

Evaluation of faculty-based student support



Report 2 of 2: Summary and Recommendations

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April 2012

This evaluation of faculty-based student support collected data from staff and students in order to better understand: the issues on which students require advice and information, their preferences for seeking support, and the effectiveness and impact of faculty-based support in meeting students' needs. The companion report 'Analysis and Discussion' presents the data and findings.

AESC are asked to consider the 'Summary and Recommendations', and approve the recommendations in the action grid (pp. 6-7).

1. Reduce high demand for support through improving university systems

There is a high and increasing demand from students for support on a range of issues. The issues which require most support are:

- ensuring their programme is accurate and up to date on PiP (79% of student survey respondents have needed advice and information on their programme and PiP this year, and this issue is most frequently recorded by SSCs as a reason for a student to visit).
- making claims for mitigating circumstances (The numbers of student survey respondents who reported needing advice on mitigating circumstances rose by 20% to 57% from 2010-2011).

For both issues, staff and students expressed difficulties in finding their way through these university systems independently. In response, both Student Support Co-ordinators and Academic Advisers are spending significant amounts of time supporting students in navigating these computer-based systems, at the expense of offering more proactive support or academic guidance.

Student Support Co-ordinators are now each keeping some type of electronic records. Differences in how SSCs are keeping records make it difficult to compile and use these data, either for monitoring activities for Oxford Brookes, to provide personalized responses to students, or to contribute to knowledge in the sector more generally. For example, we can estimate from the data available that over 2000 students have sought advice from SSCs on using PiP last semester, although it may be many more.

Recommendation 1: Redesign PiP and the mitigating circumstances systems so that they can be used independently by students, as a matter of urgency.

Recommendation 2: Provide SSCs with a single system for logging activity data and require annual reporting in a consistent format.

Recommendation 3: Conduct a scoping study for introducing a central records system for student support interactions.

2. Reconceptualise the Academic Adviser role as ‘academic guidance’

Where the Academic Adviser role is working well, staff are offering academic guidance that is distinct from the support provided by Student Support Co-ordinators. It is recommended that the term ‘academic guidance’ is used to explain the Academic Advisers role, in part to distinguish it from the more problem solving advice given by SSCs, and in part to focus on the need to build an ongoing relationship with all students.

Academic guidance focuses on the holistic academic development of the student, which leads to students developing autonomy and self-regulating approaches to their learning. It frequently includes discussions about academic progress, performance, skills development, assessment and feedback, approaches to study, choice of modules and subjects and career advice. For non-traditional students, this can also be a place to discuss the issues they raised during interviews regarding their need to understand the study and assessment requirements.

Academic guidance can, and should, take different forms depending on the local context. For example, in the Faculty of Business with large class sizes and modular programmes, Academic Advisers are best placed to develop such relationships with students. Here Academic Advisers are given clear guidance on when to make contact with students and are provided with a suggested timetable of activities. In some parts of Health and Life Sciences (BMS and SHS), such provision is established through structured group tutorials with a focus on study skills, based on

the PASS model. In parts of TDE, academic guidance is embedded into the curriculum, with the creation of the 'enhanced first year tutor team' in BEMS resulting in a halving of the student attrition rate. In some of the health profession's programmes, Academic Advisers are chosen from the programme team, building on established relationships where staff already assess the ongoing development of students' professional competencies.

Relationships such as these promote a sense of belonging to an academic community and are associated with improvements in student satisfaction, retention and academic success¹. The relationship is valued by students where the advisor is knowledgeable, proactive, available, caring and initiates regular and sustained contact (see Table 2). It is unlikely that such a relationship could be formed in the current WLP allowance of 2 hours per student per year.

Recommendation 4: Programmes review how academic guidance is provided within their programmes and make this clear in the Programme Handbooks.

Recommendation 5: Update the role descriptor for the Academic Advisor on the student support web pages to encompass the notion of academic guidance, using examples of staff and student experiences from this project.

Recommendation 6: Feed this review into the annual review of workload planning allowances

3. Reduce variation in the quality of academic advice

From our survey data, the Academic Adviser was consistently the preferred source of support across a range of issues. Students seek out academic staff because they are already known to them in other roles e.g. as a course tutor, module leader, subject co-ordinator, and they want to build on these relationships. However, students are not always clear about the purpose and value of meetings with Academic Advisers.

Help-seeking is a complex, active process which comprises: recognition of the need for support, knowing what types of support to look for and knowing where to go². Rather than trying to change help-seeking behaviour by always directing students towards SSCs as a first port of call for all enquiries, Academic Advisers need to help students to understand which role is most appropriate. Academic Advisers in interview saw their role as the most appropriate one for students when making academic choices and reviewing academic progress, but are increasingly appreciative of, and reliant upon, the SSCs for trouble-shooting and problem-fixing.

When students approach Academic Advisers in times of difficulty, some receive exemplary support, whereas others leave frustrated with the experience. In addition, 26% of student survey respondents this year reported that they had not seen their Academic Adviser by Week 8 in Semester One. Others were frustrated by changes in the location, availability and allocation of their Academic Adviser.

Induction and briefing for Academic Advisers is patchy. Staff who take on the Academic Adviser role are entitled to receive briefings which help them to stay informed about university regulations and to develop activities which promote their guidance roles in ways appropriate to their discipline.

¹ See for example Summary of findings from the HEA funded programme 'What Works? Student Retention and Success' at http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/what-works-student-retention/What_Works_Summary_Report

² Newman, R. (2008) Adaptive and non-adaptive help seeking with peer harassment: An integrative perspective of coping and self-regulation. *Educational Psychologist*, 43, 1-15.

For some students, they have tried to access services but found the quality of the advice given to be poor or not specific enough to their issues, or have found that staff are unhelpful. There is a need to raise the expectations of all staff to offer consistently accurate, prompt and supportive interventions, and to take each individual student difficulty with obtaining support as a prompt to investigate and, where necessary, improve the support on offer.

The attached table outlines, in the words of staff and students at Brookes, what good quality academic guidance looks like, and offers prompts to staff to help them make a self-assessment of the guidance they offer. This could be worked up into a self-assessment tool.

Recommendation 7: An annual briefing for Academic Advisers to be conducted by the Programme Lead in collaboration with the Faculty SSCs

Recommendation 8: An online self-assessment toolkit to be completed as part of the induction in the first year of being either an Academic Adviser or SSC

Recommendation 9: Each faculty to nominate someone within the faculty who is responsible for the allocation of academic advisees and informing students of any changes.

Recommendation 10: Encourage all those who provide student support to engage with the 'Putting Students at the Centre' staff development programme.

Recommendation 11: Subject Committees to have student support as a standing agenda item, escalated to Faculty AESC, as necessary.

4. Continue to improve awareness of and access to faculty-based support

Awareness of both the Academic Adviser and Student Support Co-ordinator role has increased. In our student surveys, awareness of SSCs has increased amongst respondents from 32% in 2010 to 49% in 2011. Awareness and appreciation of the SSC role has also increased considerably amongst Academic Advisers over the two years. SSCs have been engaging in a range of activities to improve their visibility, and students report becoming aware of their services primarily through presentation during the orientation period and ongoing, regular email contact. In line with the enquiry to enrolment project, we found that ongoing awareness raising activities are needed throughout students' extended period of induction.

Despite these improvements in awareness, almost a quarter of student survey respondents had sometimes or often not found the advice and information they needed and this was unchanged from last year. Although for some students this could be improved by increased awareness, others find support difficult to access or of limited availability. SSCs are responding to this. It was noticeable that last year SSCs were focusing on establishing their visibility, whereas this year they were also concerned with improving access to their services. The most obvious improvement to access has been the relocation of many SSCs to more central locations, and they have also established shared email inboxes, consistent and established drop-in hours and appointments bookable by email.

Recommendation 12: SSCs to promote the advice and guidance offered by SSCs and Academic Advisers beyond the orientation period, such as at the start of every Semester, through regular emails and in Programme Handbooks.

5. Value and support the work of Student Support Coordinators

When this project was scoped in 2009, it was largely concerned with the work of the Student Support Coordinators. However, we have found extremely high satisfaction ratings from students who have seen SSCs. Students value their well-informed advice, prompt responses to emails, listening skills, approachability as well as high quality referrals and the ability to resolve a problem.

The SSCs are clear about their role in providing a one-stop shop for resolving and referring support issues. In this last year they have seen improvements to their job descriptions, and several have moved to more suitable office spaces. Compared to last year they are more focused on activities that are directly related to student support and are appreciative of efforts to limit their role to these core duties. Our concern now should be one of maintaining such a high level of service through supporting and developing the SSCs.

SSCs benefit from the SSCs Network co-ordinated by Keith Cooper, and are appreciative of the development opportunities they have been offered through that network. There is however no clear career progression pathway for SSCs within the University, and they are uncertain of career development opportunities beyond the SSCs role.

Recommendation 13: Maintain staff development opportunities for SSCs and additionally offer career development support.

6. Investigate the effectiveness of activities to support students who are disengaging

There are some instances of proactive processes being put in place to reach students who are disengaging, as indicated by errors on PiP, failing modules, non-attendance, failure to submit or pass assessments. Some of this has been initiated and/or is conducted by SSCs, some goes on informally on a day-to-day basis within academic teams, sometimes involving module leaders and subject co-ordinators. The faculty-based model of student support, with locally based SSCs and nominated staff with responsibility for overseeing individual students' academic progress, should be well positioned to undertake this type of activity. If these activities were co-ordinated and monitored they could provide powerful institutional data on how best to support such students and the impact of the various different interventions.

Recommendation 14: Conduct further research on what interventions are effective in reaching students who are disengaging.

Table 1: Action grid to follow up on recommendations

Action	Who should take the lead?	By when?	
Recommendation 1: Redesign PiP and the mitigating circumstances systems so that they can be used independently by students, as a matter of urgency.	OBIS, AMO and SSCs	September 2012	
Recommendation 2: Provide SSCs with a single system for logging activity data and require annual reporting in a consistent format.	OBIS and Student Services	September 2013	
Recommendation 3: Conduct a scoping study for introducing a central records system for student support interactions.	OBIS/AMO/Student Services	2012-13	
Recommendation 4: Programmes review how academic guidance is provided within their programmes and make this clear in the Programme Handbooks.	Programme Leads	September 2012 and ongoing	
Recommendation 5: Update the role descriptor for the Academic Advisor on the student support web pages to encompass the notion of academic guidance, using examples of staff and student experiences from this project.	Student Services	September 2012	
Recommendation 6: Feed this review into the annual review of workload planning allowances	WLP review group	2012-13	
Recommendation 7: An annual briefing for Academic Advisers to be conducted by the Programme Lead in collaboration with the Faculty SSCs	Programme Leads	September 2012 and ongoing	
Recommendation 8: An online self-assessment toolkit to be completed as part of the induction in the first year of being either an Academic Adviser or SSC	OCSLD	September 2012	
Recommendation 9: Each faculty to nominate someone within the faculty who is responsible for the allocation of academic advisees and informing students of any changes.	AD(SE)s	July 2012	
Recommendation 10: Encourage all those who provide student support to engage with the 'Putting Students at the Centre' staff development programme.	Faculty Heads of Admin and Directors	July 2012	
Recommendation 11: Subject Committees to have student	Chairs of Subject Committees	September 2012 and	

support as a standing agenda item, escalated to Faculty AESC, as necessary.		ongoing	
Recommendation 12: SSCs to promote the advice and guidance offered by SSCs and Academic Advisers beyond the orientation period, such as at the start of every Semester, through regular emails and in Programme Handbooks	SSCs	Ongoing	
Recommendation 13: Maintain staff development opportunities for SSCs and additionally offer career development support.	Head of Student Services	Ongoing	
Recommendation 14: Conduct further research on what interventions are effective in reaching students who are disengaging.	OCSLD	2012-13	

Table 2: What does good (and not so good) quality academic advice and guidance look like? In the words of staff [AA] and students [S] and indicative self-assessment questions (DRAFT)

	When it's good...	When it's not so good....	Self – assessment questions
Knowledgeable	<p>Understands what PIP records show, has contacts in Faculty and with AMO, and is aware of points of referral.</p> <p>[S] I have always gone to one of my academic advisers first if I have any issues, then they direct me what to do next.</p> <p>Familiarity with the programme that the student is on and a range of pathways to completion</p>	<p>[S] Mark's disappointment in his Academic Advisor resulted from superficial and incorrect advice on a group project format that resulted in low marks.</p> <p>[S] Advice on mitigating circumstances is often contradictory.</p> <p>[S] Academic staff very careful on the information they give and often withhold information rather than risk giving inaccurate information, it may then take them a long time to find the correct information by which time it is no longer relevant.</p> <p>Speculation on what may or may not be possible without knowledge or reference to those who do have the knowledge</p>	<p>Have you checked your role? at www.brookes.ac.uk/student/services/handbook/your_role.html and the 'to do' list and timetable at /role-todo.html.</p> <p>Can you use Brookes vocabulary accurately?</p> <p>Are you aware of the latest programme regulations relating to your students' course of study?</p> <p>Do you know the structures of the programmes your advisees are taking, including compulsory modules and prerequisites?</p> <p>Have you read the latest groupwork policy?</p> <p>Are you familiar with the Mitigating Circumstances procedure? – slides are available from AMO</p> <p>Are you able to give basic programme advice? Can you navigate a student's PiP pages?</p> <p>Can you calculate a student's final grade?</p>

	When it's good...	When it's not so good....	Self – assessment questions
Proactive	<p>[S] At the start of the term I had an appointment to discuss how the previous year had gone and what I planned to do when I finished.</p> <p>[AA] I set up a quiz session in induction week which did a lot to break the ice. We met our students and had a laugh with them, so it's not so scary for them to sign up for an appointment or just drop in.</p> <p>[AA] First year and second year students participate in buddy system which is launched with a 'bring and share' welcome lunch, supported by AAs</p>	<p>[S] I have had no contact from my personal tutor in over a year. Don't even know which room he is based in now.</p> <p>[AA] I would say that I'm good when the student walks through the door, but I'm falling down when it comes to being more proactive</p>	<p>Have you met all of your students during their orientation? Did you follow up on any students who did not attend?</p> <p>Have your students been given the student booklet as a self-evaluation tool?</p> <p>Which students are not replying to your emails? Have you checked their attendance on modules?</p> <p>Have you checked that all your advisees have made appropriate Stage 2 choices?</p> <p>Have you checked your students PIP record after results issued (exams letters)?</p> <p>Do you see students before summer to find out what they will be doing before the next year?</p>
Available	<p>[S] Whenever I need the help I often get it from my Academic Adviser because she is readily available either online or physically.</p> <p>[AA] I schedule my office hours for when the part-time students are on site</p>	<p>[S] Usually the office hours are not flexible and not many opportunities for "drop-in" time</p> <p>[S] Module leader can be hard to contact and even visiting his office is hard to find him, further to this he doesn't seem to always reply to emails</p> <p>[AA] I am aware that some of my colleagues are not keeping office hours</p>	<p>Do you schedule time to meet students on days when you know they are on campus?</p> <p>Do students know your preferred means of communication and how quickly you aim to respond to queries?</p> <p>Are your office hours clearly visible and up-to-date?</p> <p>Is the information on your Virtual Office Door in PIP accurate?</p>

	When it's good...	When it's not so good....	Self – assessment questions
Makes time	<p>[S] My Academic Advisor emailed me regarding a meeting with her. Talking through any issue with my studying so far with the subject. We discussed about issues that occurred. She was very patient to listen and explain. I was very happy to listen to her.</p> <p>[AA] I inform module leaders of personal circumstances in some cases, and this is appreciated</p>	<p>[S] It did not feel like he had any time to spare, like me coming to see him was an inconvenience.</p> <p>[S] I was having trouble choosing my modules, but I find my Academic Adviser is too busy, and pretty useless to be honest</p>	<p>Do you observe your office hours?</p> <p>Do you encourage students to think about how much time they need and book an appropriate slot?</p> <p>Do you turn the phone off/blank the screen when students are with you?</p> <p>Do you follow-up on issues raised by students where appropriate?</p>
Caring	<p>[S] Had some issues that were largely affecting my course and work etc and she saw me in the street and called out to ask if I was OK. Furthermore she seemed very genuine too, which then prompted me to begin to seek help.</p> <p>[AA] if there is a problem with academic progress, then I dig down to the pastoral</p> <p>[AA] Meetings between AA and SSC 'made a significant difference' in helping a first year student change course. We clarified the process and provided a sense that people are there that care for her.</p>	<p>[AA] I have seen colleagues being brusque with students who drop by.</p> <p>[S] Went to my personal tutor for advice and she was unable to help me and didn't seem to know anything about my personal situation or what I should do. Felt very unsupported and haven't felt I can go back to her with other problems.</p>	<p>How do you let students know that you are or are not available when they drop in outside your office hours?</p> <p>Do you know how and when to refer students on? (see http://www.brookes.ac.uk/student/services/counselling/concerns/referring.html)</p>

	When it's good...	When it's not so good....	Self – assessment questions
Continuity	Lisa developed a positive relationship with her Academic Advisor despite that she was away and unable to help Lisa directly when Lisa experienced a serious family crisis just before her exams, Lisa so appreciated that her AA followed up on her return to campus and has continued to provide an important level of support.		Do you follow up with your students after you, or they, have been away?
Coaching	[S] Mary appreciated the intensive one to one coaching sessions with her Academic advisor who helped her build up confidence to face a troubling assessment. [S] We went through the module guide and she helped to push me to attend all of the lectures and made me feel at ease with that, and also the workload.		Do you help student reach academic decisions? What careers do many of your graduates/postgraduates go on to do? What qualities are employers looking for in graduates/postgraduates from your discipline?
Evaluative	[AA quoting student view] My friends are always complaining about their academic advisors. I guess I'm lucky	[AA] Students know who their AA is, but they don't have a good grasp of what the role entails.	Are students attending when requested? Are there group or peer support activities that you can involve students in? What do students say about you?

