

Sonya

“If people have built a close relationship with this person from the start that is their first point of contact.”

Sonya’s first experience of needing help in her first year resulted from her starting the semester a week late, missing induction and feeling very lost in an unfamiliar environment. Having had a good relationship at high school level with the head teacher, she went straight to her senior lecturer for assistance and obtained help in getting up and running and catching up. Always receiving good advice and support, over the intervening three years Sonya has continued to make her senior lecturer her first port of call and has acted on resulting referrals to her personal tutor, her module leader and the administration office. Always acting on the advice and information provided she has continued to progress with her studies through to her final year despite some health problems that caused her to miss a term of work.

Currently in her third year of study, Sonya is unaware of any other specific help services in her school of study, does not know who the course student representatives are, nor that there are Student Support Co-ordinators. Furthermore, she does not know the Dean, despite attempts to consult the Dean over the past three years, as the latter has never been available.

Situations that Sonya suggests require enhanced help include needing to find venues and services on campus. In addition to her finding the campus very difficult to negotiate when she first arrived, Sonya, as a co-ordinator for a student society, needed to consult various campus services. With main reception being the first, often only visible source of information, it often seems the appropriate place to start. In reality the help often lacks the details of where to go or who to consult. For this reason Sonya considers that main reception is more of a help service for external visitors to the campus rather than to the university students. Inadequate building signage and the need to work through layers of information to find maps and related information online are also potentially counterproductive for initiating new students into the unfamiliar campus environment.

During her first year of study Sonya was subjected to unfortunate targeting in class by a tutor that focused inappropriate attention on her cultural and religious background which had no bearing on the course material. Having been brought up to have respect for teachers and to be always polite, for some weeks she let it be. When her course peers complained and insisted that she act, she consulted her senior lecturer to outline the situation. Though she was offered the opportunity to move to another tutorial group she asked the senior lecturer to keep the issue confidential and explained how she intended to deal with it. This meant that someone else in authority knew of the situation in case it became necessary for her work to be assessed by someone other than her tutor. Sonya’s expectations of confidentiality were respected and she was able to voice her displeasure to the tutor who ceased the behaviour without her having to move to another class group.

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

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

If Sonya had not had the good relationship with her senior lecturer, as well as very good support from her family, she suggests that, particularly for students who don't have that support, assistance based at course level rather than school based might be more useful. This is because schools usually include a diversity of approaches and issues. In addition she would like to see support staff available during regular business hours as personal tutors have teaching and other commitments that impact on their availability. She considers that a single entry point for assistance, no matter what the issue and which then lead to appropriate referrals to other staff or services would be of most help to students. The information of where to go first should be included in the initial information pack.

For some personal issues that impact on student life and studies, Sonya suggests that some woman students might find it more appropriate to consult a woman for advice or information.

Sonya values face-to-face interaction in some circumstances (rather than online information or email) as more timely, direct and less likely to result in misunderstanding. Although she has made little use of her PIP pages, Sonya does suggest that the PIP pages could be made more useful for provision of information and directions of where to get help and advice.

Sonya is in her third year of her studies, already runs her own business part-time, and would like to further her studies at postgraduate level although, owing to family circumstance, she is uncertain if she will remain in Oxford to study.