What do we mean by student support? Staff and students' perspectives of the provision and effectiveness of support for students

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Abstract

The aim of this small-scale study is to explore the effectiveness of the support available to students registered for programmes of study in the School of Education. This includes the provision of university-wide student support and guidance services as well as the more localised study skills and academic and personal support provided by personal tutors. The perceptions of both staff and students were sampled through questionnaires and interviews. This paper presents a review of literature on the provision of student support for the increasingly diverse body of students in higher education and some preliminary findings from our survey of current students. The literature and findings from our investigation indicate discrepancies between the officially declared provision of student support services and the accessibility and use of these services in practice. There is ambiguity around the role of the personal tutor and inconsistency of practice in the level of support provided by 'personal tutors' which suggest that a review of the personal tutor role is needed.   Student responses to our questionnaire also indicate that drop-in study skills provision in useful and being used but that other student support services, such as careers and counselling services are rarely used by students from the School of Education. This is mainly due to accessibility of these services and the lack of provision on the Walsall campus. The other major theme in the data is the process of induction to the University which students regard as being too intensive an 'event' and inappropriate for getting to know about support services.

Introduction

The provision of student support services including personal and financial counselling, careers guidance and support for students with disabilities is an established part of the support available to students in all higher education institutions (HEIs), including the University of Wolverhampton. The increasing diversity of students entering HEIs has resulted in additional support being made available to support the academic and personal development of students, including study skills to support academic writing skills and subject specific support to address gaps in subject knowledge and understanding. This support contributes to the quality of the students' learning experience and to their educational achievement. In their survey of students' perceptions of quality in higher education Hill et al. (2003) found that the most influential factors in the provision of a quality education are the quality of the lecturer and the student support systems. Thus evidence of the importance of student support is increasingly but it also becoming more difficult to manage as growing numbers of students need access to high quality support. The aim of this study is to explore the effectiveness of the support available to students registered for

programmes of study in the School of Education, through a survey of current students on different awards. The research also seeks to identify ways of improving the support that is currently available by investigating the views of staff and students through interviews and making recommendations to senior managers based on the findings of the study. The interview data is not presented in this paper but has been used to compile a more detailed report which can be obtained from the authors.

Literature review

This literature review is structured around a number of key questions in relation to the provision of student support in HEIs which has been shaped by the development of a mass higher education system that needs to support students with differing needs on more flexible programmes of learning. This includes, for example, part-time as well as full-time students, home and international students, students with disabilities (Avramidis & Skidmore, 2004), students with caring responsibilities as parents and as carers for elderly relatives and those on distance learning courses (Rahman, 2002; Stewart, 1993). In addition to these differences the need for support on more conventional campus-based teaching and learning programmes is increasing in order to improve retention rates (Gutteridge, 2001) and the quality of higher education.

How did student support emerge as an issue for HEIs?

The emergence of student support as a major issue for HEIs can be linked to two reasons; firstly, the rate of student withdrawal from university education and secondly, the impact of increasing student diversity on students' experience of university. There is concern about students who drop out of university before completing their degree and the associated costs of non-completion (Yorke, 2000). In 1982/3, the rate of non-completion was 13% and in 1997/8, it was 17% in the UK (Education and Employment, Sixth Report, 2001, para. 1.11.). Tinto (1993) has produced an integrative theory and models of student departure. His model has six progressive phases: student pre-entry attributes; early goals/commitments to study; institutional experiences; integration into the institution; goals/commitments to the institution; ending in a departure decision, among which 'institutional experiences' and 'integration' are defined in the domain of student support (Tinto, 1993). Tinto's work suggests that students who do not relate emotionally, socially and academically to the institutional culture may withdraw and leave without completing their programme of study. This is something that is being affected by the diversity of students attending HEIs. Casey et al. (2003) claim that the growth in the diversity of students in universities in recent years has been striking, especially in post-1992 universities in the UK. In terms of home students the diversity relates to the academic background and previous experience of students who are entering higher education with a much broader range of qualifications, including vocational and technical qualifications which differ from more traditional academic routes. Most universities also have a greater number of international students participating in their programmes. Consequently, many aspects of student life, including academic, social support and pastoral care have become harder to understand and manage in a growing and diverse population (Audin & Davy, 2003). In this context, student support systems have become increasingly important for HEIs.

What support services are currently available to students in universities?

Most universities have well-established student support systems to meet the personal and academic needs of their students. According to McInnis et al. (2000), the support

services that students are using include child care, financial aid, pastoral care, English language support services, counselling services, health services, library support service, employment service, study skills assistance, student union club, sports facilities and catering services. The belief that students come to university to achieve academic aspirations as well as personal development has expanded the range of student support (University of Melbourne, 2002). As a community, universities are more aware of the need to satisfy the social and emotional needs of their students and to offer facilities such as childcare for students with young children.

Among the support services available to students at universities, those which are pertinent to the academic, self-development and emotional needs of students are the most important. McInnis' study (McInnis et al., 2000) shows that the most desirable forms of support are the employment service, learning support, counselling service and facilities which cater for students' academic, emotional and self-development needs. In a study of 9000 further education students in the UK, Martinez and Munday (1998) found that the quality of tutorials were factors in students' staying in or leaving university. Students who withdrew were reported as dissatisfied with a lack of collegiality in the way tutorials were run, in an absence of attempts to create a positive and participative group dynamic and a dearth of communication between teachers. Tinto's work and other research suggests that the more students interact with other students and staff, the more likely they are to continue with their studies (Astin 1984, Tinto 1997). However, McInnis (2000) does not examine the personal tutor system, which is a regular support mechanism for university students in the UK. For most students, coming to university is a major change and they need someone to guide and direct them and 'the most usual method is through some variant of a personal tutor system' (Owen, 2002, p.7). The role of personal tutor is an integral part of the academic and emotional support for students.

How effectively are available support services being used?
Even though most universities can give a long list of their student support services, it does not necessarily mean that all the services are actively functioning and benefiting the students effectively. There can be a discrepancy between the provision and the accessibility of support services. A few previous studies have identified deficiencies in established student support systems. McInnis (2000) suggests a discrepancy between the most important support services identified by the students (employment service, counselling and learning support) and the most frequently used support facilities (student union café and libraries). The gap between the importance of the support service and the frequency of the services being used by the students demonstrates some of the problems with university support systems. Some highly important services such as learning support, counselling, employment services may be rigidly scheduled and clash with students' lecture or placement schedule so that they cannot access the support service easily. This is often the case with initial teacher education programmes which operate outside the standard academic year. Furthermore, the gap between the provision and use of support services can also be caused by the quality of the services. If students find that the personnel in support services are not very helpful, they may turn to their friends or families rather than support workers in the university. Thus, the provision of support facilities cannot guarantee an effective support system.

Personal tutoring, as a pivot of student support systems, is still problematic in some universities. Some lecturers are not willing to take the role of personal tutor seriously

even though they think that some personal issues could impinge upon students' academic performance (Lea & Farbus, 2000). Furthermore, lecturers who act as personal tutors are not actually informed of the characteristics of the personal tutor role and most are not clear about the role(s) of personal tutors (Owen, 2002). In most universities, there seems to be no quality assurance or consistent system to ensure the quality or scale of personal tutoring. Lea & Farbus (2000) found that 'the amount of time tutors spent with tutees varied enormously – from no time at all to as many as 30 hours in any core work'. (Lea & Farbus, 2000, p.20)

How can the effectiveness of student support systems be improved?
To improve the effectiveness of student support systems, university managers need to champion the importance of such services in enhancing the experience of being at university. They need to develop support that promotes the intellectual, personal and academic development and achievement of students from diverse backgrounds. The support system is 'an educational necessity' and both students and staff benefit from it (Lea & Farbus, 2000 p.23). However, to be effective it needs to be motivated by a sincere concern for students' development rather than merely being a response to external measures of quality assurance. More investment is needed to provide a responsive and sufficient system of student support to cater for a student body that is both more diverse and also increasing as larger numbers of students are encouraged to participate in higher education. Existing support services may suffer from inadequate staffing. Lea & Farbus (2000) found that both staff and students 'felt that the amount of time budgeted for student support in terms of workload is insufficient '(Lea & Farbus, 2000, p.25). Another key area is the role of personal tutors in university student support systems. Previous studies have shown that the personal tutor role is ambiguous (Owen, 2002: Lea & Farbus, 2000) and that personal tutors are not usually given enough time to work with tutees (Lea & Farbus, 2000). According to Owen (2002), 'a re-thinking, a radical reappraisal of the whole approach to the personal tutor system' should be undertaken to upgrade the personal tutor system (Owen, 2002 p.21). The gap between the needs/demands of the student and the capacity of the personal tutor to provide the necessary support should be addressed to increase satisfaction on both sides.

Despite a rhetoric around the importance of providing quality education for students, the research on student support systems is limited. However, studies such as the ones reviewed in this paper show the challenges and problems facing staff and students in an increasingly diverse higher education system. The following section reports on the findings of our questionnaire on student support.

Findings from the survey of current students

The questionnaire was distributed to 200 students in the School of Education on undergraduate and postgraduate programmes across the three Divisions of the School. They were distributed to students in classrooms by lecturers during timetabled module sessions, which gave us a high response rate but may have affected the content of the responses. From the 200 questionnaires that were distributed, 157 responses were returned, giving a response rate of 78.5%. Over 60% of the respondents were aged between 20-29, 22% were between 30-39, with smaller numbers between 40-59 and a few aged below 20. A summary of the main findings is given below.

- Students indicated that they approached their personal tutors or subject tutors for support. Some students did not distinguish these roles and others regarded project/dissertation supervisors as their personal tutor. The responses indicate some confusion around the role of the personal tutor but general satisfaction with the support received from tutors.

- The questionnaire responses show that 58% of 157 students are aware of the study skills support provided in the learning centre. Students on undergraduate combined awards programmes had made greater use of the support than those on other award routes.

- Few students were aware of the counselling service and a small number of the services provided by the careers service. Only 5 out of 152 respondents had used the careers service and had found it 'not helpful', whilst 4 out of 155 had used the counselling service and defined it as 'useless'.

- Students complained about the lack of support services on the Walsall campus compared to other campuses of the University.

- The questionnaire responses suggested the following as ways in which support for students could be improved included:

  - clarification of the time available for personal tutorials to ensure consistent support for tutees;

  - fewer tutees and more time for personal tutors to support their tutees;

  - the same support facilities on each campus including a job shop, child care and gateway services;

  - a less intensive induction which is more of a process than an 'event'; comments included 'they told us too many things in the first week… the staff got their job done but I can't remember what is where.'

Conclusion

The responses to the questionnaire support the findings of other studies in relation to the ambiguity around the role of the personal tutor and the increasing demands on tutor time. As Owen (2002) argues it may be time for a radical review of the role of the personal tutor. Students also indicate that they are making use of drop-in study skills support and this is a useful consideration as some universities move towards 'embedded study skills' in the curriculum. The other findings concern the disparity in the provision of student support services on the different campuses of the University and the issues this raises in relation to accessibility of these services to all students as well as the quality of these services in meeting the needs of the students. Finally, students offer some suggestions for improving the nature of induction to the University, including making it more of a process than an 'event'.

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