

Sheera

'I told her where I come from and she was really sweet and helpful - like a mom really. That's why I settled in really well as I knew there was somebody I could turn to if I had a problem or if I just wanted to talk to somebody or just come for a cup of coffee.'

Sheera, an international student in her second year of study, is currently studying part-time while she completes a placement until next semester when she will return to full time study.

Prior to the appointment of Student Support Co-ordinators (SSCs) at Brookes, advice provided during induction week was that academic or other issues could be taken to the Field Chair or the Academic Advisor. Sheera thus chose to contact her Field Chair as soon as she experienced difficulty understanding a selected module. With the Field Chair's help she changed to a different module and went on to obtain an A Symbol for it.

Although Sheera would initially take more personal problems to her Academic Advisor, as she has developed good relationships with both her Field Chair and her Academic Advisor, she is comfortable discussing personal issues with both of them. With both of them women, Sheera acknowledges that there might be some issues that some women students might have difficulty raising with a male advisor. For this reason she considers that students should be able to choose the gender of their Academic Advisor though this is not an issue with respect to the Field Chair role.

Sheera has made use of a range of additional support services at Brookes. ISAS helped with visa queries; the careers centre provided guidance with her CV and helped her find her current job. With all her issues resolved by these services, Sheera has also been able to pass on advice and help to other students. This has proved useful to her as a student rep.

As SSCs have been appointed only recently, Sheera's contact with them has been through her student rep work. Sheera refers students to the SSCs if they have an issue with which she cannot help. She expects to continue working with them more closely next year when she will be a school rep. The SSCs help with communicating student issues to the staff thereby also lightening the work load of the student reps that can focus more on their studies. Currently students in her school are encouraged to contact the SSCs when faced with big or small issues.

Sheera has noticed that students who are more actively engaged are more likely to follow up by seeking help. In addition students are less likely to seek help if they are from cultural contexts that do not encourage talking to authority or asking them for anything e.g. if there are mark discrepancies that need adjustment. Sheera suggests that in addition to encouraging students to speak up it is also possible to offer to take issues up on their behalf. Alternatively some students feel more comfortable seeking help as a group.

This story was collected as part of the Evaluation of the Revised Student Support at Oxford Brookes University. Sheera is not the student's real name.

See <https://wiki.brookes.ac.uk/display/pedres/Student+Support+Evaluation>

Students are able to change their Academic Advisors and do for various reasons including a preference for someone who is familiar with their field of study. Sheera also referred to friends whose attempts to obtain help from their Academic Advisors were met with 'instead of a warm friendly reception, always a cold shoulder as if they were wasting their time'. As Sheera considers forming good relationships between a university and a student should begin even *before* their arrival at university, she sees these negative first experiences with Academic Advisors, or other support services, as potentially contributing to further alienation of students.

With some students being harder to reach than others, communication channels in Sheera's school that endeavour to engage students and keep them up to date on events include a wiki, regular emails from the SSCs, student rep messages conveyed through the Field Chair, class announcements, posters and rep stalls. Sheera considers that texting and Facebook as communication channels related to study issues would be less popular with students as they are used more for personal communication.