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Editorial

“What we hope for CONNECT is that it makes connections for you – whether you manage student services, lead or help to deliver a specific professional service, run a higher education institution, or plan the next major change in higher education. Too often policies and practice have been developed in isolation from other parts of the system, and we hope that this journal will encourage a more holistic approach.”

CONNECT's founding co-editors wrote this in the first issue, in 1994. The same hope applies today.

CONNECT's purpose is to provide a means of sharing ideas and good practice and so to make connections. We greatly value the fact that a good many of our readers have already been contributors; and we wish to extend particular appreciation to those who have contributed articles to this issue.

The editorial panel is also always interested in offers, from new contributors, of articles, reviews, or other material for possible inclusion in future issues of the journal.

If you – or any of your colleagues – would be interested in offering a piece for CONNECT, you – or a colleague – are warmly welcome to contact a member of the editorial panel. Our details appear on this page.

Academic Review : Uncertainty, Challenge and Promise

Sheila Aynsley Smith and David J. Owens

Background

A week may be a long time in politics, but the same can rarely be said of higher education. However, since we presented a workshop at the Amoshe conference in July 2001, on the role of Student Services in academic review, this nostrum has been defied – at least in the realm of quality assurance. Whether the rapidly changing environment was directly attributable to the re-elected government or to power and politics at the heart of higher education, we will leave for others to assess. Notwithstanding, it left us with a dilemma in writing up the workshop.

Aware of some imminent changes to the new system for academic review which had been developed by the Quality Assurance Agency (as set out in the Handbook for Academic Review (QAA 2000), nevertheless we sought in the workshop to describe the good practices which had evolved for Student Services managers over the previous (or, in England, expiring) methodology, to analyse the implications of the proposed new system and identify ways in which we might continue to make an effective contribution. Although we touched on institutional review, our main focus was on subject review, which had given a high profile to the contribution and support of Student Services.

The 2001 Autumn term saw much controversy about the future role of quality assurance, following the publication, in July of a joint HEFCE/UUK/SCOP/QAA Consultative document (HEFCE 2001a) which argued for a much lighter touch. The then Chief Executive of the QAA, John Randall, resigned on the grounds that public accountability of the sector would be all but removed. Following some well publicised turmoil, peace appears to be breaking out, with a clearer and consensual model emerging. Whilst the HEFCE awareness 'Information on quality and standards of teaching and learning' (HEFUS 2001b) is still a consultative document, key features of the new system are apparent. In particular, the core of the nationally driven system will be to ensure institutional accountability through institutional audit. As we discuss below, such audit will be

founded on internal quality assurance processes, compliance with the QAA Code of Practice¹ and

reliance on cornerstones already established. It is understood that subject (or programme) review will effectively disappear and in those instances where a discipline related review is required, this will be on a very limited basis.

Thus, while the QAA scenario is not yet finalised, we believe that there are sufficient indicators for student services managers to prepare for the quality future, using lessons from the past. Moreover, the QAA is not the sole agent of external quality assurance and there are many professional bodies which accredit and review academic disciplines, to which the lessons of subject review are relevant. Although subject review, as we know it, ended in December 2001, many of us were involved in reviews throughout the Autumn term and have continued to develop excellent working relations within our own institutions, which will provide a sound basis for future collaboration. A further influence on our own areas of work will stem from dedicated exercises such as Guidance Council accreditation, the relationship with service specific performance indicators, and the impact of relevant sections of the QAA Code of Practice. Therefore, as in the original workshop, and the recent controversies and current uncertainties notwithstanding, we argue that "quality" will remain an important issue for us all and a significant, albeit altered, role for Student Services in institutional processes, will continue.

Programme Review and the Role of Student Services

1997 saw the introduction of the QAA quality assurance framework, which superseded and united processes operated by the HEQC (Higher Education Quality Council) and the national funding councils. Nationally, all British HEIs became subject to a dual process involving institutional audit and subject (now termed 'programme') review.

Institutional review focused on the nature, validity and implementation of institutional processes. The

¹ Reference is made throughout to constituent sections, or individual codes, which together form the overall QAA code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education.

extent of involvement in the formal review by Student Services depended on a balance between their profile in those processes (as highlighted in the institution's Analytical Account) and the programme determined by the review team. However, in the area of Subject Review, Student Services had a more clearly defined role to play, and, we argued, has helped shape and underpin our central contribution to this academic experience and teaching and learning.

Briefly outlining the elements of good practice which many Services were able to develop over the life of the now virtually extinct methodology, we noted that there were some differences in approach between Scotland, England and Wales and Northern Ireland. In each country however, Subject Review concentrated on an intensive four day visit by a review team, whose activities and deliberations were orientated by a Self Assessment Document (SAD) produced some six months earlier.

In England, the review process was constructed around six core aspects of provision:

- Curriculum design, content and organisation
- Teaching, learning and assessment
- Student progression and achievement
- Student support and guidance
- Learning resources
- Quality management and enhancement

It was Student Support and Guidance that highlighted the role of Student Services (with the caveat that some subject teams also chose to involve elements of the services in supporting both Student Progression and Achievement and Learning Resources) and provided a vehicle for them to enhance visibility and influence in the institution. It is noteworthy that Student Support and Guidance consistently achieved the highest average grades across the sector in subjects assessed in England, Wales and Northern Ireland between 1995 and 2000.

As a consequence of their extensive and sustained involvement in every subject review, Student Services teams were able to develop a range of strategies and approaches which not only helped the subject team in securing a positive outcome, but also emphasised Student Services' role in the learning process, through establishing sound working relations and promoting the range of services available. Good practice in the review process was reliant on ensuring involvement at all stages, from initial planning meetings, through the preparation of the Self Assessment Document, inclusion of material in the base room, compilation

of supplementary documents, data and case studies as back up material and working effectively with subject team members in the run-up to the review visit. For Heads of Student Services who were involved in every Student Support and Guidance core aspect meeting, it became possible to share with subject teams experience of prior reviews and to provide some pointers which both effectively complemented the role of the institutional facilitator. Benefits stemming from this involvement were legion and included: greater involvement in student induction, more informed referrals, invitations to deliver workshops, joint involvement in bids for funding and collaborative projects.

Uncertainty and Challenge

Many of these positive outcomes will remain, and indeed are given prominence by the contribution which Student Services can make to institutional strategies such as Widening Participation, and associated implications for access and retention. However, now that programme review has been drastically reduced, the role of Student Services in the quality assurance process is less much less clear and potentially marginalised. Thus there is a challenge both to identify what will be formally required of them as part of the academic review process, and to ensure that we make continue to make an effective, valid and recognised contribution.

In preparing for our workshop in July 01, we analysed what we understood to be the central planks of the emerging processes, looked at how these might map onto the Services' functions and sought to share these with our colleagues. Taking as our basis the Handbook for Academic Review 2000, we looked at the two strands of academic review – institutional and programme- which were to be much more interdependent than hitherto, and at the three proposed aspects of provision by which the quality of learning opportunities was to be defined, namely:

- Teaching and Learning
- Student Progression
- Learning Resources.

Drawing on reflections from the 2001 pilot exercise in Scotland, and in the knowledge that subject review as originally proposed was to be much reduced ('the lighter touch'), we reached the conclusion that, whilst the revised methodology provided us with less scope for direct intervention in the review process, there was, nonetheless, a significant role for Student Services, in the

following respects. First, we saw it as essential that the lessons learned from the 97-2001 processes became embedded. Student Services managers needed to be proactive in:

- ensuring involvement in, for instance, the Self Evaluation Document,
- building on discipline/curriculum related initiatives
- working with programme teams in disseminating experience in student support.

Second, we argued that there was:

- a significant role to play in both 'championing' and leading on certain of the QAA Codes of Practice.

Third, we proposed we should ensure (as far as possible) that internal quality assurance processes were:

- inclusive and,
- reflected the breadth and diversity of the learning experience.

Although not yet definitive, the messages currently emanating from the funding councils and their agencies have not fundamentally altered those conclusions and, from some standpoints, may have strengthened them. In the remainder of this paper, we will explore this assertion in more depth.

Similarities and Differences

It is now virtually certain that revised national quality assurance processes will concentrate on a redefined institutional audit process; proposals to include subject specialists in audit teams will be dropped and subject level inspections will take place only where previous exercises have demonstrated significant shortcomings. Arrangements will be based on a compact which respects institutional autonomy, recognises their corporate responsibility for assuring the standards of programmes and awards, and places that responsibility within a framework of public accountability.

The revised system is likely to be characterised by both similarities to and differences from its predecessor.

First, *many of the cornerstones of the Handbook for Academic Review will be retained*. Most of these are already operationalised, and form the basis of revised institutional quality assurance systems. They include:

- The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications

- The Precepts of the Code of Practice
- Subject Benchmark Statements
- Programme Specifications.

Second, however, there may well be *significant differences in emphasis* from previous quality assurance processes, deriving particularly from:

- the increased role of the student, through the publication of student feedback surveys and their inclusion in the audit process
- reliance on data published both internally and externally, as suggested in HEFCE 01/66.

In practical terms, where does this leave Student Services? We would argue that they can be fully involved these processes, but that student service managers will need to be aware of the known changes, alert to further ones, and in any case far more proactive.

The key issues that will facilitate involvement are likely to be:

- the force of the Code of Practice
- the principles of accountability and the student voice.

The QAA Code of Practice

The most obvious area in which Student Services have a major role to play is that of ensuring compliance with certain sections of the QAA Code of Practice. The Code as a whole is described as 'An authoritative reference point for institutions as they consciously, actively and systematically assure the academic quality and standards of their programmes, awards and qualifications'. There are approximately 200 precepts, the majority of which are specifically concerned with various aspects of the learning, teaching and assessment process. However three sections are particularly relevant to Student Services, namely:

- Students with Disabilities (QAA 1999)
- Career Education, Information and Guidance (CEIG) (QAA 2001)
- Academic Appeals and Student Complaints (QAA 2000).

When we looked at this aspect last July, we identified specific precepts which made reference to: inclusion in programme specifications, arrangements for programme approval and review and the requirements for regular review and monitoring of relevant arrangements. We suggested that a major role for managers of relevant services lay in 'championing those codes'

and ensuring that they were reflected in institutional templates for programme approval and review.

Whilst all three sections are relevant, the last few months have seen a particular reinforcement of the first two sections listed above, but with a different emphasis. Both the Codes of Practice on Students with Disabilities and CEIG are distinctive from the majority of the other sections, in that:

- they do not map directly on to existing procedures/regulations
- their impact is at a whole-institution level
- they relate both to working practices and to curriculum content and delivery.

Paradoxically, however, their primary focus has led, in most cases, to their being identified with relevant areas within Student Services, who have, in the main, taken the lead role in interpreting and promoting the precepts. Progress in that task has been variable across the sector, but recent developments have served to highlight and ensure their relevance. Most Heads/Directors of Student Services will have had a key role in ensuring that the implications of the Special Education Needs and Disability Act (2001) are being addressed. The Code of Practice: Students with Disabilities has proved a valuable tool in the task of identifying relevant action across the institution and the curriculum – and will, it is hoped, become embedded in working practices. Responses to the CEIG Code have varied considerably, reflecting highly diverse approaches both to Careers Services and to curriculum design. However that Code was given a particular impetus (at least in England) through the virtually simultaneous publication of the Harris Report (DfEE 2001), and the consequent investment of resources in the Joint Implementation Group's study (2001), which has now produced a draft questionnaire for consultation. Both exercises serve to ensure that those Codes will now be effectively addressed and incorporated at the level of institutional policy. This will afford ample opportunity for Student Services to build on the collaborative initiatives which evolved from the previous subject review arrangements and to work more confidently with programme teams, both in sharing expertise and in contributing to the learning process.

Accountability and the Student Voice

Less obvious, but potentially important vehicles for securing involvement, lie in the emphasis on institutional accountability and the separate, though related, attention to the student voice.

Institutions will have to look critically at their own internal processes and to ensure that they have the robustness, reliability and commitment which audit teams will expect to see. Whilst all HEIs have well established annual course/ programme monitoring procedures, arrangements for the assurance of quality in support services is much more diverse – ranging from inclusion in stringent annual feedback processes, to periodic reviews – and in some instances, complete silence (Aynsley Smith 2001). However, institutions may well not be able to sustain such 'complete silence' from student services in the future for the imperatives for more routinised and integrated systems are clearly articulated in key sections of the QAA Code of Practice. For example, it is recommended that "Institutions should ensure that programme approval decisions are informed by full consideration of academic standards and the **quality of learning opportunities**", and these considerations will need to be taken on the basis of systematic and available evidence. Moreover, programme approval is not just about the written curriculum, but about delivery, support and the environment – to which student services contribute.

In that vein, the recent consultative paper (HEFCE 01/66) sought views on proposals by the Task Group set up as part of the revised approach to quality assurance to 'identify the categories of data, information and judgements that should be available, and which should be published'. The Group suggested four main portfolio categories as the basis for collecting information about quality and standards, namely:

- the institutional context relating to quality and standards
- student admission, progression and completion
- assurance of academic quality and standards
- quality and enhancement of learning opportunities.

A preliminary trawl through the sub-headings of 01/66 highlights many areas of our responsibility, such as:

- progression and retention; graduates' first destinations (para 32)
- student views on (inter alia) quality of pastoral support (para 37)
- the availability and use of specialist equipment and other resources and materials to support teaching and learning.

The impact of performance indicators in a range of areas, as evidenced by the latest set (1998-99)

published in December 2001, comparing data on access, retention and time taken to complete, is increasing and will raise public questions about the effectiveness of strategies to support the learning experience.

Drawing these factors together, we can conclude and reaffirm that it will be essential to ensure that student support services form an intrinsic part of the institution's quality assurance processes. At the same time, we must ensure that any more locally adopted processes, such as those initiated by the Services themselves, in particular, student feedback exercises, are consistent with institutional strategies and systems of accountability, and are appropriately analysed and addressed.

Academic Review and Student Services: The Future

How do these developments relate to the process of academic review, which was our starting point? In the new methodology, the importance of audit trails will be increasingly significant. It will therefore be essential to ensure that there is evidence that the codes and related exercises are not only addressed, but are embedded in working practices and are effectively monitored. Institutions are continually being enjoined to ensure that there is correlation and cross referencing between their institutional strategies for, for example, Widening Access and Increasing Participation, Learning and Teaching, Rewarding and Developing Staff. The Annual Operating Statement which is submitted to HEFCE, (or the Institutions of Higher Education Strategic Plans submitted by Welsh institutions of higher education to HEFCW), are important vehicles for demonstrating commitment to key initiatives (and again would form part of the evidential base for audit teams). Student Service managers should seek to ensure their priorities and issues are reflected adequately in such documents.

Thus, in many respects, the last six months in HE have been extremely eventful and the parameters have changed more rapidly than we could have envisaged. Nevertheless, we believe our conclusions in July 2001 were sound, albeit that today we would need to give a different emphasis. Student Services have the potential to play a strong and pervasive role. But to do so we will need to be alert to the possibilities inherent in the changes, and be both proactive and tactical. If we do so, and monitor whatever future changes emerge, as student service managers we can continue to support our organisations in providing a high quality learning environment. In other words, we can be integral to the process of academic review.

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‘Traditionally Non-traditional’ A proud history of encouraging and supporting mature students into Higher Education

Robert Wiggins, Widening Participation Activities Co-ordinator, University of Northumbria

The Access Guidance Centre (AGC) at Northumbria University has been directly involved with providing pre-entry information, advice and guidance (IAG) to mature students since 1993. It has helped the University establish a reputation for being ‘mature friendly’ and is constantly seeking new ways to engage with adult learners.

This article looks at prospective mature students as a specific group and tries to highlight some of the issues that need to be taken into consideration when working with them at the pre-entry level. It will also highlight some of the Access Guidance Centre’s activities, their impact on mature student entry into higher education and the opportunities and benefits for institutions who proactively engage with mature students.

Me, mature?

The term ‘mature’ can sometimes be misleading both to university staff and the audience we are trying to engage. At the Access Guidance Centre we tend to refer to mature students or adult learners as those who are over 21, have not come straight from school or college and are bringing with them a variety of life experiences, achievements and personal circumstances. All of which produce a group of individuals requiring closer support and attention in order fully to integrate their variety and richness into the student population.

However, we are increasingly seeing a large number of 19/20 year olds who find themselves in limbo, outside of school or college and yet too young for many of the access programmes that exist in the region.

The Value of Mature Students

Experience

Northumbria has always had an above average proportion of students aged over 21 and at present approximately a quarter of all enrolments are aged 30+. This proportion provides for a wealth of experience to be injected into the student

population and as such is seen by the institution to be of real benefit.

Mature students bring with them experience that can often relate to the subject being studied, either from their employment or personal life, and this can enhance discussion and debate within the classroom. Their willingness to take part in such discussion is also well noted and many lecturers at Northumbria comment that classes with a higher proportion of adult learners tend to evoke more participation.

Diversity

A diverse student population can yield great rewards by enhancing the learning experience, both academically and socially. Eric Hoffer, the American social philosopher, once said that “the truly human society is a learning society, where grandparents, parents, and children are students together.” We currently have a case at Northumbria where three generations of the same family have come to study and it has given us an interesting insight into how they each view and tackle the challenges that university poses.

Perhaps the most interesting find is that students view their classes as being richer for having a diverse age range. One 19 year old student commented that “it makes the class feel more true to life rather than a classroom full of same age students from similar backgrounds and I have learnt quite a bit from the older students.”

Motivation

There are many reasons why an adult learner chooses to enter higher education but we find that most are making a significant change in their lives in order to attend university and this in turn drives many of them to perform extremely well. Client feedback indicates that for the majority of clients a change of career or improvement in their current employment prospects is the primary motivation factor.

Mature Students – a separate breed?

Along with the benefits that mature students bring to the University it must be recognised that they have different needs and requirements which must be addressed if they are to be engaged effectively.

Most of the work that the Access Guidance Centre undertakes can be firmly classed as widening participation: engaging new audiences and helping them achieve their goals through higher education. However, providing IAG to prospective mature students is not solely in the realm of Widening Participation. Mature students entering higher education for the first time require certain consideration no matter what socio-economic background they come from.

Retention

A commonly held view is that mature students are more likely than traditional entry students to drop-out during their course. We often see clients at the Access Guidance Centre who are making enormous changes and sacrifices in their lives to study at university and although this can sometimes lead to complications, a recent report by Universities for the North East has shown that “seeking pre-entry advice and guidance does have a positive impact on retention”. (1).

This pre-entry activity can take many forms but they should all seek to tackle the main causes of poor retention which the same report identified, in order of importance, as:

1. Finance Issues
2. Wrong Course or course not what I expected
3. Workload too high / Stress too high
4. Left to get a job
5. Course too hard / not doing well in exams

Raising Aspirations

Stereotypes of university and poor experiences of school are a significant factor in limiting people’s educational aspirations. One of the tasks of pre-entry IAG is to try and remove those perceived barriers and show people what can be and has been achieved by people in similar situations. There are many ways in which this can be done and most require the university to get away from the confines of the campus and shed the perceived image of higher education which many see as the biggest barrier of all.

In many activities that we organise, the use of current mature students are repeatedly highlighted in feedback as being of particular value, helping

prospective students see and hear what is really possible. Painting a genuine, real-life picture is often far more inspiring to mature students than a glossy brochure or slick TV advertisement.

Confusion

For school leavers entering directly into higher education there are many support structures in place to guide and instruct them through the application process. A mature student who is not currently engaged in education can view this process as confusing, especially when there is little or no dedicated support for them to call upon.

Often we see very capable people, who have been out of education for some time, really struggle with this process and they can be easily put off higher education or education as a whole because of the hurdles that they perceive. With the ever-changing face of qualifications and entry criteria even admissions and guidance staff within the education sector can find it confusing, so it is understandable why members of the public would feel this way.

Consumerism

In his article on the “New Era of Higher Education” (2), Professor Dennis Hardy identified six developments that have and will change the context in which higher education and specifically, student services, operate. In particular, he points out that students are now being treated as consumers in a financial sense and are acting as consumers by demanding better services and information when choosing a course or ‘product’.

Mature students fit this criterion better than others, as consumers not only pay financially but also with their time, commitment and the sacrifice of other products or services now placed out of reach. When making decisions, mature students may have more to balance in terms of family, career prospects and finances. We need to cater for this where possible and provide more accurate information and advice, as well as personal encouragement, at the pre-entry stage.

Access Guidance Centre Activities:

The Access Guidance Centre has built up a strong portfolio of activities designed to encourage and support mature students at this pre-entry stage. We are continually developing these whilst establishing new initiatives in collaboration with internal departments and external partners.

Guidance Interviews:

As mentioned previously, the mature student is more of a consumer than a traditional student and as such they often require (and may even demand) a personal approach to their unique situation. To meet this requirement the Access Guidance Centre offers free guidance interviews to help individuals plan their route into higher education, no matter what stage of education they may currently be at. Last year over 320 sessions were held and the demand for these continues to grow.

The appointments are designed to be both professional and informal and usually last about one hour. They are confidential and only implicitly linked to Northumbria's course provision, and this ensures that the client's needs and not the University's recruitment agenda direct the service. However, recruitment is well satisfied as quality of service and the personal approach genuinely enhance the University's professional image and attractiveness.

The Guidance Officer helps prospective students to explore their options, plan a pathway towards their chosen course and identify the action they will need to take. Referral is frequently made to admissions staff or other specialist advisers within Northumbria or to appropriate external agencies.

In 2001 the Access Guidance Centre was approved by the Guidance Accreditation Board and the constant feedback that we gather from our clients was a significant factor to securing this standard.

A recent research project outlined the beneficial impact of guidance sessions at Northumbria and the results were very encouraging with over 94% of clients saying that the appointment was 'very beneficial' in helping them decide how best to proceed.

The following client feedback comments clearly show the impact that these sessions have:

"I was very unsure of my direction and what course of action to take. Since visiting the Guidance Centre... I have had a preliminary acceptance onto my chosen course and I also came back to the Access Guidance Centre for more help with my UCAS form. I would never have got this far without their help."

"I found the service extremely helpful. [The Guidance Officer] offered sound, practical advice

and couldn't have been more accommodating. I congratulate you on running such a committed and informative service. I just wish all universities in Britain could be as forward thinking as yourselves!"

Taster Courses

The Access Guidance Centre has been running short, free taster courses for 6 years. The programme is split into Spring, Summer and Autumn sections and now offers in excess of 130 courses with over 1,000 people enrolling on them last year.

They are designed and delivered by university staff and marketed to a large number of individuals and organisations including local colleges, libraries, community centres, and businesses, as well as some more unusual outlets such as doctors surgeries, hair dressers, the probation service, leisure centres and supermarkets.

The courses vary in length and structure, both of which are at the discretion of the tutor and some may last for a few hours on a single day while the longer tasters might run for a total of 30+ hours spread over several weeks. All taster course participants submit feedback immediately after the course has finished and a 3 month follow-up questionnaire allows us to gauge whether they have helped people move forward.

Tasters are delivered both on and off campus depending on the target audience but all adopt a certain amount of informality. This helps encourage people to view university as a different learning environment from that which they may have previously experienced.

The tasters serve three main functions, all linked to the University's widening participation strategy. The first is to allow people with an interest the chance to explore that interest in an academic environment - and so some taster courses are closely linked to matters of general interest. These have included 'Spanish for Socialising', 'Victorian Culture', 'A Critical(ish) look at the Harry Potter Books', 'Personal Investment' and 'Science Solves Crime'. They provide a 'carrot' to engage with the University, and this may lead to future participation in more formal learning.

The second function is to give prospective students the chance to improve or refresh important skills which they may need to progress

into higher education or to succeed once they are there. Such courses include 'Delivering Presentations', 'Starting to Study', 'Prime your Maths Skills' and a six-week outreach based Study Skills programme which was successfully piloted last year.

The final role of the tasters is to give prospective students the opportunity to sample an actual university course prior to applying. Tasters such as 'The Role of the Midwife', 'So you Want to Teach' or 'An Introduction to Psychology' provide a relaxed introduction to the courses, as well as some useful tips about how to prepare for the application process. This direct and detailed information is essential in shaping realistic expectations, thereby supporting student retention. The tutors who run these always try to present a fair yet encouraging view of what the student should expect, including workload and support structures.

There are many benefits to taster courses and feedback has shown these to include:

- Presenting the university in a non-threatening way with no formal assessment.
- Encouraging people into higher education who had not thought of pursuing an interest academically.
- Enthusing and inspiring people to find out what they can progress to.
- Inspiring confidence and enhancing skills.
- Free!

The full taster programme can be viewed online at www.northumbria.ac.uk/tastercourses

Open Events

Institutional Open Events provide a good way of bringing many people onto campus to see the university, hear presentations and meet staff. However, we have repeatedly found that a more targeted approach is beneficial for adult learners and so we have hosted a Mature Students Open Day for the past several years which regularly attracts over 300 prospective students.

Mature students often have more varied and detailed questions to ask than the usual Open Day audience. We find many of them value the time after a presentation to speak face-to-face with an academic member of staff who actually teaches on the course they wish to pursue. In the past, mature students have commented that sitting in a room full of 16/17 year olds can sometimes feel slightly intimidating, which in turn inhibits them

from asking as many questions – an opportunity which is extremely important.

Perhaps one of the great benefits of targeted events for mature learners is that it gives people the chance to see and talk with others in similar situations. Many times I have heard people say "I didn't think I was clever enough..." or "I imagined I'd be the only person over 30...". The opportunity for them to chat to others, including current mature students, soon dispels many myths and fears, giving them valuable encouragement.

Shadowing Scheme

Many mature students like the opportunity to see the university campus prior to starting a course or even before the application process. Although this can be achieved in some form at open events, the shadowing scheme takes this experience further and allows a prospective student to spend a day with a current similarly aged students on the relevant course.

The Access Guidance Centre carefully matches the students together but provides a fairly open ended format for the shadowing experience. It is intended that the prospective student can affect what they see during the day allowing them to gain as much as possible from the experience. Usually this will involve attendance at a lecture, tours of the facilities and an introduction to staff and other students. Perhaps the most important aspect of this is the chance to ask questions and receive honest and practical answers from someone who has been through a similar process to that of the shadower.

Some people have said that they feel it is a little risky to leave advice and encouragement in the hands of current students in case of bad impressions. We have never found this to be a problem and with over 100 shadowing experiences arranged last year alone, the feedback shows that the frank and open discussions really influence and inspire the prospective student.

Outreach

An expanding area of the Access Guidance Centre's work is with outreach events and courses. These can take many forms depending on the audience and venue, but there are particular benefits common to all outreach initiatives which are enormously important.

Our environment can have a significant impact on what and how we learn and it can even prevent us from engaging in learning if it is unappealing or

threatening. Providing opportunities away from the University campus is often a necessary first step, particularly when undertaking widening participation work.

Time constraints, family responsibilities and travel arrangements often limit the ability of many mature students to attend university, particularly when making the initial steps. Combine these practical factors with possible low self-esteem, perceived inability to achieve, negative stereotypes, and a low perception of Higher Education's value and it paints a scene that requires higher education institutions to move into client-familiar environments and adopt a more informal approach to learning.

Recent initiatives have seen the Access Guidance Centre run courses at Newcastle United Football Club's Learning Centre and sessions for parents at local primary schools. Many new partnerships are being created with local galleries, community learning centres and basic skills organisations, as well as regular attendance at regional events and fairs. All of these are being constructed with an understanding that informal learning can effectively engage mature students, without being patronising or sacrificing quality of delivery.

Summary

Universities have one of the most diverse customer bases of any organisation. To be successful in delivering our many products and services we must respond to each client group in the most appropriate (and feasible) manner. As this article has tried to highlight, mature students, regardless of prior education, social background or intended course of study, can be viewed as a separate client group with their own unique needs and demands.

As a group they bring with them a broad range of real-life experiences, add diversity to the student population and are driven to succeed in their new, often life-changing venture. Both the institution and the individual will benefit if they are engaged at the pre-entry stage in a pro-active and individually focussed manner.

There are many forms that this engagement can take but throughout our experience we have found such activity to have real and tangible benefits, positively contributing to the University's recruitment, widening participation and retention strategies. It is Northumbria's willingness to view such pre-entry IAG as a fundamental service that

has helped enhance its reputation as a professional, caring and mature friendly institution.

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My Experience of being a Japanese trainee counsellor in the UK

Makiko Makuni

Over three months have already passed since I left England. . . or since I came back to Japan. I do not feel either of them is right to express how I feel myself now. Writing this paper may help me to examine where I am and where I am going from here.

I undertook the Diploma in Counselling for one year and an MA in Counselling Studies for another year at a British university. The Diploma course I took was a full-time person-centred counselling training course. Apart from studying counselling theories and skills we had to have personal development in order to be with our clients. The MA was a research-based course and it was more solitary. Having completed the courses I am now back in Japan living with my parents. In this paper I would like to look at my experience of studying at university in England especially focused on counselling training and my personal development, which was very much an important part of our counselling training. This is because the Person-Centred Approach (the theoretical stance of the course) demands the full use of the person as therapist.

First, I would like to talk briefly about the reason I studied counselling. My working life started as a teacher. I taught at a kindergarten (age three to five) for two years and taught the Japanese language at international school to students whose ages were from five to sixteen years. Having worked in the Institute for seven years I became a private tutor. I went to the home of my students in the evenings and weekends to teach them privately. It was one of those students who first made me consider a career in counselling. She was twelve years old and did not do academic work well. One day I touched her shoulder and she jumped. I knew something was wrong. I asked her to show me her shoulder. There was a big bruise. She told me that her mother had beaten her. Then I found out the mother had been beating her with whatever came to hand. I reported this issue to her school so that the school could take appropriate action and offer her support, but the school did nothing. That was the time when I felt I was powerless and started to think about studying counselling. Here I am now. I completed the course, which was not easy for me emotionally.

"I am in a washing machine!" I remember the day I said this in the community meeting¹. It was the time I knew something was going on in myself as well as in our group. But although I had awareness that something had been going on, I could not put my finger on it and it was a very aggressive experience. This may seem a strange word to use but I felt that something was attacking me physically and emotionally. At that time I lost a lot of weight in a single week. I cannot write about what happened because of the nature of the course and the confidentiality agreements made within the training group². What I can share in this paper are my own feelings.

I did not know why things were happening and I did not feel in control. So I had to let things happen and wait until they were over. Then I thought it was over, but in so many times it was not. I remember I said to my colleagues that I was not clean enough to be dried so I had to go back into the washing machine! Even now I cannot explain why I felt I was in a washing machine; whether it was because I was from Japan or the Far East or because of the nature of the course. What I know now is that I did not know anybody else in the town other than the people from the course (who I did not want to see at that time). So I was feeling that I was suffering from something. I knew that some of my colleagues were feeling the same although they were British or English. Some of my colleagues had moved here in order to undertake the course at the university, so I do not think my feelings were necessarily special for an international student.

As some of my colleagues were feeling the same I do not think that my feeling resulted from the fact that I was a foreign student or was culturally different. I believe I would have been feeling that way wherever I came from. However, as a Japanese person I did not have any sort of support system outside of the course and there were times when that was exactly what I needed.

¹ Community meeting is a part of counselling training where participants share their feelings, thoughts and difficulties as well as developing participants' abilities of offering three core-conditions - congruence, empathy and unconditional positive regard. In the community meeting there is an element of counselling settings. See Meams (1997).

² Because in the community meeting there is an element of counselling settings we had very strict confidentiality between us

I have been thinking what does being in a washing machine mean to me? One of the most important things was how I saw myself in relation to the others. In our culture. . . Japanese culture. . . I believe that we always need to think that we are a part of the society, family and any groups we belong to. I used to think about how my parents would react to what I did. When I was a teacher I had to walk like a teacher in town. I do not know what a teacher's walk is. To look at this issue I would like to talk about the "Japanese Sense of Self". Rosenberger explains what "self means to Japanese people" (1992). She explains that one of the dimensional movements of self is "through movements in dyadic relationship".

Positions shift between the give and take of indulgence. On one side of the relationship, one gives indulgence (*amayakasu*), allowing another person to be spontaneous and free. On the other side of the relationship, one receives indulgence (*amaeru*), presuming on another's benevolence to act spontaneously (Rosenberger, 1992, p69).

The other dimension of self takes place "through positioning within different contexts, signified by related sets of terms such as outer/inner (*soto/Uchi*), front/back (*omote/ura*), and on-stage meaning/off-stage meaning (*tatemaelhonno*). Contexts are more outer (*soto*) if social hierarchy is emphasized." (ibid, p69)

I believe that these two dimensions explain how Japanese people see confidentiality between themselves and how they recognise their sense of self.

When I look back at the time I felt I was in a washing machine, I must have confused how to see myself through my foreign colleagues' eyes because I was trained to see myself through others or through my social or job backgrounds. However, when I was on the training course I had to learn how to see myself through my own eyes. Because I was wearing "many clothes", which you can call my social back ground, my family background, my career and so on, I had to take all my clothes off to be washed³.

The other difficulty for me in surviving the course was that I did not have any chance to share my experiences with any Japanese friends. I did not

make any Japanese friends while I was doing the course. It was because I was also working as a trainee counsellor at the university counselling service and seeing students as clients. I counselled not only English students but also Japanese students. I was the only Japanese counsellor at the service and so if any Japanese students wanted to talk in Japanese to a counsellor, I would see them.

I remember when I had an interview for the diploma course I was asked whether I would live on campus. I was very clear that I did not want to. I did not want to share my university life with my potential clients. Therefore, while I was undertaking these courses, I had a flat in the town. I did not go to the ESL course (the English language course for foreign students). I tried very hard not to become friendly with any Japanese students on campus. The main reason I did not want to mix with Japanese students was ethical. As a trainee counsellor I did not want to be with my clients or with my potential clients in my daily life and I did not want to see my clients' daily life either. I had only one Japanese friend who happened to be my sister's friend. I asked her not to give any information about me to anybody because she had many Japanese friends.

There were many Japanese students at university but, relatively, the Japanese society was very small. I knew that there were times when my Japanese friend was talking about my clients. Most of the Japanese students lived on campus and took English courses beside their own subjects. When I interviewed Japanese people at the university for my research, one of them said to me that she was not in England; she was in this university! That explains a lot to me. Although I tried not to meet any Japanese people, I met a few Japanese students though my friend. What they did everyday was go to lectures, eat on campus, go to the university pub, buy food at the student's union shop and sleep in students' accommodation on campus. They did not need to go to the town and even if they wanted to go to the town, they had to take a bus.

I had an awareness that I needed to have help for myself, although I worked for the support system. While I was undertaking the diploma course I was seeing a counsellor at the university counselling service where all of us were doing training placements. As a part of our diploma course we had to complete one hundred hours of counselling sessions. We all had clients at the university counselling service. So I was at the service as a

³ Because in the community meeting there is an element of counselling settings we had very strict confidentiality between us

trainee counsellor and also as a client. At that time most of my life in England was within the university especially the diploma course. The majority of issues I wanted to share with my counsellor were to do with my colleagues and trainers who my counsellor would know. It was very difficult for me to be honest with my counsellor and trust confidentiality. So I was not feeling comfortable with my counsellor, but also I did not know where I could go to share my feelings. However, when I started my MA and continued my placement at the counselling service as a qualified counsellor, I had to stop seeing my counsellor. This was because, as a qualified counsellor, I attended some of the Staff meetings and parties at which my counsellor was present. I did not feel it was right to see my counsellor outside of the sessions. I thought about seeing a new counsellor off the campus but my tutor is one of the big names in the counselling field and most of counsellors who work in the region know both him and the university. Consequently, I did not find it easy to locate a personal counsellor whilst there. So I was in a huge dilemma; I was very happy to be at and to study in the university because of the tutor, and at the same time I wanted to have some support, but I could not find anybody who did not know him.

There was another good side to doing counselling training in this university for me. One day I went to the tutor's book launch. There, a few people who I did not know come up to me and started to talk to me. They said that they had heard of me! I was the only Japanese person who worked in the counselling field locally.

As a trainee counsellor I had both Japanese and English clients at the university counselling service. All encounters I had with my clients were very special for me and I value every moment with my clients. However, at the beginning of the diploma course I was very anxious to see English clients. How would they feel about having a foreign counsellor in their own country? This question was with me when I saw a new English client. I asked this question to one of my clients. She said, "Don't be silly! You are Makiko". This reply was so powerful. The client did not need to know what my nationality or any other personal detail. She was with me, Makiko. I was also told that it helped her because she had to think very hard to say exactly what she meant. I believe that this is often what we are attempting to do with clients - to help them to understand exactly what their issue really means

for them - so she was halfway there because she had to be clear for me.

Writing this paper took about two months. It was not easy for me to write this paper but also it has been a very good opportunity for me to look at my experience from a different direction. When people ask me about my experience of being in the UK, they often want to know about the trainee counsellor aspect. In this paper I have written what I experienced as a trainee counsellor.

While I was writing this, I had to see a doctor because I had very bad stomach ache and was feeling sick. The doctor told me that the cause was stress. Is living with my parents stressful? Was the life in the UK stressful?

What I have learnt through the course is to look at the "here and now". I have been having some difficulties with my parents. They worry about my future life and they cannot see what I am doing now and where I am now. They only try to see me in the future. I believe now leads to the future and without now I cannot have a future.

Since I started to write this paper, I have been thinking about myself a lot. I undertook my counselling training in England and through the training I undertook my own personal development, which was a part of our training. However, I was on my own in England and I carried out my personal development without my family who were in Japan.

Now I live with my parents in Japan and I have recognised there were some difficulties between us, which I could not put my finger on. Writing about my experience of counselling training has given me a chance to reflect on some feelings I had had at that time. Feeling some old feelings and thinking about them has highlighted the current feelings which I have towards my parents and family. This process has not been easy for myself or my parents. I believe that my parents, who have no idea about my process have been struggling a lot with my emotional needs. I am going to show this to my parents to help them understand what has been happening in me.

Thank you for giving me a chance to write this.

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Overcoming barriers - widening access for all students

Ann Barlow, Learning Support Co-ordinator, Manchester Metropolitan University

Introduction

Government targets for widening participation in Higher Education are to some extent responsible for greater diversity within the student population. However, changes in British society over the last half century have also had an impact on the type of student we see in our universities.

Racial diversity within our society is now taken for granted and this is reflected in the students entering university. Lack of career stability has led to a demand for re-training and as a result more people are choosing to enter or return to university as mature students. Preece (1998:p.1) notes that the trend for a more diverse student population "has generally been stimulated by the upskilling needs of a fast changing world and demographic age population shifts." This is also reflected in the fact that, for some, university education may be an opportunity which arises following retirement.

An improved welfare state has meant that disabled people may be better supported during their early education. As a result, more young people with special needs are achieving the entry requirements for university. In addition, increased material wealth has led to higher aspirations in terms of education. Parents have high expectations of their children and perceive university degrees as an essential to entering the jobs-market.

Students come to us having had many different experiences, with different expectations and with very different educational backgrounds. We, therefore, as university staff, can no longer assume that there is a common foundation for study within our student population. If our universities are to provide a stimulating educational experience, we need to be aware of the diverse nature of those backgrounds and to develop ways of working which will enable us to ensure that all students can gain from the university experience.

Providing access for students with disabilities

Students with disabilities have for many years been singled out as students who need very specific support. As a result, processes have been developed which enable support needs to be identified. All home students with disabilities are entitled to apply for Disabled Students'

Allowances (DSA). These allowances are administered by the Local Education Authority and provide funding for necessary Study Aids. In order to determine the appropriate aids, all students applying for DSA must undergo an assessment of their needs at a recognized assessment centre (Skill, 1998). Assessments are conducted as a fact-finding exercise and identify not only supportive aids but also strategies which can be applied to enhance the student's learning experience. In a booklet aimed at students, Skill (2001: 34) describes the process as an "investigation of what you will need in higher education to study effectively." Recommended strategies for both teaching and learning are identified during the assessment. The assessment of need process is a time consuming process and it would be unrealistic to imagine that it could be applied to every individual student. However, the principles which underpin the process may provide a model for developing teaching and learning strategies which can be used to ensure student success.

The first stage of an assessment of need process is to gather as much detail as possible about the individual student. In particular, details of the student's disability and its effect on learning are considered first. Some of these details will be gathered from the student but an experienced assessor will also gather information from other expert sources such as voluntary agencies and internet databanks as well as medical or psychological reports. Information will also be elicited regarding the student's approach to study and previous support which the student has been given to enable effective study. The student's expectations may also be discussed.

Information is also gathered about the course which the student is undertaking. The means and methods of course delivery will be identified. Attendance requirements are taken into account and assessment methods are considered. By considering this information in conjunction with the student's background an assessor then identifies possible barriers to learning and discusses the extent to which the student perceives a need for additional support in order to overcome these barriers. The assessor will then make suggestions for appropriate study aids and strategies which could be used to enable the

student to develop as an independent learner. It is by identifying the possible barriers that the assessor can offer access to the course. However, it is the student who will decide whether to use the suggested strategies (Skill, 1997).

Diversity of background

With widening participation, there is a need to become more aware of student background. Students present a variety of entry qualifications and the learning skills developed when attaining these qualifications vary considerably (Evans and Abbott, 1998). The skills expected at AS and A level for example are very different from those expected at NVQ or HND. Similarly, the teaching methods to which students have been exposed will also have varied greatly. The teaching methods which are familiar to young people in today's schools are very different from those which mature students and, indeed, most university lecturers, will have been familiar with. For many students returning to study the use of technology in learning is unfamiliar and confusing while others find word-processing easier than writing. In addition, the cultural background of the student may have an impact on the approach to learning. Communication may be hampered by the need to use a second language. Students who are fluent in conversational English may not be so conversant with more technical or academic vocabulary. De Vita (2000: 170) identifies that "language-related factors, especially verbal, can be a major source of misunderstandings in communicating with international students." Students' commitment to non-academic work also has an impact on student progression. Students from particular cultural backgrounds may be expected to continue supporting a family business. Many students will need to take paid work in order to support themselves financially. Others may well be caring for young families as single parents while undertaking study.

If student learning needs are to be identified and addressed, such issues have to be considered early in the course. Cohort profiles could be identified from application onwards with an emphasis on identifying pre-entry qualifications and types of feeder institutions. Further investigations could be conducted in interviews with year or personal tutors within the first half term. These could raise issues of language skills, disability and family commitments. At the same time, student expectations of the course could be explored. Johnston and Croft (1998) emphasise a need to ensure that "non-traditional students arenot given false hopes as to their ability to progress

within HE". Many students entering Higher Education are not aware of the demands of the system and expect to achieve a high level of success.

Identifying barriers

Having gained an insight into the pre-university experience, university staff may then consider programme design and delivery, particularly for first year students. Course content may have been established on the basis that students are expected to have a common starting point for study. As a wider range of pre-university qualifications become available this may become a less realistic expectation. Academic staff can ensure that barriers are not created in the first few weeks by familiarising themselves with the content of pre-university courses and developing a syllabus which can dove-tail with students' prior knowledge.

The academic language which underpins a subject is often taken for granted in the university environment. The delivery of taught sessions is often dependent on the student having an understanding of the appropriate vocabulary. This can often form a barrier for those for whom English is a second language or those who have had a break from education. The production of a glossary of academic terminology pertaining to the subject may provide an appropriate starting point for many such students.

Means of assessment can often cause a great deal of anxiety. If the criteria for the assessment are clear then it is easier for students to determine what is expected of them. Many students will require modifications to their assessments due to disability. Clear assessment criteria enable support staff such as disability advisers to make the most appropriate recommendations. Similarly, if procedures for obtaining modifications are available and easily understood, appropriate arrangements can be made in good time. While the development of such procedures is expected under the Disability Discrimination Act, it can also prove useful in circumstances where students experience particular family problems.

Language problems also become evident in assessment as students may have difficulty in grasping the exact meaning of a question. Where assessment is formative, students may find the feedback confusing. Channock (2000) identified issues surrounding the interpretation of written feedback. Students misunderstand common marking comments and, as a result, comments

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Widening Participation and Student Support

Sheila Aynsley Smith, Head of Student Services, Manchester Metropolitan University

Context

The context in which higher education institutions are operating is changing rapidly and is fraught with paradox. The Government is redefining and justifying its targets and higher education institutions are both seeking to achieve targets and cope with the implications of a changing student market and intake. The Government remains committed to a target of 50% of young people benefiting from higher education by the age of 30, by 2010. Interpretation of figures varies, but the most recent figures suggest that the current participation rate of 18 – 30 year olds is 41% across the UK. There are clear messages that this increase in participation should be achieved through currently under-represented groups and in particular, those who are 'socially disadvantaged'. As Margaret Hodge, Life-long Learning and Higher Education Minister expressed in the Times Higher Education Supplement (11 Jan 2002) 'we need more young people from poorer backgrounds'.

At Manchester Metropolitan University, we have a long tradition of recruiting and supporting students from a diverse range of backgrounds. However, this diversity has been more manifest in some types of courses than others and many full-time undergraduate degrees still recruit a high percentage of 18 year olds from middle class backgrounds, with two A levels. There are signs that this pattern is altering and most programmes now have a growing proportion of students from the region, from ethnic minority backgrounds, mature women and students with disabilities and other learning needs. Continuing pressures to achieve recruitment targets have an inevitable influence on admissions criteria and many students are inadequately prepared for the demands of higher education. At MMU, we have a well established track record of supporting students and this has been endorsed by successive QAA Subject Review outcomes, where the support provided through partnership between the academic department and central services has resulted in the top score of four for the core aspect of Student Support and Guidance.

In Government terms 'student support' generally applies to financial provision. Although a number

of schemes has been initiated, such as the Excellence Challenge and opportunity bursaries, there is now acknowledgement that existing systems of student finance are proving a disincentive both to recruitment and retention and the DFES has initiated a review of student funding. These are issues which are beyond our immediate control and in this context, I will look at 'student support' in terms of the learning experience.

Factors Influencing the Student Experience

The provision of higher education is influenced by a number of factors, with political, economic and social origins. One of the main emphases of the Dearing Report (Dearing 1997) was on the purpose of higher education. This stressed the preparation of graduates for the world of work, the value of life-long learning and the contribution of higher education to the economy. The increasingly vocational nature of higher education has to be set against the wider economic contexts; we are operating in a global environment, influencing all aspects of provision. At the same time, the likelihood of world recession will have an effect on graduate recruitment. The inevitable dominance of information and communication technology (ICT) is increasingly influencing teaching and learning styles and determining skills which graduates must acquire.

Higher education is also influenced by changing social and attitudinal paradigms. Students are in a buyers' market, and allied to the sense that they purchase their education, they expect a responsive and client focussed service. They are aware of their rights and prepared to exercise them (the 'litigious society'). This is underpinned by recent legislation, including the Data Protection Act 1998, the Human Rights Act 1998, the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2001, the amendment to the Race Relations Act 2000.

Students are entering higher education from an increasingly wide range of backgrounds with a range of entry qualifications; those entering directly from further education may expect some consistency and continuity in guidance strategies. The inevitability of student debt affects many aspects of provision and delivery. Reluctance to

enter into debt militates against Government's Widening Participation Strategies, as those from ethnic minorities and disadvantaged background struggle against cultural or religious resistance. Financial factors affect student choices as more elect to study near to home and have a very different expectation of the student experience from earlier generations. At least two thirds of students now work during term-time to support their studies and this has an inevitable effect on their learning patterns. It also puts pressure on the institutions to provide a more flexible learning environment.

One of the main tensions for universities is the competing pressure between increased student numbers and the need for individualised learning, which students can tailor to their own situation 'rather than fitting a standard model... based on young, professionally inexperienced, full-time students living on the campus' (Collis and Moonen 2001). As these pressures increase, many students will require a flexible learning environment, which may be both demand led and negotiated, embracing such strategies as distance learning, web-based delivery and a radical review of programme design, delivery and modes of attendance. Concurrently, they require accessible support in managing the learning process.

As students' (as customers) attitudes to the learning experience change, their expectations of its outcomes are increasing. To meet these expectations, they require focused and accurate careers guidance and will expect institutions to provide relevant skills training and development.

Many of the challenges facing universities appear to be politically driven; we have targets for recruitment, we are subject to an increasing battery of performance indicators and league tables; the revised quality assurance process is likely to put increased emphasis on student feedback and analysis. However, at the chalk face, our priority is the recruitment of students who have the motivation and potential to complete their programme of study and for this to be of benefit in their future lives and careers. The relevance and importance of accurate and timely advice, support and guidance is crucial, throughout the journey through higher education.

Towards a Comprehensive Support Strategy

Early in 2001, I set up an internal student support group, under the aegis of the Recruitment Support Strategy Steering Group, which was chaired by the Director of External Relations. Within the

context of deriving a recruitment support strategy 'which generates an overall increase in the proportion of conversions to reach target numbers and grades' the sub-group looked at all aspects of student support, from pre-entry to graduation. The group comprised representatives from each of the faculties, bringing widely different experiences in terms of types and size of programme, nature of student intake, academic/vocational balance, physical location and so on. The group was also aware of current projects in the University including the attraction, preparation and retention project in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Science and the 'foundation stage' initiative. Discussion and experience underlined the interrelated nature of all stages of the student experience. Therefore, for the University to succeed in recruiting to target, retaining its students and enabling a future success, there are interrelationships between pre-entry strategies, on-course support, and careers guidance and management. The effectiveness of such strategies is reflected in the University's reputation in the region, through its graduates and through published data and performance indicators.

There are many examples of good practice across the University, and many are transferable. Effective student support is not the province of one particular group of staff or department within the University; it is a shared commitment which relies on good working relationships and effective communication.

Drawing on some of the issues generated by the group, student support can be considered both as a sequential process and in terms of categories of students.

A Sequential Process

It is only possible to give a brief outline of some of the strategies necessary to underpin a positive student experience and to indicate current approaches and services. Differences between programmes, their methods and timing of recruitment and the nature of the student intake, precludes generalisation. It is hoped, in time, to develop a good practice guide which could elaborate on some of the suggestions outlined here.

Pre-application

The value of making the right choice is incontrovertible. It is essential that applicants have access to informed pre-entry advice and guidance, in order to avoid subsequent

disappointment or disillusion with course content - a frequent reason for withdrawal. There are significant differences in scale and approach between the prolonged process of application through the standard UCAS programme and the decisions and choices made during the Clearing period. Notwithstanding, potential applicants should have access to accurate information about the content and demands of programmes of study, about career implications and choices, about the wider opportunities (social, personal) offered by the University and about choices and flexibility. We need to look at more accessible guidance strategies, strengthening our links with feeder institutions (recognising that in many areas these are already strong) and encouraging a sense of value and interest in potential applicants.

The Application Process

Considerable work is being put into analysing factors around applicant choices, conversion of offers to acceptances and so on across the University. For many applicants who fulfil the criteria of widening participation, this University will be their only preferred choice, due to its geographical location. For such applicants, overriding issues will be confidence and commitment. It is important therefore, that as far as possible, we establish and maintain personal contact with individual applicants, to sustain their interest and to help them think through the implications of engaging on a programme of study. There are many innovative approaches; some departments send Christmas cards and good luck cards before examinations; they also engage in cold calling, using student volunteers. Certainly, ongoing contact both helps in the conversion of offers to acceptances and may reduce lack of take-up by making the applicant feel valued.

Pre-Entry Support

It is at this stage we in Student Services feel that there is scope for structured interaction between the University and those who have accepted offers. Students from traditionally underrepresented groups could benefit significantly from pre-entry support, but some provision might also be available to more traditional entrants, but particularly those who have taken a gap year or been out of study for some time. Whilst there are examples across the University of good practice, through summer schools and other pre-entry courses, we do not routinely provide opportunities for students to become familiar with the demands of higher education or to have prior exposure to learning

and teaching processes. Such support can be targeted at individual groups of students, or on a programme basis and can be available in different modes. The provision of effective pre-entry support would, we believe, help both in the conversion of offers to places and in avoiding some of the student withdrawal which occurs in the first year of the programme.

Enrolment/Induction

We currently put considerable effort into student induction programmes, but do not always evaluate their effectiveness. Induction programmes tend to be geared towards the characteristics of the majority, as sheer volume of numbers militates against differentiation. Some programmes have introduced schemes such as mentoring or buddying, which facilitate the acclimatisation process. Again, practices vary between programmes and reflect departmental ethos and resources. It is important that, from the outset, students feel valued and secure, and have access to support, be it academic, personal or financial. It is also important that during the early stages of students' association with us, we maintain their interest and enthusiasm.

Post-entry Support

This is an area in which we already have considerable expertise within the University; but within which there is much more to be achieved. It is here that the tension between increased student numbers and relatively static resources is most manifest. The first point of contact for all students is usually their Personal Tutor and the Departmental Office. Considerable academic and pastoral support is provided at local level and this is complemented by the support which we can offer through Student Services. In particular, the Learning Support Unit is increasingly working with programme teams to support learner needs, whilst maintaining provision to support students on an individual basis and through the provision of workshops and drop-in sessions. The Counselling Service is available to support students who experience personal distress or wish to talk through issues in confidence. Counsellors are also working increasingly with programme teams. The Careers Service has developed a number of links with individual programmes to integrate career management skills into the student programme at an early stage.

There are a number of areas in which more effective and timely support could be provided, through more accessible financial advice, facilitation of part-time employment and

increasing provision of flexible modes of study. Such strategies require a holistic approach to the learning experience and some changes in culture and attitudes.

Graduation and Beyond

The University's graduates are among its best ambassadors and advertisements. Although we have a major commitment to facilitating students' entry to the workplace (and again, this is a shared responsibility between academic departments and the Careers Service) there are considerable additional benefits to be obtained from maintaining and developing longer-term contact with our graduates. Post-course contact and involvement in University activities engender a range of benefits and may help to develop business, professional and commercial links of value to future generations of students. Sustained contact with our graduates also provides the opportunity to obtain effective labour market intelligence and informed understanding of longer-term graduate destinations. In the context of life-long learning, an individual's relationship with the institution may last over several decades. The Harris Report (DfEE 2001) recommends that all students should be able to use the Careers Service at the University at which they studied for at least two years after they have left. This is a service which we would wish to promote and encourage.

There are many areas within the University where good practices have been developed; the challenge, within the Widening Participation Strategy, is to harness such good practice and to provide integrated, informed and assured support.

Target Groups

Students are not homogeneous and the characteristics of the student body vary considerably between institutions. Government policies are encouraging diversification across the sector; for instance, the Raising Aspirations funding stream is designed to encourage universities with less than 80% intake from the state sector to increase that proportion. Different categories of students, however, require different types of support.

International students are increasingly in a buyers' market, as universities seek to stimulate income streams. With a possible decline in entry standards, there is an increased need for English language and study skills support. Students expect high standards of accommodation, technology, equipment – and cultural

understanding and support. They will increasingly look for vocational guidance, which has traditionally been beyond the remit of Careers Services.

Postgraduate and research students are likely to be carrying substantial debt. They need opportunities to work and support their studies and therefore require a highly flexible approach to learning and open access to facilities. Those following postgraduate, professional course, have to balance the demands of their own jobs and may look for more work-based opportunities and accreditation. Many may have uncertain career prospects and need informed guidance.

Students from *ethnic minorities* may have conflicting cultural or religious traditions and pressures. It is important that all staff have an understanding of cultural diversity and can recognise some of the tensions faced by students.

Mature Students have been directly affected by changing policies on student finance. Whilst the Government is trying to address these through its Funding Review, the current approach is piecemeal and there are inconsistencies between the benefits and student support systems, which must be addressed if mature entrants are to be encouraged. They are often unfamiliar with IT and also have difficulty in adjusting to study; in an environment of individualised study, they may need more personalised support. They will benefit from flexible study patterns to enable them to reconcile life and work pressures. Recent student support initiatives may diminish the need for campus-based childcare, but a facilitative approach is increasingly necessary. Effective careers guidance – both pre-entry and on-programme - will help mature students in determining and achieving aspirations. In developing facilities – social, recreation £ we should reflect the diversity of the student body and provide alternatives to the typical undergraduate bar and programme of activities.

Numbers of *students with disabilities* and other learning needs are increasing. Whilst institutions are now required, by the SEN and Disability Act 2001, to accommodate those with disabilities, there remains a tension between the principle of inclusiveness and legislative requirements. It is essential that students with disabilities have access to informed pre-entry guidance. Advance identification of study needs is fundamental in enabling academic orientation and success.

The concept of social inclusion creates some tensions for students from *disadvantaged backgrounds*. Many students require more targeted support in all the areas I have identified above and systems which ensure that particular needs are identified at an early stage.

Finally, amongst the body of traditional entrants, an increasing number has taken a 'gap year'. *Deferred entry* students may need particular consideration, for instance, academic reorientation and residential accommodation. It is also important to maintain contact during the gap year.

Across all these categories, there are growing numbers experiencing *mental health difficulties* – which may be short or long term. This is a sensitive area, and we need to provide confidential and informed support which respects the rights of individuals, the student and staff body and maintain academic standards.

Implications for the University

Across the institution, programme teams are endeavouring to cope with the conflicting imperatives of student numbers and the need for more individualised learning and targeted support. Faculties, the Learning and Teaching Unit and Student Services are all engaged in projects around the widening participation agenda and seek to utilise funding opportunities. Examples include the on-line mentoring project for ethnic minority students in the Careers Service, the Headstart project, for deaf and hard of hearing students in which the Learning Support Unit is a partner, the DEMOS Inter-institutional Project which is developing on-line staff development materials to support students with disabilities, the Widening Participation (Foundation Stage) Project and initiatives generated by the North West Post 16 Network. However there is much more which could be achieved. For example, we would like to develop more pre-entry advice, guidance and support to ensure that applicants make the right choice. We would also wish to work with tutors in supporting individual students, both in their learning needs and developing their key skills and career aspirations. We are aware that there are many students within the University who could benefit from the services which we offer but are either unaware of them or reluctant to seek support.

The task ahead is challenging. There are already many examples of good practice in supporting students with an increasing array of learning needs. Further progress can be made through

effective collaboration between those in departments and central services, informed referral and collaboration in joint projects and bids for funding. There are real lessons to be learned from the experience of individual students and informed feedback is essential to this process. We should be proud of our reputation as a student centred institution. However we need to work collaboratively to address changing student needs and to ensure their experience from pre-entry to post-graduation is positive and enriching.

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