

Pastoral support to undergraduates in higher education

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DOI:10.3794/ijme.81.220

Received: July 2007

Revised: January 2008; December 2008

Accepted: January 2009

Abstract

Academic failure creates financial and emotional problems for students, and is being prioritised for scrutiny by educational funding bodies and institutions. Pastoral support to “at-risk” students moots both the defining of those students under threat and constructing appropriate effective support mechanisms. Research however reports somewhat fragmented support structures in higher education. This paper contributes to the student support debate regarding the balancing of resources with an effective support system for those students most vulnerable. The paper explores a recent innovation in pastoral support, with undergraduates being individually mentored by a specific staff member familiar to those students throughout their academic life. The paper uses action research methodologies as a construct to evaluate the initiative. The project was seen to have had a significant resource implication for the institution, whilst having little impact on student progression and retention. However, a baseline of duty for at-risk students is advocated within each educational body’s own specific context, with any further support to enhance student academic development being left to the discretion of each institution.

Keywords: progression; retention; student support; student transition

Introduction

Academic failure brings with it emotional and financial issues for students, and resource and performance implications for educational establishments. An understanding of what affects academic performance will inform educators and policy makers, aiding decision making (Koh & Koh, 1999). Advising students is propounded as a foundational pre-requisite to undergraduate study (e.g., Jacques, 1990; Earwaker, 1992; Johnson, 1994) with Blythman and Orr (2003) believing that student support frameworks should reach all students. Research into student performance has given little consideration to student support, focusing rather on other variables including gender, age, work experience, motives and expectations (see Tyson, 1989; Doran *et al.*, 1991; Bartlett *et al.*, 1993; Gul & Fong, 1993; Lai, 1994; Booth *et al.*, 1999; Koh & Koh, 1999; Gracia & Jenkins, 2003; Byrne & Flood, 2005). Using an action research methodology, this paper’s aim is to examine the area of student support from a learning situation within the authors’ own teaching experience, adopting a more personal style of relating the story of events advocated by such as Christensen and Atweh (1998). The paper considers a student advisory scheme introduced at a post-1992 UK university aimed primarily at improving retention and progression metrics.

Research methodology

Action research is a systematic investigative research method (Hand *et al.*, 1996) which, when applied to education, encourages teachers to be critically aware of their current practice and willing to change in order to improve education (McNiff, 1988). Nixon (1981) also saw action research as having the potential to modify theories of learning, whilst Carr and Kemmis (1986) saw it as emancipatory, releasing practitioners from constraints of habit, coercion and ideology, considering the efficiency and effectiveness of existing situations whilst promoting professionalism through reflection and subjective judgement. Paisey and Paisey (2004) advocated its ability to “create and reinforce an enquiring culture... to stimulate improvement and professionalism” (p. 285) while Carr and Kemmis (1986) saw it as a bridge between research and teaching.

The framework for this methodology is flexible to differing contexts (Hand, 2001), initially utilised within

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school learning environments (e.g., Nixon, 1981; Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Cohen *et al.*, 2000) but also applied to higher education (HE) contexts (e.g., Granleese, 1996; Aspland & Brooker, 1998; Watters *et al.*, 1998). Paisey and Paisey (2004) advocated that the framework is suited to small scale projects seeking improvement through change, providing a structured approach. The framework is applied to specific learning environments and is thus context specific, being situationally responsive (Cohen *et al.*, 2000), and is an aid to enriching understanding rather than making generalisable conclusions (Hand, 1998).

Bassey (1998) noted the following stages within action research's framework:

1. Define the area of inquiry. As the perception of problems between different educators differs, a key element of this stage is an outlining of the researcher's beliefs around the project.
2. Describe the educational situation, collecting evaluative data, analysing it whilst looking for contradictions. This stage allows for the framing of how change might be effected including researching current educational thinking to assist in this reflection.
3. Tackle the contradiction by introducing change.
4. Monitor the change, analysing evaluative data about the change through a variety of means e.g., focus groups, interviews and questionnaires with students and staff.
5. Review the change, deciding on what to do next.

These five stages can be seen as a first cycle of review which has the potential for informing a second cycle where further improvement is considered a possibility, thus forming the cyclical nature of action research (Zuber-Skerritt, 1992). Action research was seen as appropriate for this project as it was small scale and specific to one programme of study with no attempt being made to generalise the findings but rather providing a greater understanding through an in-depth study of one particular context.

Context and author's beliefs regarding student advising

Outlining the authors' beliefs regarding student advising will clarify the context within which the action research was applied. Both authors have for some time shown concern for students struggling in their HE experience resulting in retention and progression difficulties. Whilst an argument could be made for minimal pastoral care, thus resisting a dependency culture which mitigates against students developing into independent learners, the authors would argue that a balance needs to be sought in investing resources into an effective level of pastoral support for "at-risk" students whilst actively fostering and advocating academic autonomy.

At-risk students

In a National Audit Office (2002) report on improving student achievement it was noted that institutions do not identify separately those students most at risk of withdrawal. The definition of at-risk could be simply related to student withdrawals. Lowe and Cook (2003), however, noted that dropping out of university is only one indicator of lack of success with Johnson (1994) suggesting disengagement in academic life as a more profound indicator. Numerous categories have been advocated to identify students at-risk: those in transition from other forms of education, students entering education through widening access routes, poor attenders, those entering through clearing and those with personal problems. Authors like Moxley *et al.* (2001) suggested that there should be recognition of students at-risk, and appropriate advisers to support these students in their development and retention.

Yorke (1999, 2003) regards the transition from secondary education to HE as a barrier to learning, and a contributor towards helplessness and discontinuation, believing that transition has yet to gain significant attention. Literature has consistently recognised students' first year of study as being critical in their academic development (e.g., Blythman & Orr, 2003). Transition to university life is a stressful event, which Cooke *et al.* (2006, p. 514) referred to as a "time of heightened anxiety" with students moving from the shelter of school to the impersonality of a large institution, new teaching methods, unclear expectations regarding the range and content of subjects (Wall *et al.*, 1991) and often by their own admission being unprepared for the change (McInnis & James, 1995, McInnis *et al.*, 2000). These problems are aggravated within a form of impersonal "mass produced" HE encountered by students (Bell, 1996) and further exacerbated by modular programmes of choice where students may not have an academic home. The importance of students feeling that they are part of an academic community is a significant aspect in their learning experience (Tinto, 1993; Mentkowski & Associates, 2000) with students needing to know if they are on the right track (Raaheim *et al.*, 1991). HE's autonomous approach to learning is a further significant factor (Fisher, 1994), providing a potential mismatch of previous learning styles with the independent learning styles required in HE (Ozga & Sukhmandan, 1998; Cook & Leckey, 1999). Other variables such as intrapersonal and adaptability skills also impact on this transition (Parker *et al.*, 2004) and require to be factored in to an understanding of students' learning experiences. At-risk students could include all entering HE for the first time recognising that secondary teachers often do not consider it their responsibility to prepare students for HE (Burchill, 1982). Blythman and Orr (2003), suggested that support mechanisms should reach the entire student body and this could be accomplished by supporting all new entrants.

Widening access to ensure that all those wishing to benefit from HE have this opportunity (HEFCE, 2004) raises particular problems, with some evidence that students thus recruited are at greater risk of academic failure (Brennan & Shah, 2002). Government interest here is not only in student numbers but also with progression and support mechanisms (e.g., HEFCE, 2003; Scottish Executive, 2003; QAAHE 2004). Trotter and Roberts (2006) believed an increase in the diversity of students brings varying and often untypical needs requiring additional support. Christie *et al.* (2005), in a study of non-traditional students, noted characteristics peculiar to this group including care responsibilities and limited financial resources, with appropriate institutional understanding and support not in evidence. In addition, Thomas (2002) saw non-traditional students as lacking an understanding of HE systems and being unprepared for academic study. The effective transition from further education must also be given consideration (Knox, 2005).

A link between attendance and academic performance is also mooted (Durden & Ellis, 1995; Devadoss & Foltz, 1996). This could be linked to evidence that academic achievements may be adversely affected by part time employment (Barke *et al.*, 2000; Callender & Kemp, 2000; Humphrey, 2001; Paisey & Paisey, 2004). Davies and Elias's (2003) study showed that of students leaving HE prematurely, 44% had undertaken on average 20 hours per week of paid employment during term time. Krause *et al.* (2005) noted a progressive trend for students to spend fewer hours on campus alongside a growing percentage of students in paid employment. It is critical to note that at-risk students may be those who are least visible (Eaton & Bean, 1995).

Other categories of at-risk students include those unsure of their selected discipline. A study by Davies and Elias (2003) showed that 37% of those applying through clearing reported academic difficulties at a later point in their studies, whilst Gracia and Jenkins (2002) noted that vague or negatively focused reasoning in initial study choices may have a negative longer-term influence on attitudes to study, affecting academic performance. A further reason for student withdrawals are personal problems affecting a student's psychological state, support for such problems requiring institutional recognition (Jacques, 1990; Earwaker, 1992; Johnson, 1994). Davies and Elias (2003), studying students' withdrawals, noted that 67% did so during the first year of study citing financial problems, academic difficulties and personal problems. One further category of at-risk students requiring guidance are those trying to find their way back into a course after a sustained period of absence, for example through illness.

Pastoral support

Higher Education Quality Council guidelines (HEQC, 1995) state that there should be access to reliable and valid academic advice and guidance services at all reasonable times, including regular access to a designated personal tutor/academic adviser able to offer information on programmes, specific subjects, student progress and referrals to other sources of advice. Pastoral care is seen to vary widely both between and within HE institutions (National Audit Office, 2002), showing a variation in the quantity of time and quality of service provided by staff. An HEQC study (1994) noted that there appeared to be confusion about the division of labour between central and course-based assistance, a fact corroborated by the work of Bell (1996) and Earwaker (1992). Bell suggested a number of models, including the separation of the role of the academic tutor and the personal tutor, although alternatively the two roles could be merged. Studies by Christie *et al.* (2004) and Cooke *et al.* (2006) of the more vulnerable groups in HE noted that most of such students did not seek assistance within the university's counselling services. The authors believe that the effectiveness of student advising is weakened where responsibility is absolved away from academic staff to the centre, which is often impersonal to the student and exacerbated when at-risk students shun the confrontation of problems.

Numerous approaches to process and style of student academic advising can be argued. Jacques (1990) defined the role of the personal tutor as an agent at the interface between the personal and the academic, with a watching brief on problems that students are likely to encounter, and being a support to facilitate the personal development of the student. Primary to effective advising is the connection made with individual students (Ford & Ford, 1989; Tinto, 1987). Krause *et al.* (2005) noted that only a third of students questioned felt that teaching staff took an interest in their progress. This could be attributed to a lack of relationship between the academic and the student, with students often being linked to a complete stranger. Raaheim *et al.* (1991), in attempting to reduce academic learning anxiety for students, suggested more frequent contact with tutors who teach them.

The relationship between tutor and student, once formed, can be prescriptive or developmental (Smith, 2002). Developmental interaction engages the students in thoughtful relational dialogue whilst prescriptive is more hierarchical, with the adviser in command of the knowledge and advising process, the student being passive. Smith (2002) noted that first year students prefer prescriptive over developmental advising. However, this earlier style of meeting may pave the way for more developmental interactions in future meetings.

Other forms of support have been adopted with some success to deal with at-risk students: peer mentoring (Grant-Vallone *et al.*, 2004); an on-line, real-time database of student activities (Laing *et al.*, 2005); a module to aid in the transition from FE to HE (Knox, 2005). The authors believe that a systemised process of advising students with an emphasis on those at-risk could not only aid progression but also develop each student's potential. This should start with the students in transition. In a study of six institutions whose progression rate predictions were higher than HEFC's benchmarks, Thomas *et al.* (2001) noted a particular emphasis on support leading up to and during the first year of study. The prioritising of resources to the first year of studies may reap benefits, including savings, in subsequent years (Pitkethly & Prosser, 2001; Yorke & Thomas, 2003). However, a clear argument can be made to stretch the advising throughout the academic life to ensure appropriate developmental support. Trotter and Roberts (2006) believed that personal tutor meetings:

... should be timetabled regularly in the first semester reverting to at least one per semester after that. An agenda for the meeting should be provided with an academic link e.g., personal development planning, reflection on results... an ethos of attendance being a requirement should be encouraged. Attendance needs to be monitored and procedures put in place for contacting absentees. (p. 382)

The authors also believe that forming quality personal relationships between the adviser and the advisee is key to the system being effective. Good information flow is also necessary to assist in meeting with students especially in assessing those students at risk, for example attendance and assessment records (Palomba & Banta, 1999; Upcraft & Schuh, 1996).

The action research project

Stage 1: Define the area of inquiry

The project relates to the designing of a student advising system for undergraduate students with particular emphasis on at-risk students, most notably students in transition from another form of education and those with progression difficulties during their academic life.

Stage 2: Describe the educational situation, collecting evaluative data and analysing it whilst looking for contradictions

It is vital that studies such as this understand the changing context of the provision of education. Student numbers as well as the number of HE providers has grown significantly in recent years. Yorke (2003) noted that the old universities within the UK are clearly differentiated as regards projected non-completion, being 9.6% for pre-1992 universities and 22.1% for new universities. There has also been an increase in students from low socio-economic groups and entrants from groups other than school leavers. Yorke (2003) noted that older universities have a lower intake of entrants from lower socio-economic groups (20%) and mature entrants (12.3%) than the new universities (32.5% and 30.8% respectively).

This project examines the student advising system for the BA Accountancy programme at a post-1992 status university. The programme has an annual intake of approximately 100 students of which 15% are expected to be non-standard entrants (usually entrants from further education entering at second year with an HND) with no significant changes in the entrance qualifications for students or teaching staff on this programme over recent years. The unclassified degree has a 3 year duration with students studying six modules per academic year, each carrying equal credit. A semester system is in operation with students studying three modules in semester A (September to December), examined in January and then a further three modules in semester B (February to April) examined in May.

The student advising system in place prior to 2003/4 required that all lecturers be assigned students to counsel with two meetings arranged with students in their first year. Advisors retained these students throughout their academic life but after first year no formal meetings were arranged, with students being told that they could approach their advisor as required. Students thus met with someone they may never have met before and often did not turn up to arranged meetings. Any meetings held tended to be very short since the lecturer often had little knowledge of the course or the student. The effectiveness of the student advising system was regarded by staff as extremely limited.

The university in question is dependent on funding which relates to student numbers and within the institution a resource allocation model applies resources linked to student numbers. Progression and retention targets set by the university provided the catalyst for developing the student support system in the light of non-achievement of the set indicators. Part-time employment and lack of attendance were cited as possible contributory factors to the poor progression, and there had been a poor student take-up of the existing student advising system which might have catered for the at-risk students. A further reason cited for poor progression was the introduction of a centralised team-based administration of the programme somewhat out of touch with specific groups of students compared to a previous system of local and more personal administration housed in the accounting academic department. This resulted in students feeling

remote and unsupported.

Stage 3: Tackle contradictions by introducing change

In September 2003, a pastoral support system was introduced to address these issues. A number of distinctive changes were made. Firstly, all students were required to participate in the new advisory systems with follow up procedures on students absenting themselves from the system. Secondly, staff were not strangers to the students, having tutored their 20 advisees for 2 hours per week in core subject seminars throughout their first academic year, allowing a firm relationship to form. Thirdly, individual meetings between the tutor and each student in these seminar groups were organised twice a year throughout their academic life. The first meeting in Year 1 introduced the advisory system and ensured that students had “settled in”, focusing on the early elements of transition to HE. Future meetings facilitated a focused discussion on each student’s results and academic development, for example considering assessment marks as provided for each module. Fourthly, information would be made available to staff to assist in gauging those students at-risk: attendance registers maintained on a central server by module staff, end of semester examination results and any personal information passed on by the students. Finally, the role of Programme Organiser was split to devolve student contact elements to a Programme Tutor responsible for coordinating and taking responsibility for the effectiveness of the advising system.

Stage 4: Monitor the change, analysing evaluative data about the change

The revised advisory system needs to be considered in the light of alterations to the student learning experience. This will be looked at from a number of perspectives.

Academic performance

The academic performance of students has been reviewed by comparing the results of the students before and after the commencement of the student advising system in the academic year 2003/4. Tables 1 to 3 show the results of the students after the first assessment diet of each academic year prior to and after the initiation of the new processes. Table 4 shows the results after the second diet.

No. of modules failed	1	2	3	4	5	6	% students not passing all subjects	% students passing at first attempt	Total number of students
<i>Results of students after the new student advising system</i>									
2005/06	36%*	13%	8%	5%	5%	0%	67%	33%	104
2004/05	21%	19%	6%	2%	1%	0%	49%	51%	113
2003/04	17%	7%	3%	2%	2%	2%	32%	68%	102
<i>Results of students prior to new student advising system</i>									
2002/03	19%	14%	8%	5%	1%	7%	54%	46%	74
2001/02	21%	14%	6%	4%	1%	0%	46%	54%	96

Table 1: Number of first year students failing 1-6 modules at first diet

* In retrospect this was regarded as being a slightly more difficult examination than the norm for this subject.

No. of modules failed	1	2	3	4	5	6	% students not passing all subjects	% students passing at first attempt	Total number of students
<i>Results of students after the new student advising system</i>									
2005/06	19%	17%	12%	5%	8%	7%	68%	32%	109
2004/05	19%	19%	9%	5%	5%	9%	66%	34%	95
<i>Results of students prior to new student advising system</i>									
2003/04	21%	7%	12%	9%	3%	14%	66%	34%	87
2002/03	19%	6%	12%	4%	6%	9%	56%	44%	90

Table 2: Number of second year students failing 1-6 modules

No. of modules failed	1	2	3	4	5	6	% students not passing all subjects	% students passing at first attempt	Total number of students
<i>Results of students after the new student advising system</i>									
2005/06	21%	9%	6%	3%	1%	1%	41%	59%	70
<i>Results of students prior to new student advising system</i>									
2004/05	29%	8%	10%	6%	3%	4%	60%	40%	63
2003/04	10%	10%	6%	3%	3%	3%	35%	65%	79

Table 3: Number of third year students failing 1-6 modules

	1st year	2nd year	3rd year
2005/06	84%	80%	80%
2004/05	91%	72%	73%
2003/04	91%	82%	87%
2002/03	77%	82%	78%

Table 4: Overall progression after the second diet (shaded area represents results prior to the student advising system)

Initial performance results after the introduction of the advisory system were encouraging, with a fail rate of only 32% in 2003/04 for the first year students at the first diet and an increase in overall first year progression of 14%. However, the overall picture over subsequent years appears inconclusive. First year students failing any number of subjects rose progressively in 2004/05 and 2005/06 after the first diet and only fell back in 2005/06 after the second diet. It is difficult to draw conclusions about the effects of the advising system when other variables cannot be held constant. For example, there was a change in the structure of the programme in 2004/05 where a compulsory module was substituted for an option choice. Overall progression rates after the first and second diet at second year level have never risen above previous year's results. Third year results are perhaps too early to comment on (having only had one diet) but would not seem to show a significant improvement over previous years. The volume of subjects having to be re-sat has declined but this could be due to students withdrawing earlier from the course, aided by the advising system. Overall examination performance has not significantly improved both in terms of the overall percentage passing all subjects as well as in the statistics for number of modules failed. The academic quality of students passing the modules may have improved but this was not the focus of the study which concentrated on those students at-risk.

Withdrawals

The second area of investigation relates to the volume and pattern of withdrawals before and after the introduction of the advisory system. Table 5 shows the percentage of students who withdrew from the course. The shaded figures show the withdrawals prior to the new advisory system, the data suggesting that the new advising system has not assisted in reducing the withdrawal rate although it may assist in identifying these students at an earlier stage.

	1st year	2nd year	3rd year
2005/06	14%	6%	0%
2004/05	18%	17%	10%
2003/04	13%	14%	8%
2002/03	9%	4%	2%

Table 5: Percentage of student withdrawals in relation to the total students at the start of each year (shaded area represents results prior to the student advising system)

Student advising meetings

The take-up of advising meetings was much improved from previous years. In earlier years about 20% of students took up the offer of advisory meetings. Table 6 below shows the percentage take-up of students at the Semester B advisory sessions in 2005/6 for each tutor. Table 7 shows in longitudinal form the take-up of two groups of students through their academic lives. There is a high level of take-up for all years although there is a slight tapering off of students as they progress through their academic lives.

It should be noted that there was an element of inconsistency of approach between staff over time. Thus one staff member (Tutor 2), committed to the approach in earlier years, arranged with students that they should only see them in third year where a problem arose. The need to communicate the requirements of the system

to new advisors was recognised as again there was inconsistency here (e.g., Tutor 7 and 9).

Tutor	1st year	2nd year	3rd year
1	100%	93%	67%
2	88%	75%	29%
3	90%	65%	60%
4	100%	88%	93%
5	85%	N/A	N/A
6	N/A	83%	N/A
7	N/A	N/A	0%
8	91%	64%	N/A
9	N/A	N/A	75%

Table 6: Student attendance at advising sessions

NB: Not all tutors advised for all of the 3 years since inception. Thus a N/A is shown for years where they were not involved.

	2003/4		2004/5		2005/6	
	Semester A	Semester B	Semester A	Semester B	Semester A	Semester B
Group 1	63%	93%	86%	86%	83%	67%
Group 2	100%	94%	69%	83%	100%	29%

Table 7: Student attendance at advising sessions for two groups of students

Student perceptions

The cohort of students who had experienced all three years of the new advising system were asked to complete a questionnaire based on personal tutors' responsibilities as suggested by Jacques (1990). The results obtained from a total of 58 responses are shown in Table 8. Students were also asked at their 2005/6 second advising meeting to comment on their perceptions of the system.

	The academic advising during my first year	0	1	2	3	4
1	Provides a good contact for students with staff in an otherwise seemingly anonymous institution	0%	7%	34%	38%	21%
2	Provides a good link with students and course tutors to seek course improvements	0%	3%	47%	36%	14%
3	Helps students to reflect on their progress and identify ways of improvement	2%	3%	29%	52%	14%
4	Allows a reflection on whether the course is providing what you as a student had hoped for from the course	2%	10%	45%	36%	7%
	In relation to my meetings with my academic advisor					
5	I feel he/she is capable of offering advice on my progress	2%	2%	22%	40%	34%
6	I feel he/she is capable of offering advice relating to learning problems	2%	0%	22%	50%	26%

Table 8: Student perceptions of advising system (0 = strongly disagree, 4 = strongly agree)

In judging the students' perceptions of the system, a number of students commented that their reflections may be based upon the specific student advisor they were assigned. It should be noted that, over the three years of the project, reprioritisation issues led to new staff members being introduced to the scheme who were not originally considered for the project.

Students appeared to appreciate the point of contact, with 59% agreeing or strongly agreeing with it being a good contact. A number of comments are worth noting:

A really good idea when you are struggling. It is important that you are comfortable with the person you know. I personally found assistance in relation to my approach to re-sitting an examination.

The advantage of having a familiar member of staff as this point of contact was felt strongly by some students:

I think it's better to keep the same advisor as this gives continuity and you don't need to explain the past.

I am not bothered about keeping the same advisor but would rather have someone who is tutoring on the course.

The improvements on the programme emanating from this system were only seen by 50% as being a useful benefit. However, several students did comment on it being an important feature:

I don't think that the class representative system works as it is difficult to approach them. I find it easier to talk to a staff member that I know.

As regards students being able to gauge their progress through these meetings, a significant number (66%) felt this was the case although only 43% felt it allowed them to reflect on whether the course was providing what they had hoped for. The key focus of the system was the reflection on academic progression. The sessions provided a feed-back and feed-forward mechanism between the student and the adviser, with reflection on whether the course met their aspirations being a secondary issue to the system. A number of comments are worth noting:

A chance to reflect and weigh up where you are with your studies.

I was able to reflect on academic progress. You have your own ideas of how you are getting on but to have honest independent advice is a good thing.

Good to know what academics think of your progress and marks to date.

Meetings give you something to work towards. For me I was going wayward and this helped me to refocus. It also showed me areas for improvement.

Advice given to me in first year helped me get through law as I was told not to ignore the subjects that I did not like.

Students felt confident in the ability of the student advisers to offer the appropriate guidance and advice.

Staff perceptions

The seven members of staff involved in the first year advising scheme were given informal interviews and questioned using a questionnaire similar to that given to students (with their findings given in Table 9). The reactions were mixed but on balance tended to be positive. It should be noted that the questionnaire included some new members of staff co-opted onto the project by management as the earlier first choice advisors were reprioritised to other tasks. Original tutors scored the scheme highly whilst others appeared ambivalent, although most felt strongly that the advisor system created a better point of contact with students. A key theme running through the responses of the meetings was that of "a familiar face".

One staff member believed that:

The meetings held with students were so much more worthwhile and focused - you really felt the student benefited from the experience as you could comment on their ability and attendance from first hand experience.

Tutors benefited from getting to know their group of students during the 24 weeks of teaching which, with year-on-year continuity, led to staff feeling comfortable with advisees, a feeling reciprocated by the students. One tutor stated:

This will be a group of students I will know right the way through the course... there is less awkwardness on both sides as well as allowing me to be more informed such that I can keep an eye on those whose work/attendance was not up to the standards we expect.

Staff noted that there were also indirect benefits to be gained from the system and one noted that:

It is easier to discuss specific cases at exam boards and give individual academic references since we now know our own students well and their circumstances.

One of the external examiners commented in their 2005/6 report that:

It is apparent that staff get to know students well. The discussion of problem cases is well informed.

A recent revalidation event drew the following comment:

The academic advising system operating is a particular strength to the programme [with a commendation for] strong student support in particular the Level 1 student advisory system.

The questionnaire would seem to suggest differing views on whether their role should be to influence course improvements or reflection on whether the course was satisfying students' needs. Perhaps this is due to other mechanisms being in place to address these issues such as Student/Staff Meetings and Programme Boards. One member commented that:

Some good ideas came out of these discussions that have helped to develop the student experience...the university system of feedback on the course through staff student consultative groups may not be very effective.

The attendance registers worked well for the majority of modules, allowing for more prompt action to be taken with programme administrators believing that there were "fewer persistent offenders as compared to previous years".

The negative findings by staff concentrated around the "time investment" required by those involved (the extra tutorial work, two formal meetings with each student during each academic session and dealing with any issues raised). Over time staff members found that they could have up to 60 such advisory meetings per semester where they were given a new group of students each year. There was also a clear difference in opinion over whether the tutor should help the student in selecting any option subjects and whether the system had helped students reflect on their progress.

The pastoral provision for first year B Acc students compared with previous years		0	1	2	3	4
1	Provides a better contact for students in an otherwise seemingly anonymous institution		1	1	2	3
2	Provides a better link with students and course tutors to seek course improvements		1	3	3	
3	Helps students to reflect on their progress and identify ways of improvement		1	3	1	2
4	Allows a reflection on whether the course is providing what the student needs		2	3	2	
In relation to the new pastoral support system I:						
5	Feel capable of offering advice within my sphere of competence				2	5
6	Am able to keep an eye on a students progress and help them with any learning problems			1	2	4
7	Recognise when assistance is needed outwith my sphere of competence				6	1
8	Refer students where necessary to student counselling services within the university system				3	4

Table 9: Staff perceptions of new advising system (0 = strongly disagree, 4 = strongly agree): 7 questionnaires completed

Stage 5: Review the change, deciding on what to do next

The project was always envisaged to be an evolving process including reflection on the benefits and costs. The analysis above has been predominantly inconclusive regarding both progression improvement and reductions in withdrawals, despite intensive resource investment. Changes are thus being initiated to the system such that the focus clearly remains on risk assessment but cutting back on the direct student advising contact. Thus attention will be focused on:

- students in transition
- students with progression difficulties e.g., resits
- students entering university through non-standard wider access routes
- students whose attendance is poor
- students who have joined the course through clearing

By limiting the system to consider these students at the point of their greatest risk the greatest benefit may be gained from the system without being highly onerous on staff time. For transition purposes, students entering the degree programme will still be given two advising meeting in their first year with a member of staff who will have been their seminar tutor for one semester. The remaining years will provide an open door policy should problems occur, with this initial advisor continuing to be the point of contact. Meetings may also be arranged at the staff member's request where information comes to light regarding the student being at risk (e.g., multiple assessment fails, poor attendance), covering the other at-risk categories. This will rely on an appropriate information flow, such as attendance and academic performance, and staff taking on the responsibility effectively beyond the initial face to face meetings. This structure may also be in line with a

move towards autonomous learning within a time frame that does not lead to learned helplessness. It is hoped that this will provide an effective system assisting within resource constraints. The action research methodology process advocates cyclical reviews of such refinements (Zuber-Skerritt, 1992; Hand *et al.*, 1996).

Discussion

Support for at-risk students should be regarded as critical by educators (e.g., Moxley *et al.*, 2001) and yet the evidence for effective support shows that at best the assistance is limited (National Audit Office, 2002), as mirrored in the student advising system prior to the changes. This project contributes to the student support debate regarding the balancing of resources invested with an effective support system for those students most vulnerable.

The project provided support to all students as suggested by Blythman and Orr (2003), and thus included all those at-risk within transition from school/college. In the project few students appeared to have a problem in the initial transition of settling in, and such cases that occurred predominantly related to those studying away from home. However, transition to HE should not be gauged within the early weeks of the course as the impact of a different learning approach may take longer to emerge, for example after receiving their first results. On reflection, the development of independent learning as an objective of student support requires enhancing, with a focus on successful students and not only on those struggling. Consistent with Raaheim *et al.* (1991), the project helped reassure students they were “on the right track”.

Consideration was also given to students entering from widening access routes, predominantly evidenced in the project relating to students entering directly into second year from Higher National Diploma routes. Whilst these students require specific consideration (Knox, 2005), they proved unproblematic regarding attendance and progression, having had two years post secondary education, and having already made a successful transition when entering further education. The few other wider access students tended to be mature late entrants who experienced few problems in transition. Action research is context specific. Other institutions should consider the specific characteristics of students from widening access routes who may have greater similarity to those recognised by Christie *et al.* (2005).

The student advising system considered each student’s attendance and used the meetings to encourage significant improvements in attendance. However, some students were already not visible within the system (e.g., serial non-attenders), and this task proved impossible, as recognised by Eaton and Bean (1995). The student meetings did not discuss the issue of paid employment, this only being raised by students in conjunction with poor attendance. It was noticeable that students at-risk with more personal problems, such as finance, were willing to come to their advisers outside their scheduled advising meetings to ask for advice, possibly due to the level of relationship formed.

The form of pastoral care given by the individual tutors varied in relationship to the tutors’ own personality and understanding of pastoring. However, the generic style adopted was prescriptive rather than developmental (Smith, 2002), due mainly to the developmental stage of the project. The authors question the viability of a more developmental student-led relationship, with concerns over potential inertia from students when asked to be proactive. This could lead to a reversion to the apathy of the previous advising system.

Changes in staffing detracted from the system’s effectiveness. The system is more likely to be effective where the staff empathise with its aims than when they are coerced. The process of a selected number of staff picking up an extra new group each year proved on the whole unworkable in the light of growing pressures of other administrative and research activities. However, the spreading of responsibilities to a wider team brought a mixed reception from students and staff. In addition, management’s initial high prioritisation of the scheme declined due to resource pressures (particularly research activities) in tandem with a questioning of the resource-intensive nature of the process in the light of the benefits provided. The split between academic and central support as advocated by Bell (1996) worked effectively with staff confident of those areas deemed academic and those requiring referral to central support services.

There is a case for each institution to audit the risks attached to their specific students. A post-1992 university differs from the more established institutions (Yorke & Thomas, 2003) as regards prior qualification, anticipated withdrawals and levels of widening access. The former institutions may require more rigorous systems as opposed to the latter. Figure 1 shows different levels of institutional commitment that were considered for student advising in relation to the cost/benefit pay offs. Clearly there is a need for institutional reflection on support strategies. The authors are not alone in believing that, as HE is expanding, support structures are not developing apace (Davy *et al.*, 2000) whilst the matching of resourcing to such structures cannot be ignored (Trotter & Roberts, 2006).

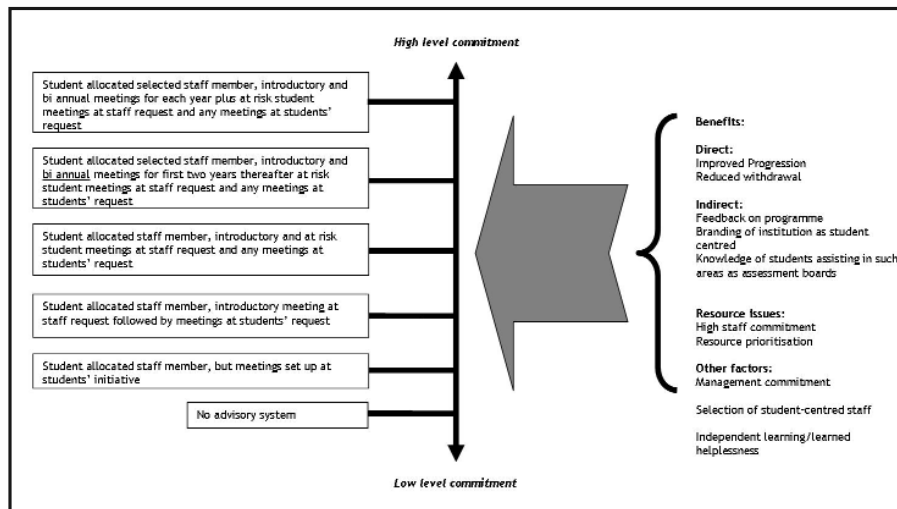


Figure 1: Differing levels of commitment to student advising

Conclusion

The student support system initially attempted to blanket cover students with an emphasis on those at-risk, a system not dissimilar to that advocated by Trotter and Roberts (2006). The findings of the project show that despite significant investment of resources there was no significant change in withdrawals or progression. These outcomes are unlikely to change with the revised system recently implemented, which only impacts on resources. It could be concluded that at best the student advising system only affected the failing students at the margins. If judged purely on cost effectiveness, the heavy investment of resources did not reap progression benefits, including savings, in subsequent years (Pitkethly & Prosser, 2001; Yorke & Thomas, 2003) and the system would not be seen as viable. However, both the duty to be responsible for those at-risk, and a student-centred branding for the institution, elevate the value of the system. Irrespective of the difficulty in balancing resources to recognised needs, institutions and the academic community need to identify their baseline of responsibility for those at-risk and administer appropriate support mechanisms. Thereafter any additional further economic costs should be evaluated against the potential benefits of enhancing students' academic development. Further research should investigate the differing models of student support being adopted and their relative effectiveness, whilst also analysing their impact on successful students in their academic development rather than focusing solely on failing students.

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