommodation Officer/Welfare Officer Landlord/Accommodation Officer Welfare Officer/Halls Manager
Health/Psychological	eating disorders depression/suicidal tendencies self mutilation highly stressed sports/other injuries alcoholism drug abuse cancer/etc. advice	University GP/own GP/Campus Nurse/Counsellor Counsellor Counsellor/GP/Campus Nurse Counsellor GP/Campus Nurse Counsellor/GP Counsellor/GP Counsellor/GP
Domestic/Marital	bereavement separation family commitments incest accusation domestic violence	Counsellor Counsellor Welfare Officer Welfare Officer/Counsellor Welfare Officer/Counsellor
Personal	sexual problems relationship problems pregnancy abortion homesickness harassment burglary	Counsellor/GP/Nurse Counsellor Nurse Nurse Welfare Officer Student Handbook Counsellor/Police
Institutional Inadequacy	car parking canteen library grievances academic appeals	Faculty non-academic issues procedures Course Committee student representative Academic Handbook Academic Handbook
Career/progression	course transfer interview preparation careers advice job application advice	Careers Officer/Academic Registry Careers Officer Careers Officer Careers Officer
Study Problems	dyslexia other tutors disputes over marking	Welfare Officer Head of School/Tutor's Line Manager Head of School/Course Director
Other	travelling work problems	Welfare Officer Employer

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