

Student Services: Effective Approaches to Retaining Students in Higher Education

Full Research Report



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1. Introduction

The student services project: *Effective Approaches to Retaining Students in Higher Education* is a research study which places the provision of student services within a widening participation context, and analyses how such services can best support a more diverse student population to remain in higher education (HE). The project was initiated and funded by the DfES and has been managed by Universities UK via a steering group including representatives from Universities UK, SCOP, the DfES, the HEFCE, the NUS, UKCOSA and AMOSSHE. The steering group circulated an open tender for this project that was subsequently won by the Institute for Access Studies (IAS) at Staffordshire University. The time-frame for the study was mid March-July 2002. The study was limited to England only and boundaries were set to focus on the services provided to students for the period they are attending an HEI. Student services was broadly defined as all services which support students to learn. The following report by the IAS is the first outcome of this study. It is a particularly timely report given the new and challenging phase of widening participation in higher education and the demands this will place on student services.

1.1 Student services, widening participation and student retention

Within higher education policy in England currently three areas of concern relevant to this research can be seen to be driving governmental, and to differing degrees, institutional agendas:

- increasing the number of students participating in higher education;
- widening the diversity of students participating in higher education;
- improving retention rates within higher education.

The goal of increasing participation is primarily linked to economic concerns and the dominance of the relationship between higher levels of education and national competitiveness. Evidence of an

interest in increasing participation is clearly indicated in the consultation document *Partnerships for Progression* (HEFCE 01/73), which supports the Government's target that, by 2010, participation of 18 to 30 year olds in HE reaches 50 percent. Achievement of this target does not directly require institutions to expand the diversity of the student population, but the supply and demand in HE research (HEFCE 01/62) suggests the need in order to increase the number of students participating in higher education, and widening participation, especially to those from lower socio-economic groups. This said, the necessity to recruit more students from traditionally under-represented groups will affect institutions differentially, depending on their existing recruitment profile and institutional mission.

The specific goal of widening participation is also linked to goals of social equality and social cohesion. It is promoted by the HEFCE in a number of ways. Firstly, special initiative funding has been made available for widening participation projects. Secondly, the funding council introduced annual performance indicators in December 1999 (HEFCE 99/66), which attempt to measure the extent to which each HEI is performing in relation to recruiting students from lower socio-economic groups and low participation neighbourhoods. These latter 'postcode indicators' have been used to assist HEIs in recruiting students from those locales with a 'postcode premium' of an additional 10% for these students (the appropriate size of the postcode premium is a topic of discussion following the report of the Education and Employment Select Committee, 2001 and is currently under review - HEFCE Circular 02/22). In addition, in 1999 HEIs were asked to prepare Initial Strategic Statements (HEFCE 99/33), and, building on this process, in 2001 they were asked to prepare a 'Widening Participation Strategy and Action Plan' for the next three years (HEFCE 01/29). Funding incentives to widen participation are likely to be of more significance to post-1992 institutions than more traditional institutions in receipt of higher levels of research-related funding, and this division within the sector is likely to continue.

Student retention is a topic of international concern. The UK has the second highest rate of retention after Japan (McGaw, 2002). The goal of maintaining current high rates of persistence in higher education, and improving them in some institutions, is largely centred on efficiency concerns. The Government has invested heavily in higher education and so is concerned that the returns on this investment are maximised. To facilitate this process, performance indicators of retention and completion have been developed, which are encouraging institutions – especially those with completion rates lower than their benchmarks – to improve their performance in this respect. The performance indicators demonstrate that institutions vary considerably as regards their retention and completion rates. The variation can be attributed to a number of factors, such as entry profile (which includes age, social class, domicile, ethnicity and qualifications), subject mix, and the institution's position in the reputational spectrum. Part of this variation is accommodated in the benchmark figures calculated separately for each institution by the HEFCE, but some demographic data remain outside the capacity of the benchmarking methodology (as does institutional reputation). Overall rates of withdrawal have not changed significantly since 1982, despite the huge increase in admissions (Select Committee on Education and Employment, 2001, para 1.11). In addition, an analysis of data for 1998-99 (HEFCE, 2000) showed that some institutions were performing better than their benchmarks for completion, despite having enrolled substantial numbers of students whose demographic backgrounds tend to correlate with weaker performance (Yorke, 2001).

In 2001 the then Secretary of State for Education stressed the importance of institutional responsibility for student retention to the Select Committee on Education and Employment:

“The evidence shows that there are unacceptable variations in the rate of 'drop-out' which appear to be linked more to the culture and workings of the institution than

to the background or nature of the students recruited” (David Blunkett, then Secretary of State for Education, Select Committee on Education and Employment, 2001, para 18).

Literature on student retention suggests that there is a wide range of individual, social and organisational factors that contribute to early withdrawal. It may however, be more productive, not to say ethical, to examine the influences and roles of the HE sector and HEIs in promoting student success. There are a number of spheres in which the structure of the HE sector, and/or the practices of the specific institution are influential. These include:

- academic practices – curricula, teaching, learning, assessment, academic support;
- social integration – formal and informal interaction with peers;
- student funding arrangements – responsibility for bearing the direct and indirect costs of higher education (i.e. cost of provision and living costs);
- personal support – to provide support in relation to individual personal circumstances.

Student services can have a central role to play in assisting students in relation to academic practices, social integration and funding issues, and providing personal support (see *Action on Access*, forthcoming). Student services alone, however, are not responsible for individual success or institutional retention rates.

The term 'non-traditional students' may be defined in various ways. HEFCE (00/35) indicates the following categories, and prioritises for additional funding full-time undergraduate students from low participation neighbourhoods and students with disabilities:

- young full-time undergraduate entrants from disadvantaged backgrounds (i.e. from geo-demographic groups with lower than average rates of participation);
- students with disabilities;
- mature (21 years and over on entry) undergraduate students;
- part-time undergraduate students.

Other categorisations include:

- first generation entrants;
- students from ethnic minorities and refugees;
- low income students.

Whether a broad or narrow definition of ‘non-traditional’ or ‘widening participation’ students is employed, these students may experience particular difficulties in relation to each of the four spheres identified above, and thus may experience multiple disadvantage not just in terms of entering higher education, but also in terms of retention and success.

1.1.1 Academic practices

Previous educational experience is a significant determinant of future academic performance. Compulsory education helps to determine the future participation of pupils’ learning via educational achievement, and the attitudes to learning which are developed. Students from non-traditional groups are, for a range of reasons, more likely to have had poor previous educational experiences, and thus be less well prepared for higher education (see Reay *et al*, 1998). There is therefore an important role for HEIs to play not just in ‘raising aspirations’ for higher education, but in supporting potential students prior to entry and once they are at the institution to develop academic skills which may not have been as well developed as in traditional students. This problem may be particularly acute for mature students, who, whatever their background, will have not participated in formal education for a number of years. Drawing from the work of Bourdieu (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) it can be argued that both curricula and pedagogy need to be amended to meet the needs of new student cohorts. He concluded that working-class students are less successful not because they were of inferior intelligence but because the curriculum was ‘biased in favour of those things with which middle-class students were already ex-curricularly familiar’ (Robbins, 1993, p153).

The need for curricula and pedagogical developments to support the needs of new student

cohorts are reflected in recent research on institutional strategies to support the success of widening participation students (Thomas & Yorke, 2001). This research found a number of academic practices to be significant, in particular, a sustained commitment to ‘the student experience’ in all its dimensions emerged as a factor of considerable importance. Specific issues relating to academic practice included:

- outreach work to develop academic skills and to promote institutional engagement;
- induction into the expectations of higher education, which tended to be extended beyond the traditional one week period, and covered the first semester or even the whole of the first year;
- prioritising resources for the first year;
- developing diagnostic approaches to inform the provision of learning support;
- curriculum development including the introduction of learning skills, information about student services, employment and careers education and the development of new subject areas into existing programmes to encourage participation by under-represented groups;
- re-introducing personal tutors and creating a more structured and proactive role;
- less emphasis on early summative assessments in favour of formative assessment;
- supportive and developmental ways of dealing with failing students, e.g. revision summer schools, providing students with alternative course of action, such as transfer, not withdrawal;
- staff pedagogical training to meet needs of greater student diversity.

The majority of these areas demonstrates the need for a close working relationship between student services and other parts of HEIs. There are thus significant roles that student services can, and in many cases do, play to support students from non-traditional groups to succeed in higher education, and indeed to improve the performance of all students. These issues are discussed later in this report.

1.1.2 Social integration

Recent empirical research (Thomas, 2002) demonstrated that an aspect of the university and college experience fundamental to the decision of students whether or not to stay in HE is the extent to which they have good friendships and social networks that provide support to overcome difficulties. Similarly, Vincent Tinto (1993) emphasises the need for social integration via both formal and informal activities. The changing nature and circumstances of new student cohorts may hinder the development of social relationships within higher education. For example, many students are engaged in paid employment, which reduces the time available for participation in all forms of social activities. The need for paid employment will be greater amongst students from low income and lower socio-economic groups, than amongst middle-class peers, although the incidence of paid work may be much more widespread. Similarly, the increase in students from the local area, and so who are not domiciled within shared student accommodation decreases opportunities for social interaction. Student services can play a role in helping students to locate each other (e.g. mature students, international students etc), by providing social spaces, by offering more flexible and affordable accommodation options and by compensating for the informal support usually provided by networks of friends.

1.1.3 Student financial issues

There is much national (e.g. Callender, 2001; Callender & Kemp, 2000) and institutional research (Dodgson & Bolam 2002; Knowles, 2000) that highlights the impact of the changed funding arrangements on students from lower socio-economic groups, and certain ethnic minority groups. Research by the Institute for Access Studies noted four key ways in which financial pressures impact on students:

1. absolute lack of money, debt and fear of debt;
2. comparative lack of money in relation to previous income levels, and peers not attending HE;
3. part-time employment;

4. transition from benefits to student finance arrangements.

Previous research (Thomas & Yorke, 2001) identified a number of ways in which institutions can support students to overcome or deal with these financial pressures.

1. Providing direct financial support via the administering of national and institutional bursary schemes.
2. Providing workshops and advising them about benefits to enable students to both manage their money more effectively, and to accept and deal with debt.
3. Assisting students to secure part-time employment, either within the institution, or externally. This not only offers direct assistance, but provides a message that the institution is aware of the need for part-time employment. In addition the institution can play a role in regulating the quality of the employment opportunity and limiting the number of hours worked.

Financial support of these types is usually a function of student services (or the Careers Service).

1.1.4 Personal support

The provision of support in relation to individual personal circumstances is perhaps the traditional arena in which student services have operated. The emphasis on widening participation means that a growing number of students face difficulties, whether that is stress caused by financial hardship or other personal circumstances (McMinn, 2002), or assistance with issues such as disability or childcare. There is evidence of a growing need for more diverse services, such as employment support for minority student groups (e.g. ethnic groups, mature students, disabled students etc.). Greater diversity entails support for a broader range of lifestyles, cultural and religious practices.

1.1.5 The strategic role of student services

To enable student services to contribute to improving retention, their contribution must be

recognised. This requires involving student services in institutional strategic planning, providing appropriate structures and systems for disseminating learning and experiences from student services to other members of academic and non-academic staff, equal prioritising of student support with other institutional activities (e.g. research and learning and teaching) in terms of human and financial resources and being realistic about the contribution of student services to this agenda. Giving student services a higher strategic priority, however, is not without difficulties as it is resource intensive and time consuming for student services staff and can reduce time available for direct work supporting students.

Student services have a central role to play by providing academic, social, financial and personal support to students and potential entrants to enable them to succeed in higher education. The issue of student retention however is complex, there are different institutional challenges, and there is not a formula for success, nor a simple linear relationship between the quality of student services and an institution's retention and completion rates. This makes it difficult to assess the contribution of student services to improving retention within an institution¹, and indeed the cost of this contribution. Students require support and an appropriate institutional culture (Thomas, 2002, Thomas & Yorke, 2001) throughout their engagement with higher education, and not just from student services when they have a specific problem. Undoubtedly student services are able to contribute and influence the development of an inclusive institutional culture, but they alone are not responsible for it. Furthermore, student services contribute not only to retaining students in HE, but allowing students to improve their performance, and even assisting students to make positive choices about deferral or withdrawal.

2. Aims and objectives

The overall aim of this research was to examine the ways in which institutions, and in particular student services, can support diverse students to remain in higher education in order to achieve educational success. This research complements other work on widening participation and retention e.g. Action on Access work and other research conducted by the Institute for Access Studies.

The research aimed to answer the following research questions:

- In what ways is a more diverse student population supported in both England and other mass systems?
- What research has already been undertaken and what can be learnt from this?
- What are the key issues of concern for the higher education sector in England in relation to supporting a more diverse student population?
- How will student support systems need to develop in the foreseeable future and what are the implications of this?
- How can these services be targeted at and rendered more accessible to students?
- How can effective policies, services, and special initiatives with respect to supporting different under-represented groups, be identified and shared?
- How can the expertise of student services professionals be accessed and disseminated across the sector?
- How can staff (academic, non-academic and support staff) be supported and developed to provide more effective student services?
- How can institutions be encouraged and assisted to develop a strategic approach to supporting student diversity?

The tender outlined four objectives for the research:

1. To review literature, reports and data from England and other countries with a mass HE system, on student services and supporting a more diverse student population.

2. To consult with the HE sector in two phases on the issues surrounding support for a more diverse student population, and the ways in which research outcomes can be of maximum benefit to the sector.
3. To produce ten case studies of good practice (policies, services or special initiatives) and general guidance for improving institutional support for a more diverse student population.
4. To produce a research report for the steering committee, including recommendations for HEIs, the sector as a whole and other stakeholders.

The following section critically reflects on the methodology chosen to answer these research questions and meet these objectives.

3. Methodology

3.1 Role of the research team

The IAS team was chosen for its research skill and international expertise in the field of widening participation and retention. This enabled them to analyse the role of student services in promoting the overall success of diverse students, within a widening participation context. The report is addressed to all concerned with student success, including those with the most senior decision-making responsibility. Its audience is not confined to the student services profession. However, the research team was highly mindful of the need to actively consult professionals and involve them in the process, drawing on their expert knowledge. This was accomplished in a variety of ways: via the steering group, via a survey/open invitation to participate and most significantly through a participative conference. Consultation was also conducted with the sector via three presentations at both national and international conferences.

3.2 Literature search

The research was informed by an extensive literature search of published and grey literature (e.g. CVCP, 1998, 2000; Harris, 2001; Dodgson & Bolam, 2002). This included international examples and benefited from the International Retention Research Network, a research partnership of ten countries, co-ordinated by the IAS. The literature search provided the team with a grounding in the field and an understanding of some of the key issues and debates. It has been used to help develop the framework for good practice which is elaborated in Section 4.

3.3 Survey

The research was initiated with an open invitation to the sector to participate via a survey (see Appendix 1) which was circulated to 93 universities and 37 colleges of higher education, using addresses provided by Universities UK and SCOP. It was also circulated to professional associations via the steering group and via the NIACE lifelong learning email discussion list, and was available from the IAS website. The survey sought the views

of the sector on the priorities and future development of student services and the results are analysed in Section 5 of this report. The design of the survey raises certain issues. The term student services can in itself be considered problematic, as it is not always used consistently. Similarly, the decision to leave the boundaries of student services open to self-definition, rather than indicating them prescriptively, was felt by some practitioners to be a limitation of the research. However, some unifying term was necessary, and although some guidance was given, the definition had to be open in order to include the wide range of services provided to support students. The form also asked institutions to nominate examples of good practice and provide some base-line data, which might be followed up in a case study. 56 universities and 15 HECs replied, giving a response rate of approximately 60% and 40% respectively. Given the three week deadline (including Easter) and the heavy workload of respondents, this is considered a very positive response. It is interesting to note that the invitation also received a number of responses from outside England, one from Northern Ireland, one from Wales, and five from Scotland, who strongly felt they should be included in the study. Because of the boundaries dictated by project funding, these parties were advised that they could not be considered as case studies, but this is an important issue which should be addressed by the relevant funding councils, and is also an indicator of the high level of interest in the survey. We have drawn on examples of good practice from outside England in the remainder of the report (i.e. excluding the institutional case studies).

3.4 Case studies

The next important phase of the research was the production of ten qualitatively-oriented case studies which serve as positive examples of some of the good practice which exists within the student services sector. Ten case studies were chosen from the 106 nominations received, some institutions having put forward more than one. This was not a competition to find 'winners' and these case studies are not prescriptive models, rather illustrative examples. This was not intended to be a statistically

representative sample and it is not suggested that all student services could or should follow these examples, rather that they indicate some good practice approaches to key issues within student support. The choice of case studies was objective rather than random, in order to give as fair and as comprehensive a picture as possible within the limits of the study. The nominations were rigorously scrutinised according to a set of criteria of good practice, chosen from the literature (see Section 4).

Although the case studies cannot be replicated wholesale the criteria by which they were chosen are generalisable across the sector and have been developed to facilitate a strategic approach to good practice. Section 4 of this report outlines the criteria and demonstrates how and why the IAS have generated them from the literature in developing a framework for good practice. Such criteria were chosen as a means of selection, rather than the performance indicators on retention, because those indicators are too gross to pinpoint the value added by student services, and because student services cannot by themselves be held accountable for retention. Moreover performance indicators may fluctuate, whilst criteria of good practice can provide a more solid basis for future sustainable development to support student retention. Innovation was not prioritised as a separate criteria, since it was good practice rather than novelty which the research tender emphasised: however the criteria themselves imply an innovative and responsive approach.

The process was controlled by independent selection by two members of the research team, who reached a high level of consistency and consensus in their choice. A second process of selection then occurred, when a final set of case studies were chosen to cover a range of key themes integral to supporting a diverse student population. These were: disability, ethnic minority students, peer support, mature students, learning skills, mental well-being and academic integration. In addition, three examples of an integrated and joined up student services were chosen. Although not a new concept, this growing trend within

student services was of particular interest to the steering group. Geographical and institutional diversity were addressed, but it was considered important to reflect where strengths lay in the sector, rather than skewing the sample to equally represent all types of institution. Other factors were also instrumental, for example, the response rate was lower from colleges of higher education and overall, nominations tended to focus on dyslexia, which the research did not have the scope to include as a separate theme.

It is important to stress that a large number of case studies not finally included in this report still appear to meet the criteria for good practice used in selection. In fact one of the outcomes of the research is a large data set of good practice which the IAS have suggested, given financial support, could be made widely available in a user friendly form, such as a directory.

Case studies were conducted by experienced members of the research team. The team determined a range of participants they wished to interview, including: frontline staff, senior management, heads of student services, academic staff, members of steering groups and students themselves. This was then negotiated and arranged with the institutional contact. Researchers then visited the institution, conducted interviews and focus groups and collected documentary evidence. The co-operation of student services staff was vital and their time effort and willingness to participate must be recognised and valued. Generally researchers were able to meet the participants they had targeted, but in a small number of case studies students were not available, mostly because of the timing of the research close to exams. In these cases other evidence of positive student response to the service was sought via monitoring data. The value of case studies is that they provide an embodied account, rather than an abstracted 'one size fits all' model. Thus the research was able to address 'the complex interweaving of threads which make up student support and student success', (Workshop member, participative conference). However, it should be noted that there

were significant limitations to the information available to researchers in some case studies. Some did not have a calculation of the cost of their service as many student services do not actually operate on an activity-based costing mapped against retention. The issue of how monitoring and evaluation might be improved is addressed in Section 7.7 of this report. Case study data has been used in two forms in the report: firstly in brief descriptive accounts of each case study, and secondly to inform the analysis in Section 7.

3.5 Participative conference

An important feature of the research methodology was building in a level of consultation and participation. This opened the research up to scrutiny; a painful but ultimately invaluable process. Once the survey and case studies had been completed a participative conference was organised at Staffordshire University. At the request of the DfES, attendance was by invitation only and nominees were provided by Universities UK, SCOP, the DfES and the steering group. Case study participants were also invited by the research team. A total of 36 people attended the conference. A presentation on the development of the research to date was followed by workshops on key themes. Rather than a congratulatory presentation of the case studies themselves, the team attempted to draw from their research the key issues which it had revealed, presenting them for reflection and discussion. In this way the team confirmed that they were not using the case studies as narrow prescriptors for success. They sought to discover whether the conclusions they were reaching had legitimacy in the sector, and asked professionals to identify key issues they might have missed. Discussion was full and frank, particularly around the issue of methodology; substantial areas of agreement were found, but there were also robust challenges and critical perspectives, which the research team have taken on board and used in the production of this report. The conference also addressed the issue of dissemination; the consensus being that this was a crucial report and must be publicly launched and disseminated as widely as possible.

3.6 Limitations of the research methodology

The research had two significant structural limitations: time scale and funding, and these have clearly impacted on its methodology. Covering the large and complex issue of student support within such a short time frame severely limited the scope of the research, despite the ability of the team to keep to a tight timetable and their willingness to work many extra hours, beyond the call of the contract. Similarly the funding for this research was on a small scale, which, amongst other factors, has limited the numbers of case studies and the time that could be spent on each one. These limitations of time and resources have been of real concern to the professional student services community.

The research team have maximised the resources and types of data available to them by adopting a mix of methods and by building consultation into the methodology. However, there have been concerns from practitioners that the short-time frame and the case study process mean that many instances of good practice will not be fully reflected in the report. Some of these concerns could be alleviated by the production of a directory of practice. The concern that the case study examples will be used as a 'top ten' of student services is a real one within the sector. Although this report has clearly explained the role of the case studies as examples not prescriptions, this problem might have been alleviated by better explication of the case study approach by the research team at an early stage. The value of the participative conference is that this problem was flagged up and could then be addressed. However, it is important to acknowledge that in any such research project, professionals will seek to have their work recognised, and when choices have to be made, disappointments are inevitable. Finally, this research should be viewed as the 'beginning' and not the 'last word' on student services, widening participation and retention.

4. Developing a framework for good practice: a literature analysis

In order to guide this research study, a wide-ranging review of literature associated with good practice in widening participation, retention, student services and student success was undertaken. It included both published and unpublished material. At present there is limited information that directly links student services with retention but a growing body of work is emerging. In addition, a number of reports have been published recently that focus on a specific student service e.g. careers and counselling, and these have wider applicability. From the literature, ten criteria for good practice were generated. These should not come as any great surprise to the sector as their importance has already been highlighted in other studies identifying good practice.

4.1 Identifying and consulting with the target group

A key theme emerging from research into widening participation is the importance of careful targeting (CVCP, 1998 and Universities UK, 2002). Woodrow (2001) stressed accurate targeting as an essential component of any good practice into widening access, and highlighted the problems of projects that adopted a 'catch all' approach. Such approaches, she argued, ignore the historical tendency for already privileged groups to benefit from opportunities not intended for them. Similarly, Thomas (2001) concluded that a 'blanket approach (to widening participation) will widen, not narrow, the persistent social class participation gap'. A similar problem could emerge in student services if they do not clearly identify and consult with the target group.

The importance of targeting specific groups is further confirmed by evidence suggesting that those who are most in need of support are the least likely to seek it out. In his review of the careers service, Harris (2001) identified mature students and students from lower socio-economic groups as the least likely groups to use the careers service, and if they did, it

was often too late to give them the maximum benefit. Research continues to indicate that these students do less well in the labour market than their peers. Current work by the Centre for Higher Education Research Information (CHERI) (2002) stresses that socio-economic background, ethnic background and age all have direct and indirect effects on employment opportunities.

The reasons why students might not access support are multiple and will depend on individual circumstances. For example, Dodgson and Bolam (2002) summarised various research projects which found that mature students, who may experience feelings of guilt in trying to achieve a balance between work and home commitments, often have low confidence which will prevent them seeking support. They may also feel that they should be coping better and/or that such support is not intended for them. Feelings of embarrassment can prevent people from asking for advice (Owen, 2002). A recent report from the National Audit Office (NAO) (2002) stressed that students may also fear being stigmatised if they need support. This might especially be the case with regard to particular services, for example, mental health support: 'Students with mental health difficulties are often very reluctant to disclose their experiences; they may be concerned about the reactions of others and anxious about jeopardising their future academic and employment careers' (CVCP, 2000: p20).

Another common finding is that students are often not aware of the services available. As Dodgson and Bolam (2002, p11) asserted 'student services must become more up-front and pro-active in supporting and meeting the needs of all students, no matter what their background and circumstances'. By being pro-active services can not only raise awareness and become transparent to students, but they can also challenge the assumption that they only exist for students with 'problems'. Dodgson and Bolam highlighted a number of ways in which universities in the North East were being pro-active; these included the use of diagnostic testing and providing study skills workshops.

Student feedback is highlighted throughout the literature as a general principle of good practice and as an important element of the monitoring and evaluation process.

"It is advisable to consult the target audience on the content, format and design of information and training materials. For example where material is devised specifically for students, the involvement of student representatives can be helpful in its production, ensuring that the language is appropriate and key messages are accessible to that group" (CVCP, 2000, p24).

4.2 Use by the target group

To be well used by the target group student services must be well-publicised and user-friendly. Students must have confidence in the services and be able to trust them in matters such as confidentiality. Ozga and Sukhnandan (1997), in their research on non-completion, found that students who choose to withdraw tend not to have sought professional help before doing so. Often this was not because they were unaware that services existed, but that they lacked understanding of their specific roles and therefore reverted to informal and often inadequate sources of support. They also found differences between what students saw as the point of intervention and staff saw as the point of departure. Ozga and Sukhnandan recommended that institutions needed to improve the way they promoted student support services and suggested institutions make available a central help desk for onward referral. The challenge for HEIs is to make information available, but at the same time to not bombard students and overwhelm them. Owen (2002) found that students would appreciate some sort of information when they needed it. A wealth of information at the outset, for example, via induction is often forgotten a few months in.

The problems with the current student financial support system illustrates the importance of providing students with user-friendly support services. Criticised for being complex, confusing and bureaucratic (Dodgson & Bolam, 2002), the

current system involves numerous different schemes. The DfES is aware of the need for a more streamlined and simpler system of financial support and the system is currently under review. As Baroness Warwick (2002) argued in the Lords Debate on the Government review of student finance, 'any new scheme must be easily understood, well publicised and easy to access'.

4.3 Addressing issues of diversity and equality

Students are entering higher education from an increasingly wide range of backgrounds and this is set to continue as widening participation remains a high priority. The numbers of mature students, international students, disabled students and ethnic minority students have all continued to rise. In 2001, Universities UK highlighted a five-fold increase in the number of young people entering HE in the last twenty years. The way in which students are studying is also changing with a move to more flexible modes of study: 'Students may study in their workplace, home, library, college, as well or instead of on-campus' (Harris, 2001). All this has had, and continues to have, implications for student services.

Student services need to meet the needs of all students, but with recognition that certain groups of students will have greater needs than others. Adams (2001) and McGivney (1996) have looked at the particular needs of disabled students and mature students respectively, and both have called for a need for greater flexibility. McGivney argues that HEIs 'need to recognise the previous experience, commitments and concerns of adult students...and need to recognise the specific difficulties faced by specific groups who lack recent educational experience or who find themselves in a minority' (1996, p131). Similarly, Adams (2001) stresses the need for 'a diverse approach to teaching and learning with scope for flexibility to take account of the circumstances specific to individual disabled students' (p17).

Dodgson and Bolam (2002) highlighted specialisation and increasing specificity in student

services as one of the common themes in the six universities in the North East. They identified the increasing development of specific student retention strategies and programmes, and special induction events and activities for specific groups e.g. mature student open days. The importance of specialist support and facilities for mature students has been reiterated by McGivney (1996). Although there are difficulties in generalising the needs of particular students (Haque, 2001) and a danger of unfounded assumptions about the needs of student groups, there is evidence of common issues, for example, the reasons why mature students drop-out are notably different to those of younger students (Ozga & Sukhmandan, 1997).

There is growing recognition in the sector that services have to acknowledge the specific demands of different groups (McMinn, 2002), and increasingly, of the importance of a personalised approach to student support. The Select Committee on Employment and Education (2001) put this forward as the most effective method of reducing non-continuation, and recent literature adds support to this. Action on Access (2002), for example, in their work on student success argue that 'the concept of an ideal student in itself is difficult to sustain. Students are highly diverse and rather than examining whether an institution's culture 'fits' the abstract student, it is perhaps more appropriate for institutions to examine how person centred and flexible they are able to be'.

4.4 Supporting students across the lifecycle

The adoption of the student lifecycle approach has proved to have efficacy in the way some institutions think about student retention and in the way research relating to retention issues is being conducted. The student lifecycle approach has the following main stages: pre-entry advice and guidance, admissions and induction, first term/semester, moving through the course and employment/progression. This approach benefits students in that it offers them a comprehensive and consistent form of provision: 'The lifecycle approach enables institutions to develop their

provision of support in line with individual student need, rather than institutional practice' (Action on Access, 2002).

Increasingly, and following trends in the USA and Australia, more support is being offered at the pre-entry stage and similarly the first semester is seen as crucial. As the NAO report (2002) states, some institutions have tried to assist the transition to HE by adjusting the first year. More time is being given over to the development of core skills and the specific discipline itself is simply introduced. However, the challenge seems to be in achieving a balance, so that all students, irrespective of their previous educational experiences are stimulated. Otherwise, this approach runs the danger of reversing its intention and causing some (other) students to withdraw.

Although it is widely recognised that the first semester/year must be prioritised, support needs to be available throughout the whole HE experience and beyond. There is some concern that overly concentrating on the first year is problematic; as Johnston (2001) argues, 'in the long run it may (and does) cause retention problems later on if the revamped educational experience in the first year fails to prepare students for what comes next'. Dodgson and Bolam (2002) reiterate the importance of students having access to high levels of continuous support, as does McGivney (1996) who asserts that student experiences change as a programme proceeds. The role of the personal tutor may be particularly significant here and has been explored in depth by Owen (2002) who argues that 'students must have a reliable system, which ensures they are known, 'tracked' and supported throughout their university careers' (p7).

Traditionally a student's contact with the careers service has been towards the end of their course. However, the importance of early contact has been stressed by both the Harris Report (2001), and the more recent report by Universities UK and the CSU (2002) '*Enhancing Employability: Recognising Diversity*'. The recommendation put forward by Harris was that 'all students (including

those discontinuing their studies) should be able to use all the services offered by the careers service at the institution where they were enrolled, for at least two years after they have left the institution'.

4.5 Monitoring procedures

Stressing the importance of monitoring for widening participation projects, Woodrow (2001) argues that its purpose is two-fold. 'Monitoring is important to make sure firstly that projects are getting it right, and to secondly *demonstrate* that they're getting it right' (p8, original emphasis). Monitoring offers the potential for improvement and is necessary for influencing future policy decisions and ultimately bringing about change. As Woodrow and Yorke argue, 'tracking of students, and monitoring and evaluation...are essential components of a sectoral strategy. The results of monitoring and evaluation will provide important inputs to further policy developments' (Universities UK, 2002, p171). Effective monitoring and tracking of students can also lead to more pro-active support (Dodgson & Bolam, 2002).

Despite its importance, the monitoring of widening participation and retention is underdeveloped and the reasons for this are varied. As Woodrow and Yorke (Universities UK, 2002, p5) explain, 'some institutions are wary of labelling their students as having entered under the banner of widening participation, on the grounds that this might stigmatise them'. They also found that some project workers have become increasingly sceptical of tracking processes because of the increase in cause and effect factors outside of their control. Johnston (2001) also highlights the secrecy within which much of the work on retention is undertaken: 'Very few institutions admit publicly to any systematic retention difficulties, useful information is therefore not shared because of the concerns that the information might be used as a stick to beat the institution with. There is very little guidance on (or hard evidence of) strategies are likely to be successful'.

Monitoring, evaluation and research all have a key role to play, and this is explored in a later section of this report (see Section no 7.7).

4.6 Impact on student success

‘It is clear that HEIs are keen to support their students, but less than half are relating the work being done to analysis of success. Taking a more strategic and research driven view is vital if we are to understand how best to support students to succeed’ (Action on Access, 2002).

The literature indicates that being able to measure student success and the contribution made by student services is a crucial but neglected area. As the monitoring procedures section has indicated, it is difficult for the published literature to analyse this relationship, due to a lack of data. What information is available, tends to be at an institutional level, in the form of grey literature, which is not generally shared more widely across the sector. For example, internal reports from Greenwich University indicate that counselling has a positive effect on retention.

However, some data is now starting to emerge which highlights the positive impact of student services and other retention initiatives on student success. For example, considerable work has been undertaken at Napier University where their student retention project is now in its eighth year. The project focuses on detailed retention-related research including the publication of yearly student retention statistics, student support initiatives and staff development activity. Napier has realised measurable improvements in student performance – for example, the proportion of first year students passing all their modules has risen by 15% since 1995/6 (see Johnston, 2001 and 2002). A recent report by McMinn (2002), examining the relationship between counselling provision and student retention, identified a range of studies that have been undertaken to ascertain the factors and relationships determining the qualitative nature of the student experience whilst in HE. Although largely institutional in nature, many of these studies offer evidence of an important connection between the two.

Clearly the gathering of evidence of success is highly important and various strategies for doing so are addressed later in the report.

4.7 Staff development

Staff development is seen as central to the success of any support service and increasingly the focus has been on an institution-wide development. For example, as addressed by CVCP (CVCP, 2000, p15) in the *Guidelines on student mental health*:

‘Given the wide range of contexts within which staff may come into contact with students with mental health problems, a whole institution approach is required’.

At present, work on staff development in relation to widening participation and retention is limited, however this is starting to be addressed as the HEFCE continue to promote the need for more ‘joined up’ thinking. Srivastava (2002) details one HEFCE-funded project commissioned to investigate activities and good practice in relation to staff development and retention and puts forward the following key points:

- academic staff are central at all stages of a student’s higher education experience: through teaching, learning, assessment and support. The achievement of the goal of widening participation and retention is dependent upon policies and practices being firmly embedded through and within staff development and training;
- the need to respond to diversity means that traditional centralised human resource management approaches need to be supplemented by more devolved, departmental and academic group-based responsibility;
- reflection on practice, involvement and ownership of change are more likely to secure staff commitment and avoid resistance to, and avoidance of, change.

Good practice in staff development includes:

- the identification of staff professional needs relating to diversity;

- provision of staff development for academic staff to include diversity and widening participation issues;
- all staff being considered in widening participation strategies;
- staff being asked for feedback of their experiences in widening participation;
- recognition of informal staff development processes such as sharing experiences and staff discussion.

Above all staff need to be aware of the different social, cultural and academic backgrounds of students, accept and respect them and develop an inclusive model of teaching, learning and assessment (Thomas, 2002).

4.8 Links within the institution

‘The key to improving retention rates is ensuring a balanced and holistic approach’ (Johnston, 2001).

The structure of higher education is changing and as such it is no longer possible to treat support services as an add-on extra, as something apart from the main institution. Instead, with widening participation and retention, it is important to build up strong working relations across the institution, with other student services and administration, academic departments, teaching and learning strategies, staff development and induction, widening participation activities and the Students' Union, to create a strategic approach (e.g. Thomas, 2001). Developing such relationships however is not unproblematic. For example, Holliday (1998), discussing the importance of internationalising the Students' Union, highlights the often grey area for students of who provides services: institutions or the union.

The establishing of good links with academic departments is also difficult, and literature continues to stress the resistance of some academics to see retention as a matter for their concern. ‘There is a trend for academics in particular to see student support as separate from good teaching, good research and generally being ‘kind’ to students’ (Action on Access, 2002). Yet research continues

to highlight the central position of the academic tutor as ‘the mainstay of student support’ (Dodgson & Bolam, 2002, p30). McGivney (1996), Dodgson and Bolam found that a common theme in the universities in the North East was the important role and contribution of the personal tutor. 69% of the students they interviewed had sought advice and support from their tutor. Despite this, however, they concluded that, at present, ‘success and effectiveness of the system is still very much dependant upon the attitudes of the individual staff and students that are involved’ (p52). Consideration needs to be given to how the system can be made more effective and responsive. This point is supported by the NAO report (2002) which found that although all institutions allocate personal tutors, there is wide variation in how – and how well – it works. Thomas and Yorke (2001) found that in HEIs that were successfully widening participation and improving retention there was a move towards the reintroduction of a more structured and proactive personal tutorial system.

Owen (2002) has focused on the growing use of the ‘curriculum model’, a model which is exemplified by the course known as University 101 in the United States. This approach attempts to provide support through the actual courses which students follow; learning skills, information about the HEI and the allocation of a personal tutor are incorporated into an accredited course/module. Such a model helps to overcome many of the problems associated with a more traditional one-to-one approach to pastoral care which, in a mass university, she argues ‘works only at a huge cost in terms of people-hours and stress’ (p20). The curriculum model approach is more structured, less dependent on the work schedule or goodwill of individual members of staff and offers a way of affirming and demonstrating the institutions commitment to student support.

4.9 Links with external agencies

‘HEIs should not be regarded as therapeutic communities in their own right, but as partners with other agencies in the referral of students with significant support needs to appropriate services’ (AMOSSHE, 2001, p9).

With growing demands on student services, emphasis is being placed on the importance of partnership, not only within institutions but with external agencies too. Developing effective partnerships can bring many benefits: it can prove very cost-effective and avoid the duplication of services which is very important when there are limited resources available. More importantly, however, it can provide seamless provision for students.

For some student services, effective communication with specialist professionals is essential in being able to offer a student in need the most comprehensive support. Working with external agencies has been particularly strongly promoted in the area of mental health support. 'The development of partnerships between HEIs and external agencies is essential. By building up relationships with external agencies, cross referrals can be facilitated and increased dialogue can help institutions develop their expertise. In return, external organisations can gain some understanding of institutional policies and procedures' (CVCP, 2000, p22). To assist the development of external relations, the CVCP recommended a central contact point for communication.

4.10 Cost effectiveness

'There is a history of funded initiatives that produce good results during the funding period, but which, despite good intentions, fail to be embedded in institutions' (Universities UK and CSU, 2002: p40).

The problems of short-term funding in relation to widening participation and retention are well documented. Thomas (2001) argues that a key aspect of widening participation sustainability is financial sustainability, and regarding retention, successful work at Napier University highlights that efforts to improve retention are necessarily long-term. 'Any cycle of research, action and evaluation will take a minimum of three years, more likely four or five years' (Johnston, 2001).

Until very recently, the actual costs of strategies to widen participation and retention were largely unknown. As Woodrow and Yorke explain, 'identification of costs tends to be problematic on two

counts. First, what counts as widening participation and/or what counts as expenditure on it is unclear, and second availability of data is limited/taboo' (Universities UK, 2002, p158). However, comments from the student services sector that there is inadequate funding to continue to meet the challenges of growing diversity and support gained considerable weight by findings of a short research exercise, commissioned jointly by Universities UK and HEFCE (2002) to establish the costs of widening participation. The research concluded that students from non-traditional backgrounds are significantly more expensive to recruit, retain and progress through their HE careers than the 'traditional' norm', and that at present, HEIs are subsidising their commitment to supporting the Government's agenda on widening participation from other income and activities. The research called for the cost premium attached to widening participation students to be changed to 35% rather than the 10% currently funded by HEFCE. (This is currently under review - see HEFCE Circular 02/22).

It is not only financial resources but human resources that are important too. Literature identifies the escalating demands on staff time: declining staff, student ratios, the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), a comparative lack of reward for developing excellence in teaching, difficulty in recruiting and retaining new staff and increased effort required for internal and external quality audits. The Select Committee on Education and Employment (2001) examined these issues in depth and found:

- institutions with the highest rates of withdrawal also had the highest staff: student ratios, and the lowest income per student;
- short-term contracts of staff had led to fewer avenues of advice and support for students;
- the availability of continuing, consistent and caring academic and personal advice from lecturers and tutors can help determine whether a student continues or terminates his or her studies.

These ten criteria were applied to the nominations for good practice to select the case studies. They were then used to draw up the interview questions for the case study visits. The case studies themselves are presented under these criteria in Section 6.

5. Findings of the research

5.1 The views of the student services sector

- This section of the report is drawn from responses to Part One of the pro forma distributed to all HEIs in England. The section is sub-divided into a number of issues raised by respondents relating to:
- the changing role of student services;
- resource implications;
- staff needs;
- diversity of student need;
- incentives for HEIs to deliver high quality student services;
- disincentives;
- using the research project.

5.1.1 The changing role of student services

It was felt that student services have traditionally been seen as a 'reactive' support department; inherently a 'good' thing and there to support the academic experience for students. This is frequently described as 'fire fighting' rather than a pro-active approach. However, government policy in the form of new legislation and the widening participation agenda and an increasing consumer orientation on the part of students and their parents, is resulting in an increased, and changing demand on student support services. Many respondents feel that student services are being encouraged to take a wider role. Similarly students (and their parents) are making more informed choices in relation to HE and the quality of the student experience is becoming increasingly important. Student support could therefore 'tip the balance' in terms of institutional choice. Student services are seen as vital to students and the HE community in general, providing a value added element:

"I believe that the role of student services is in a process of transition from a reactive, welfare orientated service for institutions to a pro-active developmental service that is fundamental to the work of the HEI as a

whole, in particular with regard to recruitment, retention and completion, the employability of students and to the overall quality of the student experience. For many years the role of student services has been just outside the core business of the institution. I believe that has now changed and that with the increasing professionalisation of all constituent areas of student services, such a department has a great deal more to offer an HEI than supporting students with problems" (Head of Student Support Services).

Perceptions of the role of student services are felt to have changed. Increasingly services are 'a port of first call', involved in supporting all students rather than being perceived as a last resort for students with 'problems'. While the need to change and develop in the face of increased diversity is acknowledged, this is coupled with the need to change staff attitudes more widely because, regardless of how effectively student support is centralised, their departments only account for a small proportion of the contacts students have with their HEI. The Quality Assurance Agency's (QAA) subject review system, which has a student support and guidance aspect was said to have put student services 'on the map' and gave them a more professional role as student support is crucial to subject area assessments. A key change therefore may be that student services staff could be less focused on remedial work with problem students and increasingly concerned with supporting other staff in managing student issues. In addition, the need to adopt an holistic approach to the student lifecycle was frequently mentioned by respondents, for example in terms of increased collaboration with the careers service to increase student employability. Similarly, the need for increased pro-active support and outreach work to raise awareness of what is available:

"Retention is a continuum, which starts with the initial enquiry, and it is from this point onwards student services should be offering guidance" (Head of Student Services).

A number of respondents feel that the development of an HEI sense of 'community' is one way forward with increased collaboration with the Students' Union and accommodation services. Similarly other respondents highlight a need for closer contact with external voluntary groups and the development of partnerships with specialist agencies. The benefits of this are noted by one head of student services:

"This both increases the potential influence of student services in institutional fora and leads to a greater focus on the department's activities. This greater scrutiny may lead to critical evaluation of long held beliefs and practices".

The link between student support and teaching and learning strategies is seen as 'the heart of the issue' by the majority of respondents. Integration into teaching and learning and the embedding of inclusive practice into academic departments is clearly seen by many as the way forward for student services. Examples of issues raised are the introduction of new and varied methods of teaching to support more effective learning, and more varied means of assessment which reward success in a wider context.

5.1.2 Resource implications

Funding allocation is at the discretion of the HEIs themselves; currently there are no sector benchmarks for resourcing and student services have to obtain funding from block grants. Improving practice and embedding activities within the main strategic structure requires resources, which have to be ring-fenced from already small budgets. Furthermore, resources have to be found for staff development and the expansion of activities. This is expressed by one head of student services:

"... as the needs of a diverse student body grow more complex, the pressures on student services staff increase. We have to make hard decisions about what we can and cannot provide in the light of institutional priorities and concerns".

Resource issues are very much determined by context; for example variance relates to the nature of the student body and specific institutional issues. However it is considered "essential for all HEIs to resource their student support services at a level commensurate with the demands upon them and ensure core provision everywhere" (Director of Student Services). At the very least HEIs ought to ensure monies, such as provided through Disability Funding premium go to disability support for which they are intended. However, it is also felt that financing should go beyond this, for example there is a need for additional resources in terms of staffing. A number of HEIs have, as a result of funding issues, adopted a strategy of developing part-time and term-time staffing. As the demand for additional flexible delivery has risen (e.g. evening staffing to give greater accessibility) they are now having to reassess this strategy, incurring additional staffing costs. A rise in demand for online access is anticipated and additional resources are said to be needed to improve accessibility via the web and other electronic information systems. In addition, student services staff will need to commit more time to the development of other staff within the university, whilst still supporting those students who require more specialised assistance.

This "squeezing of resources year on year makes responding to new initiatives increasingly difficult" (Senior Assistant Registrar) and some HEIs face a choice between recruiting more staff or reducing activity which is not seen as absolutely core. Other respondents raise the issue of providing comparable services to students in partner colleges and what is regarded by many as a key factor in terms of resource allocation; the location and suitability of accommodation. So for example, one small specialist institution describes how a focus on financial support and pastoral care has shifted as their HEI tries to meet the needs of students entering as a result of the widening participation agenda. In a shift of emphasis towards more learning support the HEI has had to employ more staff, increase the hours of existing staff to extend activities and give additional staff training

particularly in terms of disability awareness and mental well-being issues. Specialist appointments have been made in relation to student counselling, study skills, dyslexia, debt counselling and international students. This has incurred costs in terms of salaries and accommodation, and is a key issue in relation to the amount of additional resources that can be made available.

5.1.3 Staff needs

It is widely acknowledged that increased student diversity represents a challenge for all staff and needs a strong commitment to supporting and developing staff across the institution. Issues raised focused on three main areas: the need to develop and deliver effective programmes for all staff; ensuring participation in staff development; and support for student services staff.

- **Development for all staff**

Respondents highlight ongoing staff development for student services staff in terms of legislative requirements. A number of respondents feel there is a shortage of staff suitably trained in developing and piloting new initiatives, indicating a need for a national training initiative in project management. In addition staff development is also required for non-student services staff to raise basic awareness of issues and provision within their own department to facilitate referral. This relates primarily to training for academic staff in understanding and responding to diversity. Very few respondents refer to training specifically for other non-academic staff such as hospitality staff and wardens for example. In terms of more generic staff development, the issue of developing teamwork is also raised.

- **Participation in staff development**

Ensuring participation in staff development is seen as a key factor. More creative and innovative approaches to staff development are needed to encourage attendance. However, time is a major issue; many academic staff members feel they have no time to attend training sessions, to the detriment of student support. The following comment by a manager of student

services reflects a dominant concern:

“Academic colleagues would also state that the change in the student profile has increased the pressure on their time and skills in order to support vulnerable students. Added to this, the pressure of research, teaching and other departmental commitments, personal tutors are frustrated that they do not have the time to see all their students and support them in an appropriate manner. This is problematic as tutors are vital people in spotting students in difficulty and referring them on to appropriate support”.

- **Support for staff**

Two main issues are raised in relation to support for staff. Firstly, much of the work carried out by staff involved in supporting students is emotionally demanding. A second, and related issue, is the professional standing and value attached to support staff. A number of respondents feel that student services staff are seen as inferior to academic staff within the institution. Consequently much of the work they do is seen as ‘add on’, marginalised rather than being an integral part of student success.

There is a need for

“.. a better recognition that administrators can be equal partners with academics in supporting students, not just resources for departments’ “There is also the on-going issue of student services being seen as non-academic and therefore in some way inferior to academic provision. The reality is often that student services staff are highly qualified (often to a higher level than some academic staff) and that work carried out in many student services departments complements, enables and develops the academic work of the institution”.

(Heads of Student Services)

5.1.4 Diversity of student need

Although a number of issues are raised by

respondents, there is a general consensus that student groups are not homogenous and an overlap exists between the needs of some groups. The majority of respondents take the view that it is unwise to attribute particular needs to specific groups of students and believe that it is more useful to view students as individuals. It is suggested that as student diversity increases a framework which identifies different groups and different needs is possibly flawed, as it cannot encompass all the difference inherent within a truly diverse student body. Therefore, a possible solution is a broad system which allows individuals to achieve their full potential without categorisation within any particular group. However, this suggestion does carry resource implications in that there is a tension between assessing students' requirements on a group basis and treating students individually, which is more resource intensive.

Bearing in mind the points detailed above, there are a number of factors considered by respondents to be important in relation to diversity and specific student groups. There are some issues which will become increasingly important for HEIs generally:

- Mental well-being: there is said to be a growth in the number of students experiencing mental health difficulties. For example a number of respondents mention that counselling services will face increased demand. Other issues are the need to reduce waiting times to avoid students reaching a crisis situation and the need to ensure a choice of treatments in order to reach different students.
- Disability issues.
- Study support.
- Culturally relevant support for students. Again the importance of context is raised: although some issues will be prominent in all HEIs others will assume prominence depending on the particular institution e.g. racial, cultural and religious issues.
- Financial guidance.
- There is also a need for more streamlined and simplified support, particularly for mature students and those from lower socio-economic groups.

Finally a number of respondents emphasise the need for development which is based on research rather than assumptions of student need. So for example, one head of student services stresses the importance of “gathering clear and accurate information of all student opinion on matters related to welfare..” and another “There must be in place a continuous process of critical evaluation and research of the student experience which informs practice”. Many HEIs do conduct student satisfaction surveys which include information on student support services, however, student feedback is not equivalent to research into the student experience.

5.1.5 Incentives to deliver high quality student services

Incentives can be seen to be split between ‘the ideal: better society, fairness and equity; and the instrumental: recruitment, retention’. Similarly, incentives are described as covering the following issues:

- “Business - issues such as retention are of critical importance to the financial health of the university;
- Student experience - high quality experiences and 'good' student perceptions are increasingly important;
- Market position / reputation - again are of critical importance and student services should play a critical role in shaping them;
- Legal / moral - the university does have a 'duty of care' and student services are important and in some instances critical” (Director of Student Services).

More specifically incentives focus on four main areas:

- institutions' economic survival: contribution to the HEIs recruitment and retention to balance the books;
- institutional policy and development (related to their position in the market);
- commitment to the student experience: to approach the issue of student support with the same level of priority and quality as academic delivery;

- external regulation: for example adherence to statutory demands (SENDA, Duty of Care). Similarly HEIs can include student services within their quality assurance procedures (student services have been subject to institution-wide review under the QAAs Continuation Audit and department-based Subject Review and Teaching Quality Assessment, under the 'Student Support and Guidance Aspect').

5.1.6 Disincentives or obstacles to delivering high quality student services

Although there is a variety of response, again disincentives can be grouped under a number of main themes: resources, staffing and status.

5.1.6.1 Resources

- Initial and ongoing investment of resources, which is often coupled with a lack of understanding of the significance of the student services remit.
- In the majority of institutions student services follow a combination of two routes: the identification of student groups and the removal of specific barriers they face. This requires specialist staff, initiatives and projects. The second route involves a commitment to developing more inclusive education requiring general staff development, awareness raising and skill development. Both routes require additional resourcing.
- Short-term funding of initiatives: although student services can bid for resources as part of national initiatives, core permanent services are needed to underpin temporary initiatives.
- Although additional funding is available e.g. Disability Premium and Widening Participation Premium, these are a recognition of cost not incentives and may not necessarily reach student services. Moreover, the current level of funding is insufficient to meet the actual cost of widening participation and student retention.
- Additional funding given to HEIs whose track record in widening participation 'leaves a great deal to be desired' has acted as a disincentive to those HEIs who are doing a lot to widen

participation. This is felt to be particularly problematic as many respondents feel that the former receive a higher benefit from the RAE. However, 'aspiration funding' is due to be dropped under the HEFCE proposals outlined in Circular 02/22.

5.1.6.2 Staffing

- The attitudes of some academic staff in terms of a resistance to the recruitment and retention of non-traditional students is described as 'problematic' or 'inadequate'.
- A shortage of academic staff time is also seen as a major disincentive: there is an increased burden on academic staff which impacts on the amount of time they can give to research with a corresponding impact on the RAE. Under such a heavy workload student issues may not be identified and referred early enough.

5.1.6.3 Status

- In some HEIs student services are fragmented and given low status and therefore too easily marginalised. There is a need for a more integrated perspective on the centrality of student services for retention and academic success. However the willingness of HEIs to share with other institutions 'what they might see as a marketing edge' was questioned.
- Whilst there are limited careers and disability performance indicators, the quality of student services is said to count poorly in league table assessments. The 'system' does not appear to have evaluated student services other than to focus on financial issues. (As outlined above student services have been subject to institution-wide review for the QAA and hopefully the QAA will publish a general overview of Subject Review which will include this aspect.)

5.1.7 The research project

Respondents were also asked how the project would be of most use. The majority welcome the opportunity to share good practice. In addition it is hoped that the report will contribute to raising the profile of student services, from what one director feels is perceived by some as a 'raggy dolls'

syndrome' to an 'integral academic / admin bridging provision' with the ultimate aim of giving services a voice in terms of policy making. Finally, and 'most important – a recognition that there is more to widening access than expanding the number of places in HE'. Recent custom and practice within the sector is said to send out mixed messages about the value of a commitment to recruiting from a wider pool of applicants and providing support for those students. Many HEIs at the top of the league tables are said to have a conservative selection policy in terms of student grades, and consequently experience reduced costs in terms of support: "Hopefully the findings of the project will highlight the profound implications that a 50% participation rate has for student services – as for the rest of HE" (Head of Student Services).

6. Case studies

This section presents ten case studies undertaken as part of the research. These are not intended as prescriptive models of best practice, but were used to explore elements of good practice, and to deepen understanding of issues. These are presented as descriptions of the good practice concerned, and are not evaluative. The section following the case studies identifies and analyses themes emerging from these illustrative examples.

1. Bournemouth University - Peer Assisted Learning
2. University of Greenwich - Integrated Student Services
3. Huddersfield University - Enhancing Employment Skills and Opportunities for Ethnic Minority Students
4. University of Hull - Mature Student Support
5. University of Manchester - Central Academic Advisory Service
6. Manchester Metropolitan University - Learning Support Unit
7. University College Northampton - Student Mental Health Advisor
8. Nottingham Trent University - Integrated Student Support Centre
9. University of Surrey, Roehampton - Educational Development Centre
10. University of Teesside - Integrated Student Services

6.1 Peer Assisted Learning – Bournemouth University

Contact Details: Hugh Fleming, Learner
Support Tutor
email: hfleming@bournemouth.ac.uk

6.1.1 Institutional context

The university is described as a modern institution of seven schools which reflect the emphasis on vocational education. Currently there are approximately 8,800 full-time and 3,200 part-time undergraduates, a growing number of whom are international students.

6.1.2 Initiative details

Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) is a scheme of weekly learning support sessions in which second year students of a proven competence help first year students. The aim of the scheme is to address retention rates and improve student grades together with helping students adjust more quickly to university life. PAL is an opportunity for students to get a better understanding of parts of the course either staff or students feel are difficult. The scheme is partially funded by HEFCE until December 2003. Initial objectives were to establish the format for PAL and set up a website for dissemination of information. In the first year, PAL ran on the shared chemistry component of Applied Geography and Environmental Protection (School of Conservation Sciences), the Management Foundation Course (School of Service Industries) and the common first year Computing/Software Engineering Management (School of Design Engineering Computing). These courses were targeted as there was a general feeling amongst staff, supported by student achievement levels, that some students experienced difficulty with components of these courses. Academic staff involved are given an outline of the conditions of success for PAL which include not promoting the scheme as remedial; giving course information to student leaders; outlining monitoring activities; timetabling PAL; and working to create directed activities for PAL sessions.

PAL operates through Learner Support, which is located within Academic Services, and is separate

from student services. Academic Services are divided into four groups: Library, IT and Media Services, Learning Support and Staff Development. The linkage between the last two groups facilitates the promotion of PAL within the institution. Project staff liaise with academic schools, deliver the student leader training programme and provide ongoing support and supervision of student leaders. Leaders take part in a two-day training session prior to embarking on the scheme and Open College Network (OCN) accreditation for this is currently being pursued. The scope of the project is seen as far wider than purely academic, so for example, part of the training incorporates information on student support available to enable leaders to act as a referral point for first-year students.

6.1.3 Distinctive features

- The scheme is similar to mentoring and focuses on learning strategies targeted at difficult courses rather than students with difficulties.
- Incorporates a strong research element.

Identifying and consulting the target group

There is a very clear commitment to a process of listening to feedback from all users and changing to adapt to what students want. Feedback from students suggests that there needs to be a general consensus that the course is demanding enough to warrant attending sessions. This year, for example, it was found that all students attending certain PAL sessions were experiencing problems with the same three core units. In response to this student leaders targeted these units, and attendance at sessions increased. This policy will continue next year and sessions will be structured around those units perceived as the most difficult. Similarly, although the scheme is voluntary, attendance is higher when it is perceived by students as being integral to the course. Therefore, in future, information on PAL will be sent out with course information, so students see sessions as part of their course, and it is intended that PAL be timetabled on all participating courses.

Use by the target group

There has been some variation in attendance over the three schools. Attendance has been higher in Applied Geography/Environmental Protection (School of Conservation Sciences) than in Computing. Evaluation of the scheme suggests that this may be due to a lack of integration of the sessions with course content. For example, reported benefits were higher when the content of sessions was linked to course assignments and exams. In response to this students on the courses involved may be given an early assignment which requires them to investigate student support within the institution and attend a PAL session. The scheme will be available to approximately 700 students by Autumn 2002.

Addressing issues of diversity and equality

Feedback from tutors and students on which units are perceived to be difficult enables courses to be carefully targeted. It is important that the majority of students feel the course is difficult in order to avoid labeling the sessions as remedial or for less able students. The scheme is open to all students for the same reason. However the number of international students is said to be increasing and a similar scheme to PAL is planned which will focus more specifically on international students using second and third year students to help new students settle into the UK. The content of the student leader training is currently under discussion in order to meet the specific needs of international students.

Supporting students across the lifecycle

PAL is promoted actively from freshers week onwards by both student leaders and project workers. Student leaders are also given an hour a week for the first two to three weeks to talk to students about the scheme. Although they give an introductory presentation in the first week, as students have so much information to take in during this week, this information is repeated later.

Monitoring procedures

A researcher currently undertaking postgraduate study is attached to the project and an annual evaluation report is produced which includes qualitative feedback from both staff and students. Initially evaluation focused on statistical evidence related to students' approach to study. A much more qualitative approach has now been adopted in response to the lower uptake by students in some subjects by investigating why students did not attend and ways in which to respond to users comments. Wastage statistics will be monitored in future years as attendance figures increase. Feedback is also collected from students who did not attend sessions in the form of a questionnaire and student leaders are asked to complete self-evaluation forms based around sessions. Although statistical evidence of increased retention rates and academic grades would obviously be welcome, qualitative evidence of success is equally valued. Success is seen in terms of perceived benefits felt by all users; students, student leaders and staff.

Impact on student success

The scheme was initially suggested in response to evidence from the USA that schemes similar to PAL boost retention and academic performance. Currently, the first batch of second year students have held PAL sessions for first years. Although attendance was variable, and figures were too low for meaningful statistical analysis, qualitative feedback from students was positive.

Staff development

PAL is promoted as part of the staff development programme and is also part of the Teaching and Learning Staff Development Day held annually. The scheme is also presented in staff development workshops.

Links within the institution

Regular meetings (introduced in response to a request from student leaders for increased

support) involving the project manager, project researcher, student leaders and academic staff are held to give feedback on the project and implement changes. The project reports on progress directly to the Teaching and Learning Development Committee. The head of Teaching and Learning is also involved in decision making in relation to the targeting of courses. The institution as a whole has very good links with the Students' Union which has invested heavily in student support over the last 18 months. The project manager has been very keen to develop links with the SU; representatives from the SU sit on the project steering group and SU trainers will be involved in the PAL student leader training programme. The SU at Bournemouth have well-developed training materials and elected officers with National Student Learning Programme training will now hold sessions on communication skills, time management, presentation skills, problem solving and team management for PAL student leaders.

Links with external agencies

An annual conference is held with the aim of sharing information and good practice. This is an opportunity for student leaders from other institutions to share and reflect on their experience and also a channel to facilitate feedback to project co-ordinators. Whilst this is primarily student orientated, it is also a learning opportunity for staff designed to increase enthusiasm and motivation amongst both groups. The project aims to use existing research to explore what other institutions are doing in this field and to try and identify best practice in student learning. A website has been set up to facilitate this process.

Cost effectiveness

PAL is currently partially funded by HEFCE. However the ultimate aim is for the scheme to become embedded (in all schools who wish to participate) in the student support and guidance activities, for example, through learning and teaching strategies. Part of the project

researcher's remit is to examine strategies to embed PAL in the course curriculum. It is planned that the scheme will be rolled out to all schools by 2003.

6.1.4 Strengths of this initiative

- There is a clear commitment to obtaining feedback from all users which directly informs practice. Therefore key factors in non-attendance have been identified and steps taken to adapt practice to overcome perceived barriers to success.
- Strong links to the Students' Union which are used effectively.
- Dissemination of good practice.
- Quantitative and qualitative monitoring procedures which look at the impact on all users.

6.1.5 Issues and challenges

- The main weakness of the scheme is the low attendance which has ranged from 17 students (approx 15% of the course) to sessions in which no students have turned up. A key factor in non-attendance is a perception of the sessions as remedial. Timetabling and staff support are also key factors in the success of the scheme. Action has been taken to overcome these challenges for the forthcoming academic year.

6.2 An Integrated Model of Student Services: University of Greenwich

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6.2.1 Institutional context

University of Greenwich is a post 1992 university, described as a modern university which combines the best of the old and new systems, being both very research active and committed to widening participation. It is currently based on five campuses in London and Kent but this is in the process of

being reduced to three by September 2002. It has over 17,000 students which include 3,500 postgraduates and many international students. It has significant numbers of widening participation students including large numbers of working-class and ethnic minority students.

6.2.2 Initiative details

Their integrated model of student services combines Counselling, Careers, Mentoring, Financial Advice, JobShop, Study Skills, International Student Support, Chaplaincy, Nursery and Disability Support which work in multi service teams for specific purposes. The practitioners keep their discrete professional identities and standards but their receptionists have a generic role as information and advice officers.

6.2.3 Distinctive features

The services are located within a drop-in reception/resource and information centre on each campus. Students are able to access both information and support at their home campus, although the size of the resource varies with the size of the campus. The needs of each student approaching the service are individually assessed and a combination of support mechanisms are drawn upon as appropriate. Cross referral and quick and relevant responses are facilitated. The service is also able to provide students with complementary therapies such as hypnotherapy and aromatherapy, thanks to its links with professional courses run by the university. Its counselling provision is also augmented through student placements from the Masters in Counselling. This currently provides 18 associate counsellors and is a crucial factor in being able to respond quickly to students and avoid waiting lists.

Identifying and consulting the target group

The service is open to all students, but different sections target different groups and staff continually attempt to identify and respond to specific areas of need. Within different service areas, priority target groups are identified, for example the mentoring scheme targets year zero and first year students and works with Black and ethnic minority students, mature students and

students with a disability, counselling prioritises students who have a history of mental health problems, the finance team are targeting resources at lone parents, mature students and those from low socio-economic backgrounds. Consultation tends to exist on a one-to-one basis and there is a suggestion box in each reception, but to date there has been no in depth consultation such as focus groups with students.

Well used by the target group

Numbers of service users are extremely high. The receptions dealt with 52,000 enquiries for help during 2001 across 5 campuses. During that period the Careers Service had contact with 16,000 students and counselling with 1,200. Despite the level of demand, a quick response rate is a notable feature of this service. In some areas where staff feel that there is a demand that remains somewhat hidden they seek innovative solutions: for example the development of email counselling for Asian and Afro-Caribbean men.

Addressing issues of diversity and equality

The service consciously works within the frames of widening participation and equal opportunities and considers them its main paradigms. The service benefits greatly from a staff team who reflect the diversity of the student body and who understand and prioritise equality issues. It is important that this includes Black staff at senior levels in roles which are not 'ghettoised' as being focused on race e.g. finance and counselling. This team has been consciously and positively built e.g. by advertising in the ethnic press, encouraging the application of underrepresented groups, and addressing equal opportunities in interview. The integrated nature of the service means it can respond well to the multiple disadvantage experienced by many students.

Supporting students across the lifecycle

The service is available at any stage of the lifecycle and the integration of such provision as

finance and careers normalises its use for students. Students can access the service at any time and, importantly, at any location, as there is provision at each campus. Students feel that although the level of resources may vary across campuses, the quality and ethos of provision remain the same.

Monitoring procedures

The reception service monitors numbers using the service under different headings and more detailed information such as ethnicity, age, disability is kept by certain areas such as careers and counselling. Some independent monitoring occurs via the Student Satisfaction Surveys conducted by the Student Office. The service also evaluates its provision using student evaluation forms. The service uses a strong management frame with appraisal and away-days to plan its provision.

Impact on effect on student success

Students are supported to remain in the university and some of the alienating effects of a large dispersed metropolitan university are ameliorated by the creation of a warm and supportive enclosed environment in student services. Certain services are particularly targeted at students 'at risk' of failing, for example peer mentoring for certain first year students. From its qualitative data the counselling service can show that the majority of students who are at risk of leaving when they start counselling, have decided to remain in the university by the end of the process. There is also some indication that their level of problem severity is reduced by counselling. Research on the positive links between counselling and first-year retention has also been conducted.

Staff development

Staff contribute to a range of training activities such as training for tutors, libraries, registry, wardens and security staff. A number of sessions are freestanding e.g. those aimed at personal tutors, but people are less likely to

attend because it is voluntary. Where training is made compulsory, as with library staff, it is found to be more effective. An important aspect of staff development is the two day compulsory training event provided for wardens by student services, including: mental health, dealing with difficult situations, disabilities, international students, financial issues, chaplaincy. Customer care training is also provided for security staff on dealing with people who seem different or difficult. There is a move to integrate staff development at programme meetings and departmental level e.g. on supporting dyslexic students and the implementation of strategies such as the tagging of course work.

The staff development of those within student services is also facilitated via regular meetings of the steering group and this plays a key role in developing shared values and mutual knowledge and respect. They have also developed a code of practice covering all sections.

Links within institution

The service has strong links with some academic departments. A number of its staff teach on courses such as the Masters in Counselling and a Youth and Community course. It also works closely with the Students' Union. The service is well represented on key university committees and working groups and is part of campus management groups. It reports to the University Secretary.

Links with external agencies

The service has links with local communities and the public and voluntary sector, for example, with the Woolwich Project - a project for local teenagers. It sees such community links as a focus area for future development.

Cost effectiveness

The cost of the service, if calculated by dividing its budget by the total number of students in the university, is £60 per student. Given the very high use rate and the broad variety of services it

seems likely that a high proportion of students will be using the service, although some will clearly need more intensive support than others. By targeting its resources at those with most need, within a widening participation and equality frame, the service is maximising its impact in a very coherent way. Integrating services structurally and geographically maximises resources and avoids duplication. Synergy with academic departments to provide different therapies for students and training opportunities for others is a very cost effective strategy. The fact that the service gives the appearance of being well resourced in terms of good display and office space (although this can vary from campus to campus because of space restrictions) reinforces its importance to the university and the priority given to student support.

6.2.4 Strengths of this initiative

- Highly integrated and committed team which reflects the diversity of the student body and creates a sense of belonging amongst students who sometimes feel marginalised elsewhere in the university.
- Well planned and welcoming drop-in service which through ‘twinning’ and cross referral is equipped to deal quickly and effectively with students experiencing multiple difficulties.
- Very well regarded by student and used by very large numbers.
- Innovative response to different types of student demand targeting areas of particular disadvantage.
- Has a very coherent vision and makes choices according to a strong widening participation and equality frame.

6.2.5 Issues and challenges

- Students feel there is still a stigma attached to student services which prevents some students from accessing them.
- The service has to work hard to prevent students from becoming too dependent on them.
- Consultation mechanisms with students could be more fully developed.

6.3 The Impact Project: Huddersfield University

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6.3.1 Institutional context

Impact is run in partnership by Huddersfield, Bradford, Leeds and Leeds Metropolitan Universities and this particular case study took place at Huddersfield University. Huddersfield is a post-1992 university mainly situated on a central site in the centre of the city. It has a significant population of ethnic minority students, mostly from the local area. It is characterised by an emphasis on vocational education and high employability rates amongst graduates.

6.3.2 Initiative details

The Impact Project is designed to enhance employment skills and opportunities for ethnic minority students and redress the problem of ethnic minority graduate underemployment, which is a problem both locally and nationally. It offers intensive information, guidance and job-search support to UK ethnic minority students at each of the four institutions. The project runs a number of varied activities. These include one to one discussions, workshops on CVs and application forms, training on interviews and assessment centres. An important aspect of its work is with employers who are part of the Employers’ Supporters Club. This provides employer-led events on the opportunities and requirements in different sectors, and provides opportunities for mentoring and work experience. These activities are designed to raise the confidence of ethnic minority students and to give them skills which will help them to progress more effectively into employment.

6.3.3 Distinctive features

- The project is a rare example of a student service targeted specifically at ethnic minorities.
- It is also unusual in its effective partnership working across four universities.
- The strong link with employers via the

Employers' Supporters Club also make this project particularly noteworthy.

Identifying and consulting the target group

This project is specifically targeted at ethnic minority students, as it explicitly seeks to redress the imbalance in graduate employment rates amongst this group. However, white students are welcome to use the project if they wish and this is felt important by both students and staff. The project regularly consults with its users, and with religious and cultural groups within the community and the university, and adapts its programme accordingly. There is evidence that it actively responds to consultation: for example, student evaluations identified a need for one-to-one support and this has been provided subsequently. Even though it is comparatively expensive and time consuming, the identified benefit to, and demand from, students, made it a priority.

Use by the target group

Take up of the project is good and most importantly is sustained and ongoing. It has exceeded the targets set for the project quite considerably, for example, it aimed to support up to 400 students but to date has supported 732.

Addressing issues of diversity and equality

Clearly the initiative is targeted at a particular group of students who experience disadvantage: ethnic minorities. However, the project is conscious of gender as well as race issues and attempts to address them in its provision. It encourages both students and employers to consciously challenge negative stereotypes, e.g. of submissive Asian women or troublesome young Asian men, but it also supports the students in preserving their culture and customs. The project also addresses the class issues which combine with ethnicity to cause disadvantage.

Supporting students across the lifecycle

Students can access the project at any time during their studies and it plays a developmental

role in their progression through university and on to employment. An important feature of the project is that students appear to remain in contact with it throughout their studies, building on what they have learned and on their increased awareness of opportunities available to them. They have an ongoing relationship with the project and do not exhaust its benefits in a small number of sessions.

Monitoring procedures

The projects keeps detailed statistical data on its usage in line with the requirements of HEFCE. The effectiveness of its initiatives is also qualitatively measured by student evaluation after workshops and advice sessions. Monitoring reports are then presented quarterly to the steering group. There has also been a long-term survey of the project by an external evaluator.

Impact on student success

The project is able to demonstrate concrete indicators of success e.g. improved responses from employers to job applications and CVs, students winning places on prestigious training courses, positive responses to student placements. In addition the project has a beneficial effect on the students' academic work, enabling them to be more confident and focused in their studies more generally and achieving better rates of success.

Staff development

Impact staff have contributed to careers development training both within their own institutions and at a national level, for example, at the AGCAS organised 'Some Black and White Issues in Careers' training event.

Links within the institution

Impact staff are well embedded within student services teams and this is particularly important to avoid marginalisation of the project. Although project workers each work across two of the four universities, they have a base and structural role in each, which adds to the coherence of the

project. A representative of Bradford University Student's Union sits on the project steering group. The project worker also liaises with relevant cultural and religious groups within the university.

Links with external agencies

Impact has strong inter-university links and links with employers. The growing support of employers is a crucial factor in its success and 53 employers have now participated in the Employer Supporters' Club, including large organisations such as BT. The club offer practical workshops on topics such as interview techniques and assessments, and provide work placements and mentoring opportunities. Members of the Employer Supporters' Club are represented on the steering group.

Cost effectiveness

Impact was funded by the DfES Innovations Fund. This funding has now finished and has been taken over by the partner universities for a one year period initially. However there are concerns that short term funding creates problems of sustainability and uncertainty amongst staff. Sharing the project amongst four universities and maximising the contribution in kind provided by employers are both very effective uses of resources. However, neither is easy to accomplish and the project has done a lot of groundwork to build up strong systems and a high profile which bolster its effectiveness and credibility.

6.3.4 Strengths of this initiative

- The project is highly regarded and well used by the target group throughout the lifecycle. It offers concrete and relevant development opportunities to ethnic minority students – countering the disadvantage suffered by these students in the labour market. This disadvantage has been both quantitatively and qualitatively measured and thus the project is geared to meet a real need.
- The project negotiates the difficult balance

between validating the students' culture and increasing their employability. It is very well supported by employers and maximises the benefits of the partnership approach.

6.3.5 Issues and challenges

- Links with academic departments need strengthening. Although students would not want to be referred directly to Impact, students feel that lecturers are not well informed about the project and do not disseminate information about it.

6.4 The University of Hull: Mature Student Support

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6.4.1 Institutional context

The University of Hull is a pre-1992 institution, established in 1927. It operates from two main sites, the original campus on the west of Hull and a smaller campus in Scarborough; Health is currently located four miles away from the main campus in Hull. Between 14 and 18% of students are from low participation neighbourhoods. Over 50% of students are recruited locally, 32% coming from the rest of the UK, and 13% are international students. 67% of students study full-time at the university, and 27% of the full-time undergraduates are mature students. 6% of students have a declared disability; 82% of students define themselves as white, and 10% as Black and Asian. The retention rate is well above the UK average at 91%, but there is a notable difference between 'young' students (92%) and 'mature' students (82%). The university is among the UK's top five universities for the employability of its graduates at 95%.

6.4.2 Initiative details

Student support services, in collaboration with a member of academic staff, undertook a survey (funded through the Widening Participation Premium) to explore the experience of non-traditional students at the university. It found that

full-time mature students at the Hull campus were more likely to have considered withdrawing from higher education during the first year than any other student group. Primary reasons included finance, academic issues and domestic/personal reasons. The research also found that mature students participated less in the social life at university. In response to the open-ended question 'What is missing from this university in respect of student support services is...' 17% of mature full-time students at Hull gave the response 'a mature students adviser'. Subsequently, an adviser for mature, full-time students was appointed at the Hull campus. This is a joint post between the recruitment office and student support services and is funded through the Widening Participation Premium initially for approximately 18 months. The appointment was made in January 2002 and therefore much of the work is still in a developmental stage. Activities and planned activities include:

- Twice-weekly lunch-time drop-in session for mature students; or students can make appointments to see the Mature Students' Adviser.
- Visits to students studying Access courses at the ten associate FE colleges to provide general information about HE.
- Support for mature students in FE to prepare for university.
- Available at university and departmental open days. A mature students' open day is planned.
- Preparing a Mature Students' Guide (which is distributed to all mature enquirers) and developing a website of on-line materials.
- Support for the Mature Students Society (which is part of the Students' Union) is planned, as this can be an important mechanism to develop social networks amongst mature students.
- A peer-mentoring scheme is being developed. Current mature students have volunteered as mentors, but the scheme has not yet been launched.
- Other possible activities being considered include: finance workshops, involvement in Clearing and running a mature students' 'pre-arrival' event in the week prior to entry.

6.4.3 Distinctive features

- Developed in response to research findings.
- Has involved mature students in developmental discussions.
- It is a joint post between recruitment and student services, which allows the role to span pre- and post-entry support, and is cost-effective.
- Clearly linked to institution's strategic objectives as set out in Widening Participation Strategy and Action Plan.
- Funded by Widening Participation Premium allocation.

Identifying and consulting the target group

Although full-time mature students are a clearly identified target group, it is still problematic to reach these students – for example it is difficult to extract the data from the University MIS to target students prior to entry. Reaching students who progress into the university via local FEC Access courses is comparatively easy, but this excludes mature students who enter via an Access course from another region and mature students who enter via alternative entry routes. Neither group will have cohorts of friends at the time of entry, and the latter may need additional support. Students have been involved via the survey, and in discussions with the newly-appointed adviser, but there are no formal structures for mature student consultation.

Use by the target group

It is too early to be sure that the service is/will be well-used by the target group, but existing mature students are very supportive of the initiative. Although 'mature students' are not a homogenous group, they are often juggling multiple issues, and may feel excluded from student social networks. To reach all mature students targeting and wide-range publicity is required.

Addressing issues of diversity and equality

Students are generally not averse to being identified as mature students, and the research identified that full-time mature students have

different needs to part-time mature students (who are supported by a part-time adviser). The role of the 'adviser' is actually co-ordination and facilitation, which means that a diversity of issues can be supported by referral to other services. The adviser works with mature international students in liaison with the international office, when such students contact him/her, but, there may be other students, who are not mature, but who have similar needs (e.g. single parents) who are technically excluded. The research and the subsequent experience of working with mature students have been disseminated to other staff, thus helping to ensure that all mature students benefit from this post, not just those who directly access the services. The online information will allow students in different circumstances to benefit from the service, and may be of benefit to students at the Scarborough campus.

Supporting students across the lifecycle

This initiative provides a bridge between pre- and post-entry support, and between FECs and the university. It also builds links across the institution which help to ensure that students are supported throughout the lifecycle. Discussions with students suggest that the greatest role of the adviser will be in the first semester and the first year, and although mature students often have different career aspirations and opportunities to younger students, these are catered for by the Careers Service.

Monitoring procedures

There is currently only an informal monitoring system: the adviser records the number and type of contacts. But there is a desire to link work of the Mature Students Adviser to the retention of full-time mature students.

Impact on student success

The research indicated a need for this post, but it is too early to examine impact, and there is not currently a mechanism for assessing impact.

Staff development

The Mature Students Adviser has not received specific staff development, but s/he draws on professional training as a social worker. Student Support Services in general, and the Mature Students Adviser in particular, contribute to institution-wide staff training, fulfilling the need for staff development regarding the needs of non-traditional students, including mature students, which was demonstrated by the research.

Links within the institution

The adviser provides a link between recruitment and student services, and thus between pre- and post-entry, and is involved in Student Induction. The role involves signposting students to other services as necessary: s/he works with the International Office and part-time student adviser, and visits departments and presents to committees to build links to improve practice. S/he is working with the Study Advice Service to provide tailored support for mature students in the first semester, and the Students' Union to support the Mature Students' Association.

Links with external agencies

There are strong links with FE partners. Other links will be developed to meet needs, such as the collection of information about local childcare providers.

Cost effectiveness

The pre-project research supported the case for funding, and ensures that funding is used wisely. Sharing the adviser between two departments is cost effective and improves the service. The initial research cost about £12,000, the total cost of the mature student adviser post is about £30,000, and approximately 27% of full-time undergraduate mature students are mature, the cost per mature student per annum is approximately £16.

6.4.4 Strengths of this initiative

- Rationale for this initiative comes directly from

research findings, and the development of the role has involved consultation with current mature students, and collaboration with colleagues throughout the university and in the FE sector.

- This post creates both horizontal and vertical links from pre- to post-entry and throughout the institution.
- It is a cost-effective initiative (assuming it has a positive impact on retention).

6.4.5 Issues and challenges

- It is challenging to reach mature students who do not access the university via local FEC Access courses, but these students may be the most in need of support.
- To develop a robust and effective monitoring and evaluation system to demonstrate impact and thus cost-effectiveness in terms of improved student retention for the target group.
- To secure on-going funding. The initial research was crucial to the post being developed; impact evaluation is therefore likely to be beneficial in determining the continuation of this post beyond the initial funding period.

6.5 Central Academic Advisory Service (CAAS) Manchester University

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6.5.1 Institutional context

Manchester was one of the first civic universities in England and is now 150 years old. It is located on one large campus less than a mile from the city centre. There are over 18,000 students at the university which includes large numbers of postgraduates and international students. The university sees itself as a predominantly research-led institution with a culture of high achievement.

6.5.2 Initiative details

CAAS is a centrally-based service which offers students confidential advice and information on

matters relating to their academic work or affecting academic progress. It is seen as complementary, both to the roles of personal and academic tutors and to student support such as counselling. It produces a handbook for staff on personal tutoring and generates a secondment scheme within departments, as a means of disseminating good practice. It also provides training for academic and administrative staff as part of the SEDA accredited Student Support and Guidance Course. Academic staff are encouraged to use the centre for advice on supporting their students. It is a key point of referral for other support services.

6.5.3 Distinctive features

CAAS is a very unusual model, which has not been identified by any other university in the study. It is characterised by the dual academic/advisory role of its staff. Members of CAAS are academic staff with current academic roles within departments who are appointed for a proportion of their time to work in CAAS. This dual role, whereby advisers are also embedded within academic departments, is seen as an important key to the effectiveness and credibility of the service. In addition to core CAAS staff, a number of academics are seconded from departments to spend half a day a week for a period of one semester working in CAAS, so that good practice can be disseminated across the university. Their departments are funded to cover this period and the secondees funded to set up student support initiatives within their departments.

Identifying and consulting the target group

The service is open to all students. Students using CAAS are asked to return a questionnaire. Although this is valuable, feedback by this means is relatively low and this procedure is under review.

Use by the target group

CAAS has credibility amongst both staff and students because of the current knowledge and experience of its team of academic staff. In 2000-01, 463 students used the service directly, but it will also have had an indirect impact on the whole of the student body, through its more generic work in providing advice and guidance

to academic staff on student support issues, and in spreading good practice.

Addressing issues of diversity and equality

This service provides an opportunity to 'demystify' the university and as such can be seen as particularly useful for those unused to the university structures and regulations, such as working-class students, mature students or international students. It also provides a point of unstigmatised referral and thus is useful for groups such as ethnic minority men who traditionally resist accessing student services, such as counselling. The service is also useful for students with 'high aspirations' which can in themselves create problems and support needs.

Supporting students across the lifecycle

The service provides support with the sort of problems which can occur at any stage of the lifecycle and which must be managed if the student is to progress on their course. It also supports students to make important transitions during the lifecycle e.g. change courses, interrupt or even move into other universities or out of the sector. It is available at any point.

Monitoring procedures

CAAS keeps a detailed statistical database of its users which records gender, age, fees status, area of origin, level of course, year of entry, current year of course and faculty. The Annual Report analyses trends from this information and uses them to develop the support strategies of CAAS. In addition detailed notes recorded from each contact are kept. This has enabled CAAS to begin a rolling programme of research into student records from each faculty, which will feed back issues to the faculties and the university as a whole.

Impact on student success

The service is geared to help students address any problems which may be hindering their progress: such as anxiety about their academic

ability and management of work, examination problems, the impact of events in their personal life upon their work. However, student success is not measured narrowly by retention but by finding solutions appropriate to the student. The service provides a wide ranging perspective on the opportunities available and other support structures within the university. This allows the student to make informed choices about their options.

Staff development

A high priority is placed on contributing to staff development across the university, which is accomplished by a variety of means. CAAS produces a 'Guide to Personal Tutoring' which is circulated to all academic staff. It also contributes to the professional development course 'Student Support and Guidance' which is open to both academic and administrative staff. Within this course CAAS offers seminars on supporting first year students, maintaining student motivation, optimising the use of student support services and reviewing student support and guidance roles, with a particular emphasis on innovation and making the best use of resources. Finally the secondment scheme allows academic staff to develop advisory skills and knowledge of the university-wide system which they then take back to their departments. They then create departmental-based initiatives which add value both to the department and their own professional development.

Links within the institution

CAAS links directly to academic departments in a variety of ways, the dual role of its staff, the referral system of students to CAAS, the provision of advice to academic staff on general student support issues, and the secondment scheme. It also links to support services such as counselling. Geographically it is separated from counselling and this is helpful in emphasising that the two services are separate and different. It is not unusual, however, for students who visit CAAS with anxieties of an academic nature to

then gain the confidence to seek help from the counselling service to address more personal problems. Links with decision-making committees are strong, where CAAS staff are valued for their university-wide perspective. CAAS also works closely with the Students' Union.

Links with external agencies

CAAS concentrates on academic support and therefore tends to have an internal focus. It does however, refer students to non-university sources of support, when and if appropriate.

Cost effectiveness

The cost of the service is around £89,000 p.a. This should not be measured simply in terms of numbers of students using the service, but in relation to its role in developing good practice throughout the university. The dual function of its staff maximises their contribution to the university. By disseminating its knowledge it attempts to permeate this benefit across the university.

6.5.4 Strengths of this initiative

- CAAS is cost effective, has academic credibility, facilitates innovation at a departmental level, draws on current academic knowledge, facilitates a global institutional approach, avoids stigmatisation of students but links effectively to academic and core support services.
- It presents itself as a useful model for research led universities with a culture of high aspirations, but its approach can also be applied to new universities with large numbers of students without the cultural capital to understand and negotiate the academic system.

6.5.5 Issues and challenges

- Although the service is set up to complement the role of personal and academic tutors, there may be a danger that it could allow some academic staff, who may be less comfortable with or less suited to a student support role, a convenient

escape from their pastoral duties.

- The provision of training and guidance on student support, in which CAAS plays a key role, is also not as well taken up by academic staff as it could be.
- There could be a concern that their role as expert guides to university procedures might excuse the university from making its systems more transparent and accountable to students.

6. 6 Manchester Metropolitan University Learning Support Unit

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6.6.1 Institutional context

Manchester Metropolitan University is one of the largest universities in England, with seven major campuses located across a 40-mile radius. Five sites are located in the City of Manchester and two are based at Crewe and Alsager, Cheshire. A post 1992 university, it has a total student population of over 31,000 students, on more than 400 programmes. It recruits above its benchmarks with regard to students from state schools, social classes III_m, IV and V and low participation neighbourhoods. Of all home students, 62% originate from the North West and three fifths of these are from Greater Manchester. Just over 50% of students are aged 21 or over on entry, and 59% study full-time. EU and other overseas students represent 4.7% of the total student population. The number of disabled students known to the university is 1,031. Its overall rate of retention is 85%, which matches its benchmark.

6.6.2 Initiative details

The Learning Support Unit (LSU) was established as an integrated unit in 1998, bringing together previously discreet provision for disabled students and study skills support, in order to optimise limited resources. The aims of the unit are to provide an integrated approach to learning support within the university, enabling students to become independent

learners and to provide appropriate mechanisms to facilitate student progress within the academic context.

The learning support team offer a range of support services to all students. These include one-to-one study support, study skills workshops, and advice for students contemplating a change of course. Advisers also provide advice and support for students with disabilities, assessing their needs with regard to study aids, demonstrating the use of equipment and liaising with departments to identify supporting study strategies.

6.6.3 Distinctive features

- Growing demands on the unit, including a steady rise in the number of students eligible for the Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA) have meant that the team is providing an increasing proportion of disability support. However, the unit prides itself on retaining a strong commitment to an inclusive approach to student learning needs and supporting students with disabilities is simply one facet of ensuring successful achievement of learning outcomes.
- Characteristic of Greater Manchester, there is much collaborative work undertaken between the four universities in the area. This is particularly the case with regard to disability support. In 1997, through HEFCE special initiative funding, Access Summit – the Joint Universities' Disability Resource Centre was established. This centre has continued beyond its three-year funding period and supports and complements the services provided by each university. The main activities of Access Summit include assisting current students and prospective students with disabilities, and staff who have contact with students with disabilities. The centre offers taster/ introductory courses, needs assessment and training, a technology help-desk and equipment resource bank.

Identifying and consulting the target group

The unit offers support to a wide range of learners and therefore there is no one specific

target group. The unit is available to any student within the university, regardless of mode of study, who feels they need support with their learning. However staff do liaise with departments regarding applications from disabled students and wherever possible send out introductory information about the services they provide to these students. The learning support team are very pro-active in approaching faculties who have not notified them of applicants likely to require support.

Use by the target group

Statistics reveal a steady increase each year in the number of students accessing the services provided by the LSU. Information is available on the number of students seen in individual appointments, the number of assessments of need conducted, and the number of general enquiries. Latest figures for 2000/1 are 937, 61 and 2249 respectively, compared with 715, 49 and 1516 in 1998/9.

Addressing issues of diversity and equality

In adopting an inclusive approach to learning support, the unit aims to address individual learners' needs, rather than placing emphasis on the disability. Some of the staff attached to the unit have specialist expertise; for example one learning support adviser is specifically responsible for deaf and hard of hearing students and is also a full team member. Members of the unit maintain a regular presence on all the university's teaching sites and the range of students benefiting from the unit's services represents the diversity which characterises the university. International students make use of the service and, where necessary, creative means are sought to support students who are not eligible for the DSA. Diverse means are used to communicate with students, including text messaging.

Supporting students across the lifecycle

The unit is keen to identify students who might need support as early as possible and therefore

engage in a number of pre-entry activities. Primarily, members of the team take part in university and departmental open days to make prospective students and their parents aware of the services on offer. On arrival students can find out about the unit in a variety of ways. Typically the unit produces literature which is distributed across all campuses, including halls of residences. During induction, members of the team go into many departments to deliver introductory presentations on study skills. These are followed up throughout the year with presentations and workshops on a range of study techniques, including time management, revision and essay writing. Such sessions build in opportunities for students to see a member of staff individually and to discuss any difficulties they may be experiencing or the implications of a disability. Study skills modules are also integrated into many academic programmes.

Monitoring procedures

Student feedback processes are currently evolving and a key objective for the unit is to implement service evaluation procedures and further develop recording and monitoring strategies. An initial questionnaire has been developed and trialed and a full report will be included in the unit's annual operating statement.

The head of student services presents an annual operating statement to the directorate, whose membership includes the seven deans of faculty; this statement includes a detailed report on the usage and achievements of the LSU. The head of the unit, the learning support co-ordinator, is routinely involved in the student support and guidance aspect of the QAA subject reviews, demonstrating effective working relationships and providing positive case studies.

Impact on student success

The team felt it was impossible to measure accurately their individual contribution to student success, partly due to the difficulties inherent in tracking individual students. However, some

students will express their appreciation of the services they have received and the team is often informed of their success either by students themselves or by some members of academic staff. During 2002/3 the unit will be involved in a pilot project to develop student profiles, as part of the institutional strategy to implement the progress file; this will integrate the personal development plan which has been designed within the unit to support disabled students' study needs.

Staff development

Members of the LSU are actively encouraged to undertake personal staff development, using both internal and external vehicles. They regularly attend and present at conferences and a number of the team are involved in professional accredited courses. Such development is seen as beneficial in producing a well-informed unit. Members of the team run a variety of workshops on the internal staff development programme, including 'Supporting Non-traditional Students' and 'Students with Disabilities'. The team also respond to individual requests by departments and run sessions for non-academic staff e.g. front of house and librarians.

Successful strategies for support are dependent on building effective partnerships with academic and administrative staff across the university. As such the team has taken a pro-active approach to staff development both by generating specific initiatives and by responding to requests to contribute to departmental meetings and away days. The unit is also involved in a collaborative (2000-2002) HEFCE special initiative called DEMOS (for which MMU is the lead institution), exploring the effectiveness of developing online staff development resources to support students with disabilities.

The university has recently established a staff development forum which is responsible for the overall planning and delivery of staff development. As part of its brief, it has identified

a number of key priorities and members of the unit will contribute to the delivery of these in 2002/3. The head of student services is a member of the forum.

Links within the institution

The unit has built up strong links across the university with staff at all levels and wherever possible will build in time to meet with people in person. Within student services itself there are a number of team activities: staff from the LSU take part in away days, and heads of units meet monthly to share ideas and discuss common issues.

The LSU has strong links with the Students' Union, in particular the Student Advice Centre and with the disabilities officer, who is a member of the Students' Union executive. Links with faculties and departments vary. Members of the LSU are in regular communication with faculty disability contacts, who are senior administrative staff, both in relation to individual student needs and on broader issues of policy and procedure, and with relevant academic departments.

Effective working relations have been established with the Learning and Teaching Unit, leading to involvement in a number of learning and teaching initiatives and events. Staff of the LSU also sit on a number of faculty committees and boards, and good relationships exist with members of senior management. Members of the unit have been involved with academic departments in joint funding bids.

Links with external agencies

In addition to strong inter-institutional links, all members of the team, because of their diverse backgrounds, bring to the unit their own networks. Some also have active roles in professional bodies including ILT, AUA, SKILL, NADO. One member of the team was involved in the DfES review of the DSA. The unit is involved in a number of collaborative projects: on behalf of Access Summit, the unit regularly organises a workshop for LEA officers and

disability advisers. One learning support adviser is partly funded by the Headstart project, which is a HEIF initiative led by the RNID and is developing support for deaf and hard of hearing students.

Cost effectiveness

The unit is currently well supported and has been able to take advantage of some disability premium funding. The team has recently increased by 100%, with the appointment of a permanent administrative assistant and two additional learning support advisers on two year contracts. This has enabled the unit to increase support across all campuses (with a regular presence at Crewe and Alsager), expand its staff development provision, improve records management and provide additional support for examinations.

The unit is cost effective to run and ploughs income generated from assessments of need back into its resources. It also operates an equipment loan scheme for students, using obsolete, but serviceable university equipment. Any unspent budget can usually be carried forward to the next financial year.

The university's resourcing model currently operates on the principle that funding will be on the same basis as the previous year. However the LSU team are very pro-active in putting in for bids and with some success. Working with other institutions and being part of the Access Summit Consortium allows for some rationalisation of resources and sharing of expertise and knowledge.

6.6.4 Strengths

- The unit has a committed and diverse team. Staff employed in the unit come from a range of professional backgrounds and so each brings individual strengths to the unit. Some members of the team have previously held different roles within the university.

- The broad remit of the unit and its inclusive approach to learners' needs.

6.6.5 Issues and challenges

- The most significant challenge for the unit is the size of the institution and the spread of its campuses. The LSU are seeking to address this by setting up 'regular clinics' at other sites and by continually trying to raise staff awareness across the university.
- A more immediate problem is lack of space. As the team expands and student demand increases, the current location at the central Manchester site is becoming impractical.

6.7 Student Mental Health Adviser – University College Northampton (UCN)

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6.7.1 Institutional context

The institution is based on two main campus sites in Northampton. The institution was established in 1867, received confirmation of its new title of UCN in 1999 and has aspirations toward full university status. Currently there are approximately 9,500 undergraduate students; 7,000 full-time and 2,500 part-time. The student body is described as mixed, with a strong widening participation emphasis. There are currently 300 international students and 550 students with disabilities. Approximately 70% of the student cohort enter employment following graduation, a further 20% enter training, research or further study.

Overall student support within the institution is provided via a number of central departments and units which liaise with each other and the academic schools. Services are split into Learning Resources Services, including the Centre for Academic Practice which is an open learning and teaching centre, IT services and student services. This

department has teams of support staff available within guidance and information centres on both campuses who provide a first point of contact for students. These frontline staff provide more general information and arrange for students to see specialist staff if required.

6.7.2 Initiative details

Initially there was felt to be a problem within the institution in providing effective support for students with mental health problems beyond the offer of counselling. UCN successfully attracted HEFCE funding for 1997 – 2000 to address this problem, and as a result appointed a half-time Mental Health Development Officer. The intention was to assist in the development of networks with external services (which was a perceived weakness), to raise awareness of mental health problems and to develop procedures, which would enable existing staff to identify and manage issues arising at an earlier stage, and increase understanding of some of these issues. Once this post was in place it was found that people who had felt that previously they had nowhere to go, now sought support from the person fulfilling this post. Consequently, it became clear that there was a need for a continuing post; that of a Student Mental Health Adviser (SMHA), offering direct support and working alongside other student support services, such as counselling.

All students at UCN are ascribed a personal tutor who they normally meet during their first week and whose role is to act as an academic adviser. Whilst personal tutors may keep the same student for three years, the level of contact they have with students varies according to the course. For example, Fine Art tutors have a lot of contact because of the way the course is taught. The role of personal tutor is seen as vital in relation to supporting students. However, in some areas (such as mental well being) this can be token support and the main body of support is provided by a professional with experience in the field, such as the SMHA. In this situation a personal tutor would not expect feedback, because of the issues involved, but would continue to monitor the student and check they were being supported. The student

would then have direct contact via the SMHA to a network of support systems provided by a variety of other professionals both in and outside the institution. Not only did this enable a more rapid response, but students are able to access professional support which tutors do not feel able to provide at this level. Having a SMHA as a bridge between the internal and external contacts enables the student to be supported not just in an academic sense but also as part of a larger community, and also provides a sense of professional distance for tutor and student. The main source of referral is via staff (for example, the disability team, wardens and other non-academic staff, counsellors and academics). Other referrals are made via the Students' Union, GPs and external agencies such as the local Crisis Intervention Service.

6.7.3 Distinctive features

- A key feature of the role is experience of working with people with mental health problems, so for example, advisers could have a nursing or psychology background.
- The SMHA provides a focus within UCN for all staff involved in supporting students experiencing mental health problems and a central point of contact for external agencies.

Identifying and consulting target group

The target group were investigated during the initial HEFCE project. Feedback from staff during this process highlighted a gap in provision and pointed to a clear need for someone in the role of SMHA. Similarly feedback from a survey of students revealed that support was most successful and helpful when shared amongst people. Consequently, one of the functions of the role of adviser is to act as a central communicator or point of contact, working alongside other support staff.

Use by the target group

Information is available in a number of formats; web-based information for both staff and students, student publications and also on a series of postcards distributed throughout the institution. The postcards contain brief

descriptions of some mental health problems such as depression for example, together with contact information. Since the post of MHA has been established the demand for the service has increased rapidly. Similarly, students who have used the service have re-established or maintained contact.

Addressing issues of diversity and equality

The service is available to all students; full and part-time, undergraduates and postgraduates. The institution also has a growing number of international students, who not only share some of the problems of other groups such as mature students for example, but are also subject to additional stressors and their ability to access this support is important. A further issue relates to the stigma still felt to surround mental health, particularly in labelling students experiencing problems. The SMHA will pass on student-related information to academic staff on a 'need to know' basis, protecting confidentiality, avoiding burdening the tutor with information s/he may not require, or unnecessarily 'exposing' the student. In addition information can be passed on to all the course tutors involved with that student. Information relates only to the problems that student is likely to experience which will impact on their work, for example they may experience panic attacks during lectures or problems at particular times during the year. This not only avoids attaching a certain label to the student, but also removes the need for the student to repeatedly go through their 'story' to other course tutors.

Supporting students across the lifecycle

Information sessions on student support (during which the SMHA service is mentioned) are given during induction. Similarly details of student services are flagged up in the prospectus and the specific role of the SMHA is mentioned in the Student Guide. Students are also identified wherever possible via the admissions route and the SMHA will pick up on students prior to entry and forward student services information sheets. Usage of the service has so far been higher by

first and third-year students. However, some students who 'scrape through' the first year begin to experience problems in their second year, so effectively there is no period in which usage falls off. In addition students are not 'dropped' when they leave UCN; the SMHA can help to set up a support network outside the institution and can stay in contact with students if necessary for a limited period after they have finished their studies.

Monitoring procedures

No formal monitoring procedures are in place yet, but there has been informal feedback from wardens and GPs, for example, that the scheme is valuable, so much so that the question now is not is the scheme working, but is one half-time SMHA enough? Development of a monitoring tool is a key objective of the current year which is the first complete year that the post has been in place. It is envisaged that this will include 'do not attend' and usage statistics together with pre and post contact evaluation forms. The information collected to date is very encouraging; i.e. the SMHA has no empty 'sessions' and very low 'do not attend' figures which is felt to be unusual in this type of service. Procedures to monitor the quality of the service provided are in place via the SMHA's line manager and also through external clinical supervision.

Impact on student success

The service is said to provide a more effective and rapid response. For example, previously students who have needed to see a clinical psychologist have at times been subject to a wait of 4 to 12 months. During this time students could become increasingly distressed and more likely to disrupt other students or withdraw from courses. The SMHA is now able to assess these students, refer them to outside agencies if necessary, and in the event of a waiting period carry out 'holding' action in the interim. The SMHA has also been able to respond quickly to emergency situations that have arisen.

Staff development

Training is provided for both academic and non-academic staff. However the ability of the adviser to prioritise this aspect of the role is limited by the amount of time s/he has available. Training is concentrated on one event held during the summer, which focuses on a special issue, for example, working with the exam office and course team leaders and with wardens. Other events have concentrated on specific themes such as self-injury and depression. External agencies such as the Crisis Intervention Service and the Samaritans have also been involved in providing training sessions.

Although student services are outlined during staff induction days, as with students, there is felt to be an overwhelming amount of information on the day. A web page for staff (as well as students) has been set up therefore which can be accessed at the time of need. The web page includes guidelines produced by the SMHA with input from staff. The adviser has also produced handbooks for staff, for example, staff within the Guidance and Information Centres, invigilators on how to help people experiencing panic attacks during exams, special arrangements for students in exams, and guides for academic staff.

Links within the institution

Support offered by the SMHA is in addition to other support available to students. Support is also offered indirectly via support to staff such as wardens and tutors dealing with students more directly. The SMHA will also assess students' mental health needs and learning needs and if necessary refer to other sources of support within the institution.

The SMHA works in collaboration with the SU on projects and promotion. The director of student services is a member of the senior management group (heads of schools and departments), and can take forward support issues raised by the SMHA. There is also active representation on the Teaching and Learning Group.

Links with external agencies

One of the key issues of the role relates to communication; with external agencies and UCN staff and students. Having someone in the role of SMHA has proved an effective link to outside agencies, for example, because of the sensitivity of many of the issues involved, doctors and other medical professionals prefer to talk to the adviser rather than to other professionals within the university such as personal tutors. One of the initial tasks of the SMHA was to visit all local agencies offering support in order to be able to provide first-hand information and allay anxiety in students referred to these agencies. Links have also been established with staff holding equivalent positions in local FE colleges in order to facilitate pre-entry referrals.

Cost effectiveness

The financial cost of the scheme is primarily in terms of staffing, in this instance for one half time post SO1/2 grade (£20,428 – 23,759).

6.7.4 Strengths of this initiative

- A central point of contact facilitates communication internally and also with external agencies.
- Provides support for staff involved in supporting students and students themselves.
- The role is based on an investigation of student need.
- The scheme provides a different approach in addition to counselling.

6.7.5 Issues and challenges

- Involvement with the SU is limited. Currently some sabbatical posts within the SU remain unfilled and this may impact on the extent to which involvement can be developed.
- Because of limits to the time available, there is less opportunity to actively promote mental well being issues or increase staff development opportunities.

6.8 Nottingham Trent University Integrated Student Support Centre

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6.8.1 Institutional context

Nottingham Trent University currently has a student population of around 23,000 students. A former polytechnic, gaining university status in 1992, Nottingham Trent consists of nine schools and faculties situated across three sites: City, Clifton and Brackenhurst. A predominantly white institution, approx. 50% of students are aged under 21 and around one third of students come from low participation neighbourhoods. The university has 1856 international students (EU and other overseas), 915 disabled students and just under 20% of students originate from Nottinghamshire. The university has a high employability rate, with 69.2% going into employment, and 19.5% undertaking further study. It has an overall retention rate of 90%.

6.8.2 Initiative details

In 1998, Nottingham Trent successfully developed an integrated student support centre on its City site. Disability support, student financial support, counselling, chaplaincy, mental health support, targeted provision for specific groups (international and mature students) and more generalist provision (student support and information, student complaints office) are all located together in a highly visible location at the heart of the campus, which is shared with the Registry. Prior to this, services had been spread out on the periphery of the campus. This integration is currently being replicated at the Clifton site where a similar plan has been piloted since 1999. The purpose-built development is due to be completed in September 2002.

6.8.3 Distinctive features

- The creation of a one-stop-shop at the city site has enabled all services to become more accessible to staff and students.
- As well as the benefits of a shared physical

location, success has depended on establishing integrated working practices. There is now general recognition that with an increasingly diverse student population, there is need for a multi-disciplinary approach to student support.

Identifying and consulting with the target group

The centre is available to all students, however it is recognised that certain groups will make more use of the services than others. Therefore within the department there is targeted support for mature students, disabled students and international students. The mature students officer, for example, works closely with the university's widening participation outreach team and has strong links with local FE colleges. The officer provides pre-entry guidance for mature students on non-academic issues and arranges bridging and on-arrival networking events for mature students on full-time undergraduate programmes to ease the transition into higher education.

Use by the target group

The City site centre includes a foyer space for student networking meetings e.g. the weekly international students' forum. This is seen as particularly important in identifying the building as not just a place for students to go with 'problems'. It is planned for the Clifton site to include, in addition to the services at the City site, the student health centre, careers service, finance and credit control offices. The aim is to create an atmosphere of a student-centred building and therefore reduce any stigma attached to accessing support. Incorporating these services will make the centre 'part and parcel of university life' for all students.

Addressing issues of diversity and equality

The City site centre is open year-round during normal working hours. The front-line enquiry desk is fully staffed during term-time, with cover for vacations. For student emergencies, a 24 hour on-call rota is provided by the chaplains.

The Clifton site opening hours will include evening provision of medical appointments. Other 'twilight' services may be provided on an appointment basis, if required.

Student support services regularly update their website and most forms and documents are available electronically. Students are also able to email their queries to members of staff if they are not able to access the centre in person.

Supporting students across the lifecycle

Students are made aware of the services available very early on, and a good deal of work is undertaken at the pre-entry stage. Wherever possible, a member of the department participates in faculty and school open days to give information to prospective students and their parents. On arrival, all new students receive a comprehensive student handbook with detailed information about the services and key university codes and regulations, which is reinforced during induction talks. By establishing a one-stop-shop it is intended to make students aware early on of all the services available to them during their time at university.

Monitoring procedures

Each service has its own monitoring procedures in place and the number of enquires to front-line staff are continually monitored. During 2000/1 16,639 enquiries were handled by the 'front-line' service. The majority of enquiries related to financial matters. Detailed monitoring of referral information, at academic programme level, and analysis of key trends in referrals, enables the constituent services to be more pro-active in working with departments and to show their value. In addition such information informs front-line staff development needs. Reports are produced on usage data and key trends for each area. These are presented to a variety of groups and committees within the university, including faculty boards and working groups and the university Equal Opportunities Advisory Group and Academic Board.

Impact on student success

At present there is no hard evidence of the impact of student services on student success. However, following feedback from the Access Fund Audit by HEFCE, the centre is currently conducting an analysis of hardship recipients to track academic progression. The setting up of this tracking system and subsequent analysis of findings has presented challenges, especially in identifying a valid benchmark for comparison.

Staff development

A shared location has enabled both formal and informal learning and development to take place between different services. Each year the team holds a department-wide event to address issues related to working practice. Themed workshops are also arranged on particular issues, usually in response to identified need from casework (e.g. responding to trauma).

The department has recently been awarded 'Investors in People' status and takes an active role in both delivering and receiving staff development within the university. The team provides a session in the postgraduate certificate in higher education which new members of teaching staff take as part of their induction and in a parallel development programme for administrative staff. The department offers a portfolio of training opportunities on an annual basis, which are offered across the institution on a bespoke basis to individual academic departments and faculty offices.

Staff also take up the opportunity to further their own development externally. A number of staff have external commitments contributing to sector-wide debate/policy in the area of student support/student affairs e.g. members of steering groups. Plans to identify accredited development routes for new front line staff are also being developed.

Links within the institution

There is much cross-referral between services

e.g. chaplaincy and counselling. There is also an effective working relationship with the Students' Union, which provides complementary services (e.g. nursery, employment store). Student support services also has strong links with the Centre for Academic Practice, contributing to project bids and key university strategies and policies. Different members of the team represent the department on a range of committees and groups across the institution, and there are good links with senior management, facilitated by regular meetings. Links with academic departments are strong, with several referral systems integrated into admissions and course administration procedures. Referral systems have been strengthened through course and subject review processes.

Links with external agencies

Members of the team are involved with external organisations and a number have external roles/commitments. At practitioner level, there are good working relationships with counterparts at other universities e.g. international students' officers. The team have also set up their own networks to share good practice, for example, complaints procedures, hardship fund administration and there has been some sharing of good practice at conferences e.g. chaplains, disability provision.

Cost effectiveness

Initial costs to establish the units are high, but once established they are cost effective in terms of the use of resources. The department is constantly monitoring and reflecting on the services provided. Cost effective strategies adopted include maximising the use of targeted funding streams, being clear about the services that are on offer (and whether they are essential) and rationalising administrative resources. The majority of staff are on on-going contracts.

6.8.4 Strengths of this initiative

There are a considerable number of benefits for both staff and students in taking a one-stop-shop approach to student services:

Staff

- Supportive work environment and help is always at hand – front line staff.
- Raises profile of every service.
- Increases confidence and pride (especially when working with external agencies).
- Formal and informal sharing of knowledge.
- Every service is equally important – including those that are funded externally (e.g. health and chaplaincy).
- Breaking down barriers of different professional ‘domains’.
- Able to maintain intensity of work.

Students

- Reduces stigma in accessing support.
- More efficient referral.
- Students establish links with more than one member of staff.
- Easier to access and find right service.

6.8.5 Issues and challenges

- Initial resistance from staff to change working practice – concerned to maintain professional boundaries.
- Need to raise awareness within the university of the differentiation of services – may all be seen as ‘counselling’ services.

6.9 Roehampton Educational Development (RED) Centre, University of Surrey, Roehampton

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6.9.1 Institutional context

University of Surrey, Roehampton was formally Roehampton Institute, a college of higher education

with its roots in teacher education. It is now a part of Surrey University. It is located in four small colleges and operates under a college system. It is based in adjacent campuses in a suburb of south-west London. Its student intake has changed in response to widening participation and includes many local students.

6.9.2 Initiative details

The Roehampton Educational Development (RED) centre is a centralised service which brings together the Disability Service, Dyslexia Support, generic learning support for students, subject specific support in the form of collaboration with academic staff in curricular and pedagogical innovation, and the work of the Widening Participation Unit.

6.9.3 Distinctive features

- The centre integrates student support within the context of learning development and seeks to play a key strategic role in developing student centred provision across the university.
- It also plays a key role in Quality and Standards and the development of programme specifications and this is a powerful tool in working with staff at a departmental level.

Identifying and consulting the target group

The target group for learning support is mainly students who enter HE with gaps in their academic skills. However the service is not identified as remedial and is open to all students. Subject specific support is designed for identified students who are failing or underachieving on their course. Dyslexic students and students with disabilities are targeted pre entry if they have made a statement of disclosure, which many students will not do. It is important that their take up of the service then proceeds on a voluntary basis. Provision of services is evaluated at the point of delivery and is taken into consideration in future planning. Qualitative consultation also takes place through focus groups held in the summer. Changes are made as a result of consultation, for example, more drop-in facilities are now available.

Use by the target group

Demand for the services of the RED centre is high, particularly by mature students and students with dyslexia. In its work with academic departments it tends to work proactively trying to create a climate of demand and use of its services.

Addressing issues of diversity and equality

The RED centre develops its provision in response to the growing diversity of needs experienced by its students, and it is particularly aware of issues faced by mature students, working-class students and students with disabilities. The work of the Widening Participation Unit, which was established in 2002 will clearly play an important role in the ongoing development of targeted initiatives.

Supporting students across the lifecycle

The service can be seen to impact on the lifecycle, both in influencing the ongoing learning development offered to students and in providing interventions at key moments of particular need such as assessments. The RED centre is maximising its impact at the beginning of the cycle by developing the range of information provided for new and prospective students, including a guide for part-time students. It is also running a series of one-day events for targeted groups: local students, mature students and students coming via clearing. This will introduce them to successful learning skills and raise their awareness of the support available in the university.

Monitoring procedures

Statistics are kept to monitor the number of students using different services. Follow-up interviews take place with participants. The completion rates of students using the Dyslexia Support Service are very closely monitored. However more systematic and tighter monitoring of student support has been identified as an area of possible development for the university.

Impact on student success

There is statistical evidence to suggest that the service has a beneficial effect on rates of completion. Qualitative feedback from participants also indicates that the RED Centre has contributed to the success of their studies. The centre undertakes some specific academic development work with students in particular departments which is aimed to improve the quality of their work. For example, a six week project was run with students from Humanities and Cultural Studies across a range of subjects and years to support and develop their academic writing skills.

Staff development

Staff development is an important aspect of the RED centre's work, as it seeks to contribute to learning and teaching development across disciplines. It runs a diverse continuing professional development programme for staff with seminars, workshops and programmes focusing on the following key areas: Developing Professional Practice, Quality and Standards Development, Key Skills in Higher Education, Distributed Learning, Exploring Higher Education, and The Learning Experience. It has a key role in the development of innovative pedagogy and virtual learning. It also contributes proactively to programme boards and departmental away-days.

Links within the institution

Links with other student support services such as counselling are maintained by a system of committees and not by any centralised management system. Links with departments are facilitated via the academic tutor system. The role of the academic tutors is to help students with procedures and regulations and they liaise closely with the RED centre. In general self referral by students is preferred and this results in a more sustained use of the service, but students are also encouraged to use the RED centre by tutors and academic tutors. The centre is represented on nearly all major

committees and sub committees and reports to Pro Vice-Chancellor level. This is helpful for networking and raising its profile.

Links with external agencies

The university is part of the south-west London sub-regional Widening Participation Partnership and has partnerships with all seven FE colleges in the area. The RED centre provision thus has strong formal and informal links with these colleges and this facilitates the transition of students from FE to the university. It does not have the facilities to provide services within the partner colleges but feels this would be beneficial. The RED centre is also able to benefit from developments in the FE sector, for example in learning skills.

Cost effectiveness

The RED centre is partly funded via the postcode premium and also bids for special funding for specific projects from HEFCE. It also generates a small surplus via dyslexia support which allows them to support students who are very needy, such as international students with learning support needs. There is anecdotal evidence that the high profile given to student support/learning skills encourages recruitment to the university, particularly of students changing university through the CATS scheme.

6.9.4 Strengths of this initiative

- Links student support to educational development and delivers a range of services.
- It also has levers to effect positive change via its role in Quality and Standards. It is set within the widening participation framework and addresses the diverse needs of students at a curricular and pedagogic level contributing to cultural change within the classroom.
- Has a particularly well-developed Dyslexia Support Service.
- Has strong links with FE which supports student transition.

6.9.5 Issues and challenges

- There is a tension between the strong student demand for generic centrally-based support services and the need to embed educational development at a departmental level. The RED centre has taken over many student support functions. This may sometimes be seen as ‘empire building’ by the rest of the university, who can be antagonistic to top sliced centralised funding. This can be problematic in developing its key collaborative work.

6.10 University of Teesside: Integrated Student Services

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6.10.1 Institutional context

Teesside University gained university status in 1992, and is located on a single campus in Middlesborough. It consistently recruits above its benchmarks with regard to students from state schools, social classes III_m, IV and V and low participation neighbourhoods. 50% of students come from the Tees Valley and 70% from the northern region. Approximately two-thirds of students are over 21, and less than 50% of all students study full-time. It is a predominantly white university, although almost 5% are international students. Just over 5% of students report a disability. Its overall rate of retention is 85%, and it rates of withdrawal for both young and mature students converge with the institutional benchmarks.

6.10.2 Initiative details

The integrated student services consists of: advisory services, careers, counselling, accommodation, student finance, sport and recreation and childcare. The integration has two elements: a clear management structure allowing common themes to be addressed and consistent standards and procedures to be implemented; and a

shared physical location at the centre of the campus. This provides a focal point for students and facilitates co-operation, referral and mutual learning between the various student services. Student services were located together in June 1998, and the current management structure was established in January 2000. The new management structure includes a management team of six people and aims to move away from people representing their own specialist area, to them having responsibilities that cut across the department.

6.10.3 Distinctive features

- Inclusion of sport and recreation, with an emphasis on participation and well-being (rather than competition). The project 'Lightening Your Load' links physical exercise and recreation with other student services (e.g. counselling, mental health, health and disability). This is intended to: promote a sense of well being for the body and mind, encourage sport and recreation as a form of self-help; help raise confidence, self-esteem and energy levels; and develop a sense of belonging and participation in the life of the university.
- Inclusion of the accommodation service and the University Managed Housing Scheme, provides a direct link with the vast majority of students who relocate to attend university, and reinforces the university's support role.
- A strong focus on staff development across the institution to develop awareness, trust and skills amongst other staff coming into contact with students.

Identifying and consulting the target group

Student services aim to be used by all students; the range of services available helps to ensure it is an essential port of call, rather than last resort. In addition there are targeted activities, e.g. informing eligible students about opportunity bursaries, inviting mature students to student services prior to the start of term; and contacting students who declare a disability directly. Apart from the student wardens who are employed in university accommodation, there is no formal student involvement or consultation regarding the

management, contents or delivery of student services, however some services (such as the Eating Disorders Group and the Relaxation Workshop) were developed in response to informal feedback from service users.

Use by the target group

There is no specific target group, student services works with potential entrants as well as students and graduates. It is argued that Integrated Student Services promotes use by 'at risk' students by avoiding stigmatisation and by simplifying access and referral. In-reach work aims to encourage referrals from other staff members, and targeting and awareness raising schemes are used where appropriate.

Addressing issues of diversity and equality

The service is open to anyone, including applicants. All students are given a simple induction message that student services is the place to go with any query, problem etc. Front desk staff are central in diagnosing and referring students to the appropriate service(s). In addition, Student Services works closely with the international office, the former dealing with pastoral issues and the latter with more formal application and recruitment issues. Student services was opened later in the evening for an experimental period, but it was not used (e.g. by part-time students).

Supporting students across the lifecycle

Student Services provide pre-entry information, and may be accessed by potential entrants and their families prior to application and entry. The range of services means that students can use different services during the student lifecycle.

Impact on student success

There is no formal evidence of the impact of student services on student success/retention, but there are individual testimonies of value, including the students who were interviewed for this research study.

Staff development

The integrated approach has facilitated informal and formal learning between staff, enabling them to understand other areas of professional practice, and exchange experiences. Staff development for the whole of Student Services is now the responsibility of one member of the management team. The department contributes to staff induction and the postgraduate certificate in higher education for new members of academic staff. In addition they organise specific seminars and training activities, but attendance is voluntary. In-reach develops knowledge and trust amongst staff to enable them to refer students to Student Services, and provides them with skills to work better with a more diverse student body.

Links within the institution

There are effective linkages with services not integrated into Student Services, many of which are in the same building. It is necessary to build trust with academic staff at all levels to ensure students are referred to the support available. Each member of the management team now has responsibility to liaise with one of the academic schools to enhance relationships. For departmental student support (combining pastoral and academic support), Student Services have drawn up minimum standards for provision, but the contents are designed and delivered by each school. There are good working relationships with the Students' Union (especially the permanent staff), and referrals are made between services, but these relationships are based on personal relationships, rather than formal arrangements.

Links with external agencies

Not many external referrals are made, and they do not refer regularly to any particular agency; if an issue becomes prominent then they would set up provision within Student Services. They are working towards getting a GP based at the university to facilitate referrals to other health services. There are networks involving FE

partners to discuss contemporary issues, share good practice and ultimately to facilitate progression from local FE colleges to the university.

Cost effectiveness

Bringing student services together has not saved money as most of the annual budget is committed to salaries in advance, but it develops the capacity of the team to deliver. Cost effectiveness is achieved by changing the roles that people play (and this is facilitated within an integrated student services). For example, the role of counsellors has been redefined and re-directed into staff development and training to utilise skills around boundary setting. New expenditure priorities tend to be opportunistic rather than strategically planned, for example taking advantage of new funding streams or creating a new post when a member of staff leaves the department. The overall resource concern is the importance which is attached to the work of student services, and the extent to which this is reflected in resource models.

6.10.4 Strengths of this initiative

- The Integrated Student Services is well-established, and the initial teething problems have largely been overcome; staff work well together offering an integrated service to students and promoting mutual learning.
- The combination of services removes Student Services from emergency welfare intervention to having positive contact with the majority of students as a matter of course (e.g. for accommodation, finance, sport and recreation, etc).
- Student service-wide application of the Careers Matrix Standards is exemplary.
- Minimum standards for student support in academic schools allows flexibility to accommodate differences between disciplines.

6.10.5 Issues and challenges

- To ensure that at risk students are reached and access the services they need.

- To interact with students throughout the lifecycle, especially prior to entry. This may involve a more a pro-active approach by Student Services.
- To create and utilise a more comprehensive monitoring system, and to evaluate the experience and impact of Student Services.
- To find ways of reaching staff who do not voluntarily participate in staff development delivered by Student Services.

7. Analysis of empirical data

The following themes were generated by an initial analysis of the data from the case studies, followed by a further analysis informed by discussion at the participative conference.

7.1 Supporting a diverse student population

7.1.1 Developing a widening participation/ equal opportunities framework

Although the response from the sector discussed in Section 5.1 indicates a reluctance to attribute specific needs to specific groups of students, and an emphasis on treating each student as an individual, it is also important to recognise that structural factors such as race and class do have an impact on student success. Whilst it may be dangerous to make assumptions about student need, since groups are not homogeneous and students may bring with them a multiplicity of demands which cross categories, student services do need to find a way of responding to the permutation within individual cases, whilst also addressing structuring inequalities. This is particularly important if the widening participation agenda is to be realised. Moreover, it must be acknowledged that this is a key but problematic issue for HEIs as a whole, not just for student services. There was widespread acknowledgement that services need to be well publicised, easily accessible and welcoming to encourage their use by all students. However, a more targeted approach is also needed to break down those barriers which make accessing them particularly difficult and unequal for some students. This requires three levels of response.

- **Issue-based responses**

In general some student services staff feel that issue rather than group based provision is more successful, therefore research and consultation is needed to establish what issues are most important to target groups and how issues can

impact differently upon them. For example, transport and finance have been identified as serious issues for working-class students. Timetabling and childcare impact on mature students.

- **Need-based responses**

Certain groups of students do face different problems and have needs which require a focused approach, this can take the form of specific projects, such as Impact to meet the employment needs of ethnic minorities, or the adaptation/development of existing services, for example email counselling to better reach Asian /Afro Caribbean men. In both cases these services can also add value to those outside the target group.

- **Strategic responses**

A strategic widening participation/equal opportunities frame should underlie all student services, thus meeting the needs of a diverse student population becomes integral to all its work. This is an important level at which to work.

The University of Greenwich is a positive example of a service which consciously and proactively works at the strategic level: “widening participation and equal opportunity are our two dominant paradigms” (Head of Student Services). It prioritises services under this framework and targets areas of need, but it also achieves a very high take up of its service amongst students overall, thus indicating that ‘open’ access and targeting are not mutually exclusive. Such a framework requires far more than a paper commitment and will not be achieved overnight. At Greenwich it is formalised and applied via a commonly agreed code of practice for each service, is integrated and developed via its steering group and is used to develop the priorities and strategic development of both the service and staff, which includes developing links with local communities. Most importantly it is reflected in the diversity of the staff and their commitment to this ethos, which has been achieved by positive action such as recruiting in the

ethnic minority press, encouragement of applications by underrepresented groups and addressing equality issues in interview. However, Greenwich raises the important issue that student services should not be asked to compensate for lack of diversity within the institution as a whole.

“We’re ahead of the institution. It’s not necessarily the same as this in academic departments. Sometimes when students come to see me as a counsellor there’s a bit of a surprise to see a Black man on the other side of the door.” (Counsellor)

“I couldn’t talk to my personal tutor about my problems, they don’t understand my culture. In order to feel comfortable within this place I had to go to counselling.” (Black student)

Supporting and reflecting diversity has to be an institution wide and sector wide responsibility - the onus cannot just be placed on student services:

“Do you sometimes feel student services are trying to make up for things other people aren’t doing?”

“Definitely, yeah!”

“Yeah definitely!”

“The burden is put on them.”

“They’re the parents!”

(Student focus group)

The research explored particular issues relating to different groups of students. The following sections will analyse these in more detail.

7.1.2 Supporting ethnic minority students

“We feel a barrier between us and white students, even if nothing is said.”

“Sometimes tutors can’t help even if they want to, because they don’t know how, they don’t understand the culture and haven’t been through the same problems.” (Asian Students, focus group)

The research revealed that ethnic minority students experience barriers between themselves and white students and staff and can suffer direct and indirect discrimination in the HEI and the outside world. Acknowledging that these barriers are real, with powerful implications for students, is seen as the first step in developing strategies for success at both the service and student level.

“You need to recognise that there are barriers so you can address them and move forward.” (Asian student)

In a climate of rising incidents of racism and anti-Semitism, accompanied by the rise of Far Right groups and the growing resistance by ethnic minority youth, it is absolutely crucial that HEIs, including student services, tackle this issue. The question of refugees and asylum seekers complicates the larger picture and is also a growing issue within HEIs. It is important, not only for institutions with a significant ethnic minority population, but for those where ethnic minority students are a tiny minority, to address the support of ethnic minorities: “I’d want even more support there - I’d feel really isolated” (Asian student). The incidence of student services targeted at the needs of ethnic minority groups seems to be very low. Very few examples were put forward for this research and most were special projects which had been funded by HEFCE.

The success of the Impact project at Huddersfield, Bradford, Leeds and Leeds Metropolitan Universities illustrates that need-based services are effective and necessary to combat the disadvantages faced by ethnic minority students: in this case the lower rates of employment amongst ethnic minority graduates. Although part of the strength of this initiative is its clear focus, it is also raising confidence and contributing to academic success more generally. Resources should be put into such targeted work in institutions with small numbers of ethnic minority students as well as institutions where they are well represented. The Impact project illustrates that partnerships can work effectively to maximise such resources for targeted provision.

However, targeting ethnic minorities at the strategic level is even more important. HEIs need to monitor the take up of student services by ethnicity and also seek qualitative feedback. User-friendly services require ethnic minority staff both in targeted provision and in mainstream lecturing and support positions. In reach is needed to promote cultural awareness amongst both lecturing and student support staff about the different needs of British born ethnic minorities. Services also need to respond to gender issues amongst ethnic minorities. Attention to lifecycle dimensions is also important, for example ethnic minorities who are not local students can experience double isolation and need particular support in induction, whilst transition to employment requires extra support for ethnic minority students.

It is most important that ethnic minorities are not characterised as a problem. Ethnic minorities bring new sets of knowledge into institutions - this should be respected and reflected in the curriculum. Their potential for networking and peer support should also be utilised by student services. Above all a sense of belonging must be fostered without threatening the loss of cultural identity. This is a difficult balancing act and has been faced internationally, for example at the Maia Centre in New Zealand, which seeks to integrate Maori students whilst validating their customs.

“We can keep our culture and move on.”(Asian Student)

7.1.3 Supporting working-class students

“Employers want a certain kind of person, middle-class, the right accent - not someone from the streets.” (Working-class student)

“We’re seeing here (the HEI) the manifestation of why working-class students are still getting low status jobs - it’s the way they speak, the way they dress, their register of language. Some students feel they’re being marginalised and being attacked for being working-class. It’s a very delicate set of issues but I don’t think its one we can

duck from. I think for years and years people have been saying there's no problem, everyone is welcome, but now its come home to roost.”(Head of Learning Development)

“The problem is - when students don't speak the language, everyone just assumes they're thick.” (Workshop member, participative conference)

The issue of support for working-class students was felt to be a nettle that HEIs had yet failed to grasp. Offering open access to a system which is in many ways unreconstructed and imbued with middle-class assumptions, can set working-class students up to fail. The above quotes indicate how the support of working-class students links to issues of employability and to contradictory positions on class and identity. Students are aware that they are assigned negative positions because of class and consequently are far less likely to self identify as working-class than as, say, mature; this is also compounded by a fear that what they are offered may threaten their identity. This poses real problems for student services.

However, there are ways in which student services can respond positively. There appears to be a dearth of real information about the issues facing working-class students in different institutions. This needs to be addressed through consultation and research. When issues are known to be of particular significance, for example finance, concrete steps can be taken, such as the prioritising of financial support to lone parents at Greenwich University. Middle-class students often gain advantage from the cultural capital gained from their family involvement in HE. Initiatives such as CAAS at Manchester University can help redress this imbalance by helping and guiding working-class students through the complexity of the university system. At a strategic level, educational development initiatives such as the Widening Participation Unit at Surrey University, Roehampton can work with academic departments to improve students' learning skills and to think through the

curricular and pedagogic challenges posed by working-class students. Two difficult objectives need to be sustained: changing the assumptions of both university and employers and helping students to be in a position where they can operationalise middle class cultural capital when they choose, without surrendering their working-class identity. At present widening participation has not been successful in attracting working-class students, if this is to change, the complexity of their support needs must be recognised and resourced.

7.1.4 Supporting mature students

“You've got three people in here and we've all got completely different needs, you know. Mine's more money and I've got a lot of time and you've got no time.”

“It's not about a free canvas, that's what its all about.”

(Focus group, mature students)

The research indicated both the many differences between mature students and the factor which seemed to hold them together: lack of a 'free canvas' to study and the need to juggle many diverse responsibilities. Take up of services by mature students was not perceived as a problem by student services staff, in fact mature students were particularly quick to perceive the value of services such as learning skills and formed the majority of users in the first semester at the RED centre Roehampton. Mature students were not averse to being identified and were positive about targeted initiatives such as the mature students' adviser at Hull University.

Since mature students can enter the university in a multiplicity of ways, the development of electronic and paper resources to reach them pre and post entry was felt to be important. In particular the need for additional targeting and publicity for mature students who haven't entered via local FEC Access courses was stressed. Certain learning strategies, such as early assessments, were thought useful to help mature students and lecturers judge their starting level. The value of a targeted service such as a mature students' adviser was that it could

operate at the level of both need and strategy. It could help identify problems and make referrals across to other services, and via its research and subsequent experience working with mature students, it has a key role to play in informing the institution as a whole about the role of mature students. Thus all mature students can benefit, not only those who access the service.

It seems fair to say that student services feel more satisfied about their support of mature students than some other student groups. However, it was interesting to note that students themselves perceived mature students as being afraid to take up support services such as counselling: “they think its just for the young ones they think its not for them.” (Student); there may be hidden needs and normalising patterns which are not at first apparent and need to be further investigated.

7.1.5 Supporting part-time students

“I don’t think that part-time students look to the university to provide the things that full-time students look to the university to provide, there isn’t that body of expectation, their being isn’t defined by being a student.” (Head of Student Services)

“Part-time students have as much right to services as full-time students do.” (Counsellor)

Student services felt that part-time students basically want the same support as full-time students but, with appropriate interventions at appropriate moments. However this is hard to get right. Some, such as Greenwich, have found opening their services until late essential, some, such as Teesside and Nottingham Trent, have tried and found no one came. Local patterns of employment, transport and leisure impact strongly on how part-time students use services and it is essential to tap into such local knowledge. It was felt by some practitioners that part-time students and those that live at home have alternative support networks and do not rely so heavily on student services, however this might also be a factor of

their marginalisation from the institution as a whole and could be a dangerous assumption: “They’re not all there under your nose everyday, that’s how they slip through the net” (Academic). The other aspects of their lives, jobs, families, mean that time to access services is minimal and precious. Consultation with students, for example at Roehampton, has revealed that flexibility is crucial, in particular the availability of drop in and distance provision. At the strategic level, student support such as careers, should be integrated within part-time courses. With part-time provision increasing and this being a route whereby many more working-class students may access HE, much more attention needs to be given to part-time support.

7.1.6 Supporting international students

“There’s no fit between their expectations and those of the institution - they just don’t match.”(Head of Learning Support)

Although many institutions have international student recruitment drives, for example Bournemouth University envisaged increasing its numbers by 15% per annum, there was concern that these students were given little preparation for British academic norms and culture. Different pedagogic traditions and approaches to assessment caused these students considerable problems. Moreover, there was some indication that home students were reluctant to form study groups with international students, for fear they would hold them back. Shame of failure was a powerful inhibitor to the take up of service and international students often shared the problems of racism and cultural barriers faced by British born ethnic minorities. Although international students did use services such as peer support at Bournemouth University, or CAAS at Manchester, there was a danger that these were often the more successful students.

Pastoral and social support was needed to address cultural isolation, for example the work of the international students’ adviser at Teesside, and learning skills needed to be targeted at international students, as in the Roehampton RED centre. The importance of religious and spiritual support in

redressing the problem of cultural isolation should also be recognised. It was often found that international students required intense pastoral and study support during the first semester. Liaison across services for international students could be facilitated in different ways, for example in Teesside the international students' adviser provided pastoral care while other services were provided by the international office upstairs, which focused on recruitment and applicants. A role was also seen for a coordinator who could direct students to services and build links between people with similar characteristics, such as being from the same country. At Nottingham Trent University, a weekly coffee morning for international students is held in the student services building. At a strategic level an environment has to be promoted which stresses the advantages of multi-cultural learning to future employability.

The question of the expectations of international students is double edged. They justifiably expect a learning environment in which they are able to succeed, having made a significant commitment in coming to Britain, often including responsibilities to employers and governments. However, they may also have unrealistic expectations of the type and level of work which they will be undertaking and how it will be evaluated. If they are to be supported, both legitimate and false expectations must be addressed.

7.2 Disability

“In the field of disability we've not only had lack of knowledge, but the visibility of a lot of prejudice. I can think of some people, good, kind people who say 'of course disabled students should be able to come to university, but surely they want to do business studies.'”

The research revealed that students with a disability continue to experience discrimination in higher education in a variety of ways. This discrimination may be indirect from staff who want to help but don't know how to, or from students who do not

understand and see the student gaining additional support. As one student explained:

“Other students see me as getting something extra, but just getting to their level. They think my note taker does my homework”.

Students expressed the need for increased awareness of disability issues across the whole institution, including other students, but in a way that does not individually identify them.

There was evidence throughout the case studies of differences within and between institutions in how disabled students are treated and supported. However, a widespread problem for student services appears to be in getting staff, in particular academics, to take part in disability-awareness training. There was recognition that academic staff do have other constraints on their time and will take up staff development when necessary, however, there was also strong feeling that some simply perceived disability as too difficult and therefore are discouraged from taking action.

“Academics just don't have the time to prioritise disability.” (Practitioner)

“Interesting because people put it quite high up on their priority list but there are so many things on their priority list it's not something they've given time over. People won't prioritise if they don't see the need.” (Practitioner)

Pre-entry advice and support for disabled students are crucial to enable them to make an informed choice about which institution to attend. Staff need to be clear at the application stage what support is going to be available to students; often students are coming from a supportive environment and may struggle to cope if this is not maintained. Pre-entry support is also vital so that disabled students can immediately access the course. If they do not have the necessary equipment available straightaway, then they will not be able to fully participate. It is still apparent that some students with disabilities do

not declare on application for fear of being stigmatised, and this can be particularly problematic, especially in the case of unseen disabilities. A proactive approach is required on the part of student services.

The Learning Support Unit team at Manchester Metropolitan University are working pro-actively with departments to send out introductory information to students who declare a disability on application. The unit has adopted an inclusive approach to learning support and aims to address individual learners' needs rather than placing emphasis on the disability. This approach helps to overcome some of the problems regarding stigma in accessing support, and also recognises that disabled students will often have multiple needs.

“If you have somebody for each type of issue you end up with a lot of bits of things which never get pulled together in a cohesive way.” (Practitioner)

“I need to be treated as an all-round person, rather than a label.” (Student)

Support for disabled students during their time in higher education needs to be continuous, and the role of the personal tutor was seen as particularly important. Evidence from both student services staff and students reveal that there are problems regarding monitoring of disabled students. Staff were concerned that monitoring could result in a student being stigmatised, however students stressed that following their initial assessment, student services staff need to enforce their statements of need more. For example, students at some institutions should have access to lecture notes, “but rarely do lecturers have these themselves and when they do, they're out of date” (Student). Responsibility is left with students to get in touch but they sometimes felt like they were “grassing on the tutor”.

With increased numbers of disabled students entering higher education, and with the recent legislative changes, support for disabled students must continue to be a high priority for student

services. However what has to be recognised, and at the highest level, is that disability is an institution-wide responsibility and not simply that of student services. Often the problems students encounter are not with the disability service but with regard to teaching and learning, and this looks set to be the challenge for the future. There is a particular need for increased flexibility. For example, some students stressed the importance of them being able to communicate by email but remarked that “often staff don't use email, or don't know how to”. Communication between staff regarding students with disabilities also needs to improve, some students still face the situation of having to continually inform new course tutors of their disability. Some students may not discover or develop a disability until they are attending an HEI. Academics therefore need to be able to spot the early warning signs so that students can access support before reaching crisis point.

7.3 Supporting student independence

There is clearly a tension between ‘picking up’ and referring students who are experiencing difficulties and encouraging independence. It was widely acknowledged by both students and staff that self-referral is the preferred option resulting in more sustained use of a service. Students commented that the “student has to go and see (adviser) when it's right for them” and staff that “Part of what we want to do is put information out there to help students be self-sufficient”. Similarly other staff express the opinion that they had to work hard to prevent students from becoming too dependent. So, for example, in one initiative focusing on student well-being, although student files are kept open for the duration of their time in the institution, it is left to the student to make contact; “(I) don't want to encourage dependency so if I'm following them up all the time it goes against why they've come to university a lot of the time”. Similarly, a second institution experienced a dilemma between supporting students experiencing financial hardship, in terms of not pursuing rent arrears, and encouraging students to be independent and financially responsible. However, achieving a balance can be problematic, and support structures

have to be clearly visible and accessible to both students and staff, as is evident from the following comment.

“In university it’s a very help yourself environment and I accept that it has to be like that. You are supposed to be adults and you are supposed to learn how to live independently and learn independently but I feel that too many people don’t really give a damn. Sometimes you just need that extra little bit of support. I think that’s the issue. But if you don’t know what support’s there for you if you need it you can’t possibly get it can you? It should be made very, very clear to you that you do have these support avenues open and what they can help you with.” (Student)

This problem is acknowledged by support staff within the same institution, who are endeavouring to make support systems visible to both students and staff. For example one adviser describes this process as:

“I’ve met a lot of students who have said oh that’s it, I’m going to fail this, I can’t do this exam, I’m just going to have to drop out ... and they speak to me or their personal tutor and they can find out they can negotiate. ... they don’t realise that the university wants them to succeed, and wants them to complete successfully and they don’t realise that. That’s quite a key thing that students don’t realise. They think that oh that’s it. They’re not going to be able to do their exams in June, they’re going to have to leave. It’s not like that. There are always ways round a particular difficulty they may have ... all that stuff isn’t always made very clear to people because I suppose they don’t want to encourage students to abuse the system. So if they don’t tell everyone they’ll catch the students who really do need those systems. I suppose having someone like me helps make those systems clearer as well, they can be quite complicated Often tutors will just say you have to fill in one of

these (mitigating circumstances form) and leave it to them. But when you’re in distress any little stress is magnified”.

Similarly, support needs vary, and students stress the importance of support during their settling in period, when many students are more dependent, and of getting information in an accessible format.

“It’s pointless having a load of leaflets that you can’t read.” (Disabled student)
“Having more of an atmosphere of actually caring about the student’s welfare is important. Yes the students know they’re here to learn independently and all the rest of it but that doesn’t mean that they immediately are completely self sufficient, because no-one is at any time of their life really. For many, many students it’s the first time they’ve left home and that is a huge thing for some people and that’s when they perhaps need more support.” (Student)

Described as an ‘old problem’ by senior student services staff, one suggestion made to overcome the tension between ‘pick up’ and self-referral is to put in place a network of entry and ‘pick up’ points to facilitate access. Other entry points into networks are consequently a key factor in success, for example, GPs on campus, chaplains, personal tutors and other students.

Examples

The chaplaincy can provide a 'value added' aspect in that they are trained to 'pick up on people' who are perhaps more vulnerable, are perceived as being 'out and about' in the HEI rather than as a service, and frequently act as a key pick up point. Although externally funded, at Nottingham Trent University, the chaplaincy is physically located within Student Services. Students can approach chaplains for an informal chat over a cup of coffee, and/or take part in social activities e.g. weekly bread and cheese lunch, walks in the Peak District. A

24 hour on-call rota is provided by the chaplains, who also carry out 'home visits'.

“We get an overview of the whole university in a way that nobody else does. We know the cleaners, security staff, the students, academics, librarians, everyone. A lot of them go to Mass and again it's this sort of personal contact. So you get a feel of what's going on across the whole place.”
(Chaplain)

Personal tutors are also seen as vital in this process:

“Yes to the point where we want to think about giving them extra support and helping them understand disability generally. But if you look at it in a much broader sense they're the point of contact a student has so they could be a really good referral point for all sorts of different things. And at their best they are. But they're under immense pressure so what I think we've got to do is make the support easier to find so they don't think, who on earth can I contact?”

However, student experience of personal tutors can be variable as illustrated by the following comment from a student asked how s/he thought students were 'picked up' if they were having problems:

“I'm not sure they are full stop. I think occasionally if a student confides in their personal tutor. But that only happens if you have a decent personal tutor but a lot of the time you don't”.

While student services are clearly aware of many of the barriers to access, and strive to overcome these (e.g. promotional work, physical location of student services with 'normalising' services such as accommodation etc.) students still feel that there is a stigma attached to student support which acts to prevent some from accessing services. Perceptions of stigma vary according to student and the type of service accessed. Accessing mental health

services, for example, is still perceived by students generally and by certain ethnic groups particularly, as stigmatising.

7.4 Mental well-being

The mental well-being of students is a growing area of concern for many institutions. This is both in terms of general well-being, in that many students face increasing pressure during their time in HE, but also in relation to more specific mental well-being issues. For example, some senior student services staff feel that the move towards selection on paper has meant that more people with mental health issues no longer have to go through a stressful interview procedure, are less likely to self-declare and consequently are more likely to arrive at an HEI and not be picked up until they reach a crisis. Provision of counselling has been of vital importance to many students and qualitative data from counselling services shows that the majority of students who are at risk of leaving when they start counselling decide to remain in HE by the end of the process (McMinn, 2002). Changes in the rate of problem severity are also positively indicated.

7.4.1 Raising awareness

There is still a stigma attached to issues of mental well-being. Feedback from the participative conference stressed the importance of referring to mental-well being rather than mental health, and participants in the research endorsed the need to raise awareness. Student comments indicate that although support for students with special education needs has progressed, there is much more of a stigma attached to mental well-being issues. The importance of staff training in relation to this was emphasised, and that this training needs to be across the board; “I think the staff need better training about it. I think that the (student) wardens need a hell of a lot more training” (Student). However, whilst HEIs are fully aware of the need for promotion, because of restrictions in resources available the focus is on actual support and there is little time or resources left over to fund staff development or promotional activities. Some HEIs are trying to overcome this problem by using students in, for example, the School of Health, to

engage in promotion which would then form part of their work placement.

The difficulties posed by dealing with mental health issues was stressed:

“It’s such a big issue and affects so many different people. Because if someone is having a mental health problem they are extremely distressed and it can affect the mental health of other staff and students so you are not just caring for that one person, you are looking after the mental health of staff and students around them as well.”
(Non-academic staff member).

“(There have) often been cases where these students had just been put there by academic staff because they didn’t know what to do with the person. And they’re the people working on information desks and not particularly qualified in anyway to support these people and they managed the best they could and advised the best they could.”
(Student services staff member)

However, staff feel they are now carrying out their work to a higher standard. Comments from non-academic staff reiterate the importance of training in this respect.

“I’m not sure that we do get to these people particularly those who have a really deep-seated problem. But what I do know is that they’re not made even worse by a lack of care and attention and professionalism we now feel we can bring to it.”

“It’s knowing what you are doing is the right thing. It’s nice to know, that comfort zone, that what you are doing is in the right direction. The benefit to them is so much better because we can do a better job.”

7.4.2 Forms of support

Feedback from the sector suggests that there is a need for alternative forms of support for students

experiencing difficulties. Although counsellors play a multi-faceted role in supporting staff and in staff development, a multiple approach is essential in providing support. Drawing on comments made during the participative conference, and by students involved in the case studies, there is resistance on the part of some students to counselling and for others counselling is not the ‘right’ approach. However, different approaches need to be integrated to provide a coordinated service which is institution-wide.

In relation to mental well-being, having an intermediary who is a professional (i.e. with experience in the field of mental health) enables tutor and student to remain in a 'normal' relationship, to retain the sense of distance which exists between a tutor and student. Tutors are able to do this if they are secure in their knowledge that the student is being supported and cared for. However to have this sense of security, systems in place must be shown to be effective, transparent and monitored. This was reinforced by other staff who felt that it was ‘.. not always appropriate for a tutor to be talking to mental health staff for example a specialist’. Having this separate role, in which student and tutor are both treated as ‘clients’, protects student confidentiality but also ensures support. This is particularly true in relation to mental well being; students in distress are said to find it difficult to know what information to give to a tutor, the tutor is then left with a mass of information that is potentially hard to deal with, and the student can then feel uncomfortable and this can affect attendance – ‘to have someone that you can tell everything to and then they will filter essential information. Just the information the tutor wants to know. And the tutor doesn’t need to know everything’. This was reflected in comments from students:

“I couldn’t go to my personal tutor about my problems, it’s not good you know. In order to feel comfortable in this place I had to go to counselling”.

This also avoids attaching a label to the student:

“It’s important to lose those labels. There are a lot of misconceptions that surround those labels”.

Information is then passed on to all tutors dealing with the student, with the students’ approval:

“When a student is on a combined honours course .. you know, can you imagine? What often used to happen is the personal tutor would say go to tell all your other course tutors and sometimes you’re talking about five people this student has got to tell their whole life story to and it was really quite frightening for a lot of students. So to have somebody who can write a letter which gets circulated and they know that those tutors will know all that stuff without them having to say anything” (Student support staff member).

7.5 Peer support

It is widely acknowledged that information from peers carries more weight than that drawn from other sources, and many HEIs use existing students in open days for potential students. Prospective HE entrants, for example, are said to use a variety of 'hot' and 'cold' knowledge about possible destinations. Information from friends being described as 'hot' knowledge, that drawn from brochures as 'cold' (Ball *et al*, 2000: p77).

Research conducted widely in the US has also suggested that initiatives which use peer assisted learning can have a positive impact upon retention and academic success (for a fuller discussion see Capstick & Fleming, 2002). Research examining good practice in relation to peer support in the UK has established a number of key factors which enhance the success of initiatives in supporting student success (Thomas, unpublished):

- training and support for mentors;
- written information on course content for mentors to enable them to complement lectures through sessions;
- setting up of formal contact between academic mentors to share information and provide support;

- external marketing based on consultation with students who have participated in the programme;
- internal promotion;
- integration into other retention and teaching and learning strategies (e.g. encouraging tutors to refer borderline students and informing pre-entry students about schemes).

Feedback from the research process both reiterates and expands on these factors.

- Training and support for mentors is vital, and input from the Students’ Union can enhance the training process. In addition the value of training can be a key employability 'selling' point to potential mentors; “At all the interviews I went to they were really interested in it, always wanted to talk about it. About how useful it was. Because you can always put down 'I’ve got good interpersonal skills but you can rarely have evidence to say this is actually true. Whereas with (this scheme) you are working with the students all the time and you’ve actually got something to back yourself up with”.

Accreditation of training schemes adds to perceptions of value. Other institutions involved in mentoring schemes for international students 'sell' language skills as an advantage in the employment market.

- It is essential that there is clarity about sessions from the outset; whether they are academic or personal support and what they are meant to achieve. Sessions linked to course content were found to be more successful and have higher attendance:

“Most (students) would be really worried that they didn’t know where to start and if you could just point them in the right direction, you’ve not actually taught them anything but you’ve just said, we looked at these books, we’ve done these topics, if you understand this concept. One group came back and they were a lot happier, they had a bit more direction in what they were doing ... I’m sure it helps them” (Student mentor).

- Timetabling of sessions and staff support are fundamental to the success of peer support

schemes. Courses in which staff are fully behind the scheme tend to have good attendance at support sessions. However if staff are ‘under pressure’ promoting peer support does not feature highly on their list of priorities. Other staff see this type of support as low status and consequently do not provide enough of a ‘push’ to students to attend. Alternatively schemes are promoted as remedial and students are reluctant then to attend. Timetabling can help to integrate sessions particularly if information is sent out to students pre-entry.

- Input from the Students’ Union can be very influential in the success of these schemes in terms of promotion, representation on steering groups and as a source of well-developed training materials and programmes.
- An ongoing process of feedback from staff and students involved informs practice directly and facilitates evaluation of impact.

7.6 Student finance

Financial issues have not been covered in great depth in this report as they have been examined at length in numerous other evaluations and research projects. *The Access and Hardship Fund: Good Practice in Higher Education* (DfEE, 2000) for example sets out practical and useful ideas for giving financial help to students including criteria for good practice and a number of case studies. The significance of finance in terms of student support and retention has also been widely acknowledged (see for example the forthcoming report by Professor Claire Callender) and the growing demand for financial advice and assistance is evident. Exit interviews conducted in one post-1992 university, for example, have found that 20% of students cited financial reasons for withdrawal (Thomas, 2002). Financial issues are also discussed in Section 1.1.3 of this report.

7.6.1 Finance related issues

Many students face very real financial hardships which tend to exacerbate other problems. A senior student services staff member expressing the view that there has been a shift towards more finance-related problems commented:

“It’s about interaction. If we’re looking at mental health issues it’s not necessarily having a financial problem that’s going to cause that, but it creates greater strain. And then a student who has mental health problems often is someone who can’t get paid employment. They’re the ones who don’t quite get the job all the time. That creates a problem because they don’t develop skills from that employment. They don’t get money from that employment to support their financial position and you then get a mixture of problems which add in alongside mental health issues”.

Finance is clearly seen as a problem that most students now have. So much so, that it is almost seen as the ‘norm’ and in a number of institutions this has been used to remove some of the barriers to access and reduce stigmatisation attached to other services. For example, in some institutions student services integrate finance and careers to increase the flow of student ‘traffic’ into the site to normalise use of the service in general. Other institutions have encountered problems because finance is not grouped with student services, and is seen as part of administrative services:

“I think in terms of better understanding, access and referral, it would be better if student finance was part of students services. Does create some problems”
(Director, Student Services).

7.7 The role of monitoring, evaluation and research in student services

Despite being located within academic institutions, this study found that comparatively little policy and practice of student services is underpinned or supported by comprehensive monitoring, evaluation and research. This is not to say that no data collection is undertaken, but this is more likely to be monitoring rather than other forms of investigation. Where data is collected, it is not always fed back systematically into service provision. Evaluation and research are, therefore, perceived as areas of weakness, which is in part attributable to

methodological and confidentiality issues, but also to a lack of understanding or perhaps prioritising. Comments such as “For us this (i.e. evaluation and research) is a weakness” were commonplace.

To address these concerns it is useful to identify some of the key roles that monitoring, evaluation and research could play in relation to the effective delivery of student services:

- identifying student needs;
- monitoring usage levels and type;
- ensuring the quality of services;
- feedback from students;
- assessing the impact;
- value for money/cost-benefit.

7.7.1 Identifying student needs

In the light of the greater diversity within the student cohort, it is essential that student services are pro-active and responsive to the needs of new student groups. But, there is a potential danger that student services either continue to provide the diet of services that have always been available (which are largely historically defined and constrained by human resource commitments), or that they make assumptions about the perceived needs of traditionally excluded student groups, and thus services may be under-utilised or less effective than they might otherwise be. There is therefore an important need to undertake research to identify students’ needs.

Examples

In 2001 the University of Hull’s Widening Participation Group commissioned research to explore a broad range of aspects of the experience of non-traditional undergraduate students, with the specific purpose of identifying factors that may influence programme completion. The research, which was funded through the university’s postcode premium, contributes to one of the strategic objectives of the Widening Participation Strategy – to improve the retention rates of ‘widening participation’ students. The research was undertaken

collaboratively between Student Services and a member of academic staff. It employed a survey method to collect data from four groups of ‘non-traditional’ students (part-time students, mature students, students from low participation backgrounds and students with a disability) and a control group of ‘traditional’ students, at the two university sites. The research produced statistical base-line data about academic, demographic and social characteristics, reasons for studying at university, expectations and realities of university experiences, participation in academic and social life, experience of financial hardship, use of student services, thoughts about withdrawing from university and an evaluation of their overall experience. The research found that full-time mature students at the Hull campus were more likely to have considered withdrawing from higher education during the first year than any other student group. Primary reasons included finance, academic issues and domestic/personal reasons. The research also found that mature students participated less in the social life at university. In response to the question ‘What is missing from this university in respect of student support services is...’ 17% of mature full-time students at Hull ticked the response ‘a mature students adviser’. The University therefore decided to appoint a mature students adviser for full-time students at the Hull campus.

At Manchester Metropolitan University the ‘Attraction, Support and Retention Project’ conducted by the School of Humanities found that students often felt lost and did not know where to go for support. Sharing this information with Student Services enabled them to respond and provide students with better information about gaining support.

There are methodological debates about whether a survey, more qualitative work, or a combination of both is the most appropriate way to identify the barriers to success that under-represented groups face, but these examples demonstrate how collaboration between student services and academic departments to undertake research can inform practice.

7.7.2 Monitoring usage levels and types

Most services collect basic information about number (and type) of students. In some instances there is no requirement for this data to be reported or utilised.

Examples

CAAS (University of Manchester) has developed a statistical database of its users which records gender, age, fees status, origin, level of course, year of entry, current year of course and faculty. From this data an annual report is prepared which analyses trends, which are used in the forward planning of the service. In addition, detailed notes are recorded from each contact, and have been used to develop a rolling programme of research into student records from each faculty. This information will be used to feed back issues to the faculties and the university as a whole. Similarly, Sheffield Hallam University have developed a comprehensive data base system to record this type of information, and to track students. Manchester Metropolitan University has found text-messaging to be a useful way to track students with disabilities.

This information not only needs to be collected, but to be utilised too. Knowing the number, type of student and issues arising can be used both to inform the institution of the contribution it is making to supporting students to succeed, but also to learn and plan for the future. For example, in the University of Teesside the mental health support staff reported that they were dealing with increasing numbers of eating disorders, and subsequently set up an eating disorders support

group. At Nottingham Trent University, information about the usage of services helps to inform front-line staff development needs. Research participants commented that statistical data alone is rarely sufficient, and there is a need for other forms of evaluation.

7.7.3 Ensuring the quality of the service

Another dimension of evaluation is the quality of a service. This typically includes a set of standards and a process that compares the service against these. A less robust system may involve adhering to a voluntary code of practice. Within student services a variety of approaches such as Matrix, Investors in People and the European Framework have been developed. Different student support departments have sometimes made progress themselves, however, the development of a standard model with consistency across services would be of benefit.

Example

The University of Teesside is in the process of trying to apply the careers matrix standards to the whole Student Services department. The director of Student Services commented: "There is actually an excitement about that, recognising that the experience the careers service had can be transferred". To further this process, each service has created a statement of entitlement for students, which includes references to codes of practice and professional norms. These will provide clear standards against which to evaluate the quality of the service. Such an approach not only helps to ensure that students receive a quality service, but it provides a mechanism for staff to know that they are doing a good job.

7.7.4 Feedback from students

Consultation with students provides an opportunity to explore the types of services that are delivered, the contents and their effectiveness, and thus for changes to existing services to be made, and for new services to be developed. Some institutions

have undertaken student focus groups or have included questions about student services in institution wide student satisfaction surveys. Qualitative research however provides an opportunity for in-depth understanding of the barriers to using services, and of the experience of accessing services.

Examples

The University of Bournemouth attach great importance to the 'student voice'. They have therefore paid for an MPhil researcher to be attached to their PALS project. One aspect of this research is to explore with students who have not utilised the service the reasons for non-participation. This has revealed that despite the scheme's intentions it is still largely perceived as 'remedial' assistance, and therefore students are reluctant to join in. To overcome this short-coming Learner Support Services have worked more closely with academic departments to develop the idea of PALS as integral to courses, and not as remedial support.

Roehampton Educational Development Centre undertakes a qualitative consultation each summer via a series of focus groups. Changes are subsequently made to the services available, for example, more drop in services are now available.

7.7.5 Assessing the impact

Within the student services sector there is a desire for the contribution of student services to be more widely recognised, but equally, for them not to be held solely responsible for the institution's retention and withdrawal rates. It is however difficult to assess the impact of student services because: many individuals, experiences and circumstances impact on a student's decision to withdraw, and so to trace the impact or contribution of a specific intervention will never be straightforward. For example, one practitioner commented:

“We'd like to think it has an impact but it is

very difficult to prove because if they haven't left you can't actually find out what's kept them here” (Student Services staff member).

Similarly, an academic member of staff noted:

“It's hard to measure because you can't tell how badly those students would have done without support.” (Academic member of staff).

In addition to methodological issues, there are sensitivities in researching these issues, although at Canterbury Christchurch University College the Student Disability Forum discovered that students are not averse to being researched if it leads to positive benefits for them: for example longer loan periods for library books for students with specific disabilities.

Examples

At Huddersfield University the Impact project has sought 'soft' indicators for the effectiveness of its initiatives by using qualitative methods after it runs workshops and advice sessions. It is able to demonstrate hard indicators of success such as improved response rates from employers to job applications and students gaining places on prestigious training courses.

Following feedback from the HEFCE audit of their Access Fund, Nottingham Trent University is currently conducting an analysis of hardship fund recipients to explore the relationship between receipt of this finance and persistence in higher education. This has not been an easy task to undertake, but it is now underway.

No examples of approaches attempting to assess the impact of all student services on retention were identified in this research. Consequently, there is a lack of meaningful evidence on student retention as a result of student service interventions. It is therefore recommended that further work is

undertaken by the sector to develop appropriate tools to support the assessment of impact.

7.7.6 Value for money

One way of evaluating a service is to calculate its value for money. Approximately 50% of the examples of good practice submitted to this research study attempted to calculate the cost of providing a particular service. It is extremely hard to do, in part because there are different approaches to calculating this. Without a standard approach comparability is meaningless. The way in which the cost is calculated may vary – direct staff costs (including staff development), indirect staff costs (e.g. management time), other direct costs (e.g. publicity) and overheads. Furthermore, it is difficult to know who has benefited. This may include all students who have used the service, but this does not guarantee that they have 'benefited', or it might include all students in the institution who are identified as being eligible to use a particular service (e.g. all international students as opposed to just those who access the service, as they may benefit indirectly with information from peers or from other members of staff). Without a standard procedure there is a disincentive for institutions to disclose cost details, as they may be perceived to be more expensive or less efficient than other services due to the way in which the calculation is undertaken.

7.8 Links within the institution

Developing effective linkages across the institution is seen as a key area. Feedback from research participants suggests three main issues; links with the Students' Union, inter-departmental links, and impact on decision-making.

- **Links with the Students' Union**

The importance of this link is stressed in a number of case studies in terms of an additional source of referrals, access to SU training programmes and materials, promotional work and steering group representation. It is also evident that in some institutions the SU's financial position is increasingly under pressure

and certain sabbatical posts are left unfilled. This is obviously of some concern to student services staff in these institutions who commented that "the links will still be there but their ability to do things won't be as strong".

- **Inter-departmental links**

Developing departmental links is heavily influenced by institutional structure. In some HEIs, finance and accommodation are part of student services enabling informed decisions to be made in relation to pursuit of student rent arrears. In other institutions both are outside student services remit and can make decisions which unwittingly impact on student support. In an attempt to alleviate this problem the head of student services in one HEI has focused on increasing interaction at both the formal and informal level; 'I think what we've developed over time is a lot of interaction at appropriate levels. At my level, but also at the 'doing' level too'.

"So we build up good links with a course leader but next year someone else is course leader and so we don't have the same input into the course then. Our links are with individual staff and they change responsibility pretty often. Contact with students does depend on staff supporting us." (Learning Support Co-ordinator)

"What so often happened with (name of initiative) is that it has gone very well in a certain school or course and then that person has gone to another job and it has died. We want to look at ways of embedding it so it doesn't die, it carries on if someone moves to another job." (Project Manager)

Boundaries between schools and departments are sometimes described as fairly rigid and ways to ensure communication and shared good practice are sought. Academics positioned with a cross-institutional support role can facilitate effective links between departments, support services and decision-making bodies. However, there are always

blocks in the flow and it is important to address them. Entrenched attitudes can act as a barrier to communication and trust. Encouragingly, contrasting attitudes are clearly evident:

“The negative aspect is I think a lot of staff seem to think the students play the system because they know there’s a lot of support there” (Academic).

Some staff still think:

“What are these students doing here if they haven’t got study skills? You have to have a sympathetic ear to that but very often you would say these are not very good teachers” (Academic).

“It’s very easy to get trapped into what you’re doing it’s so important, it’s the only work going, I’m so busy. We can all get into that and if you don’t know the other people it’s easy to see them as them, they’re not doing anything” (Steering Group).

- **Impact on decision-making**

Representation on teaching and learning groups and on key institutional decision-making committees is seen as vital in establishing more formal links, as is representation on working groups. The majority of student services departments report direct to the Executive which facilitates networking and profile raising. Where student services are given a role in educational development, access to policy-making structures is enhanced. High-level support is crucial: “What makes us successful is the fact that we were knitted into the fabric and we have support at a very senior level” (Head of Learning Development). One effective structure has a Pro Vice-Chancellor involved in the management of student services and chairing an active student support committee. The committee enables representation from all interested parties, from the Pro Vice-Chancellor, teaching and learning, academic staff and students as well as other departments. The aim is to integrate all aspects of student services and

ensure they are closely connected to the vision and strategy of the institution as well as offering support closely oriented to effective teaching and learning strategy.

7.9 Staff development

All student services staff taking part in this research are involved in the delivery of staff development workshops within their own institutions. It is identified as one of their core activities, having two key functions. Firstly, to develop knowledge and trust amongst staff to enable them to refer students on to student services. Secondly, to provide them with knowledge to work effectively with a more diverse student body. It was widely recognised by practitioners as naïve to think student services deals with all students with problems:

“I think we only see a fraction of the students who have difficulties or issues or problems; there are those who are seen by all sorts of staff across the institution. I think the key that we are trying to work on here is to try and support the other staff across the place, partly skills development and partly ensuring they have feel comfortable with referral.”

“Realistically the most significant thing I think we can do is try to get other staff who may see students in some sort of difficulty to feel comfortable about it but also understand that the service is there for them to refer on to.”

Despite being a core activity, difficulties in getting staff, particularly academic staff, to take part were commonplace. As attendance to staff development workshops is largely voluntary, those that generally attend are the ones already familiar with the issues. As a number of practitioners stated, there is a tendency that they are preaching to the already converted.

“The problem of all staff development is that when you put on a workshop on effective

student support you get those who are interested in, and probably good at it, and what you don't get is the ones that you want."

"We've had to decide the battle we'll fight and the ones we'll say well that's life in HE. The training has been one, well that's how it goes. You'll always get the admin staff, faculty support staff and your few committed lecturers but unless it's on their agenda, you're not going to encourage them to come" (Director, Student Services).

In an attempt to overcome low attendance, many student services departments have responded by taking a more pro-active approach and attending departmental meetings and away days. Workshops have been put on at more convenient times (e.g. lunchtimes). Increasingly, student services staff are involved in delivering sessions in the postgraduate certificate in higher education which forms part of the induction for staff new to teaching, but although this is seen as a good way forward it is not enough in itself:

"Induction for staff tends to be compulsory but certain staff miss out on it. More and more student services and disability is being included in staff induction but you still see staff who don't get an induction. You've got health and safety, you've got to have...and it just gets huge and staff are bored rigid. Then you can put everything on the website but they don't read it. Very difficult, you probably do need a rolling programme but timing it is difficult because staff are busy. You put events on and four people turn up and you think it's not worth the time or the effort. So it does need to be reviewed in some way".

Example

One successful approach to staff development can be seen in the CAAS initiative at Manchester University which runs a secondment scheme allowing

academic staff to develop advisory skills and knowledge which they then take back to their departments. They then create departmental-based initiatives which add value to the department and their own professional development.

It is evident that the whole approach to staff development needs urgent attention, particularly in light of new legislation (e.g. Race Relations Act and SENDA) and the increasing demands being placed on student services staff, which makes it difficult to undertake additional staff development without increased resources. Although it is recognised that academic staff will take up staff development when there is a particular need, for example a new student with hearing difficulties, leaving it until this stage is not ideal. The importance of senior management and the value they place on staff development is crucial.

"At the moment only compulsory (staff development) is health and safety induction and beyond that people can pretty much pick and choose whether they have particular forms of training. In a modern higher education environment that does have to change. The organisation has to decide what it regards as priorities and how its going to ensure all members of the community are aware of that." (Director of Student Services)

7.9.1 Staff development for staff in student services

All staff within the case studies were able to take up possibilities of staff development internally and externally, a number were also involved in external committees such as members of steering committees and were very involved in debates on policy. Staff development for student services staff must continue to be a resource priority, particularly in light of increasing diversity. (Other issues relating to staff development are raised throughout the report).

7. 10 Supporting educational development

7.10.1 A strategic integrated approach

The question of how student services can be linked with academic departments to support the educational development of students was seen as crucial and deeply problematic. There are a number of common problems and no catch-all solution.

Relying on the personal tutor system to refer students for learning support faces three major problems:

- lecturers still seem ill informed about the work of student services: “When our personal tutor came to see us he didn’t say nothing about student services” (Student);
- increasing numbers of students and mass teaching methods mean that many lecturers do not know their students well enough to identify problems “They don’t know who we are and they don’t know anything about our problems” (Student);
- and students resist being referred for learning support. “We are very much against direct referral –you very often find that students will come once because they’re told to and will never come again” (Head of Learning Development).

Centralised services can build up a body of generic expertise which is open and user friendly, but it still relies on students making choices and finding time over and above their core academic work (as for example in the PALS scheme at Bournemouth University). Such services can also attempt a strategic level of cultural change via handbooks, staff development and secondments, as in CAAS and Roehampton, but whilst staff participation remains at a voluntary level, the extent of permeation will always be questionable and resistance to what is sometimes perceived as a lowering of standards still exists.

There thus seems to be a strong need for subject level integration of learning skills, supporting lecturers to address learning needs at the point of delivery, and to adapt their curriculum and pedagogy in response to a

more diverse student population. This is an issue which many institutions in the sector are working hard to address, for example, Sheffield Hallam, Manchester Metropolitan and Leicester Universities. This has been approached in a variety of ways, for example Roehampton is working with specific departments to identify ‘subject skills’ which then become a core part of the curriculum. However, there are dangers in a piecemeal approach. Institution-wide strategies such as that adopted by Teesside potentially offer more comprehensive solutions. Teesside allows departments to define their own student academic support systems according to agreed outcomes against which they will be audited. Minimum support standards are set and it is the responsibility of each staff group to decide the best way to meet those standards and implement the system tailor made to meet subject specific requirements:

“We’re not going to impose one system on the whole university, but each school can define how they will do it.” (Director of Student Services).

This is a clear system with strong boundaries, but does raise the perennial question: how are staff expected to find the time to do this and how will they be supported? The role of educational development staff, including widening participation units, are still crucial in this respect, even if support is to be integrated at a subject level.

The following sections explore different aspects of educational development support in more detail.

7.10.2 Learning skills

“Students don’t learn skills in a vacuum.”
(Workshop member, participative conference)

The provision and priority allocated to learning skills appears to vary greatly across institutions, according to assumptions about the nature of the student body. Such assumptions may not always be correct and clearly more consultation is needed to identify the ‘hidden’ needs of students. Learning skills benefit by being part of an integrated

educational development framework which includes disability support, quality assurance, curriculum and pedagogical development. To overcome the association between study skills and remedial activity they should be increasingly integrated within the curriculum and presented as 'subject skills' which all students need to attain. Attendees at the participative conference felt that ideally first years should have a diagnostic assessment, induction into the culture of the institution and support embedded within the curriculum. Learning skill support is particularly important in the first year, but services need to be able to cope and proactively respond to times of peak demand, such as assessments/exams, throughout the student lifecycle. Students also need other forms of support such as generic drop-in skills workshops. Skills in assertiveness and general effectiveness within the HEI context are also seen as a priority; Greenwich University Counselling Service even runs a course entitled: 'Standing Up to Your Tutor'.

Learning skills must be linked to the staff development of lecturers, to innovative pedagogy and virtual learning. These should be a responsibility and prerequisite for new lecturers via the Certificate in Learning and Teaching. Departments need to encourage students to see learning skills as a preventative measure, not a last resort when in danger of failing, and to build longer term strategies with them, including peer support which builds on the enthusiasm of students for their subjects. Institutions such as Roehampton have found that their high levels of learning skill support can be effective in recruitment, creating 'hot knowledge' amongst candidates that this is a particularly supportive environment. Learning skills are something all students need, no matter what type of institution, and all HEIs should be seeking to attain this level of provision.

7.10.3 Academic advice

HE systems are complex and confusing and students, particularly those unfamiliar with the sector, need guidance through issues such as changing course, wanting to leave or transfer to another institution. Academic tutors can be an

important filter for students but when this is shared with teaching and research responsibilities their scope is limited. Centralised academic staff with a dual equal and active role in teaching and academic advice such as found at CAAS, Manchester University are one model which can combine academic expertise with the dedicated time necessary for sustained support. Students and staff value the current knowledge, academic credibility and institution wide perspective of such advisers. Such services have been associated with cultures of high achievement and it is important to remember that students with high aspirations need support too. However, all students can benefit and this approach can also facilitate non-stigmatised referral to counselling by academics. Whether or not institutions take on such a centralised approach, the principle of dedicated academic support with a cross- institution perspective, is an important aspect of student support. Nevertheless, academic advice should not be a means of perpetuating complex systems which only experts can interpret. It should also be coupled with measures to make systems simpler and more transparent.

Example

Chester College of Higher Education expanded and formalised its study skills provision in 200-2, and the service has been very widely used. It includes one-to-one sessions, drop-ins, and specific skill workshops.

7.10.4 Dyslexia support

"Over the last five years I've seen a sea change amongst academic staff - from some academics not believing there's such a thing as dyslexia, we've got to a position now where people do get their entitlement and dyslexia is recognised as a real disability."
(Head of Student Services)

Dyslexia support is an area where student services appear to have made significant strides and there are many instances of imaginative and systematic support. Indeed it was even suggested that if

resources allowed it would be better to teach all students as if they were dyslexic.

The fact that dyslexia draws in external financial support and offers students concrete benefits, such as extra time in exams, means that this is an area where the incentives to both give and receive support are high. However, the propensity to 'label' dyslexic students has not disappeared altogether and as a result there are students who do not disclose they are dyslexic. Although services such as the RED centre Roehampton do not feel students should be forced to reveal they are dyslexic, either to student services or academics, this often results in students seeking help at moments of crisis such as assessments, rather than accessing systematic support from the start. Creating a climate of openness about dyslexia seems to be the priority and this includes the awareness that dyslexic students may have multiple needs - they are not defined by their learning disability. Thus integrated services with quick referral systems can best serve dyslexic students.

“When I came I came with a lot of baggage, having spent two years in a custody battle, having a child with a severe disability. But they supplied everything I needed here - I just wouldn't have got through - its as simple as that.” (Dyslexic student)

7.10.5 The inclusive curriculum

The curriculum is an issue which is quite resistant to interrogation and intervention, and the case of the relation of student services to the curriculum is no different. Although some issues, such as the inclusion of careers advice or financial information within the curriculum, seem relatively easy to address, this has sometimes proved problematic at an institutional level. Broader questions such as how the curriculum can either validate or suppress the experience of diverse groups of students are even more problematic. Students did find it an issue that their lives were 'invisible' within their subject, and some student services staff were very interested in issues such as the incorporation of Black history within the curriculum. However,

strategies to develop a more inclusive curriculum were rare. The work of the Widening Participation Unit at Roehampton, although in its infancy, is one example where the potential impact of access on the curriculum is explored. Much more needs to be done to develop this field of work across the sector.

7.10.6 Responsive pedagogy

“Academics are not yet used to diversity.”
(Deputy Vice Chancellor)

It is increasingly acknowledged that the key to retention and student support lies within the classroom (Tinto, 2002). If teaching and learning strategies do not address student diversity in the location where students have to be, and where they will spend most of their HE time, then students will drop out, no matter how elaborated or excellent student services are. A two-way process can help the intervention of student services in this area. Those who have an educational development role, for example the RED centre Roehampton, can play an important collaborative role with academic departments in developing innovative and student-centred pedagogy. Secondments to centralised services from departments, as happens in CAAS, Manchester University can support innovation at the subject level. However, there are barriers in this process, many of them centred on some academics lack of confidence in their teaching skills and their unwillingness to open up their classroom to others.

“Of all the issues, taping lecturers has been the most hotly debated and revealed incredible insecurity amongst academic staff. Having to make any kind of concession to the way they teach their lectures makes a lot of people defensive.”
(Head of Learning Development)

These fears and tensions are understandable in a climate of the increasing scrutiny and regulation of academic work. Student services professionals at the participative conference felt that the best way to address them is to give teaching higher status and reward within the sector and some institutions are proposing to formalise lecturers commitment to either research or student support. The whole issue

of pedagogy and widening participation has been addressed at the level of some subjects and some institutions, but it has been by no means explored or prioritised across the board. Like the curriculum, this is an area which needs more development and research, including reference to the part best played by student services.

7.11 Information technology

In this research the use and effectiveness of IT provision within student services was not specifically explored. However, as the literature indicates, increasing emphasis is being placed on this form of provision, particularly as a result of greater student diversity (see for example Dodgson & Bolam, 2002 and Harris, 2001). This was supported by evidence from the case studies. The development of websites containing generic information for students tends to be universal, with many institutions making forms and documents available electronically. The use of email as a means of communication between members of staff, and between staff and students, was also widespread, and a number of institutions found this an effective way of advertising services available.

Some institutions were moving further with IT, towards the active delivery of on-line support and guidance. For example, the University of Greenwich is piloting an email counselling scheme for students and Manchester Metropolitan University has set up an email mentoring scheme. These schemes are largely targeting underrepresented groups e.g. ethnic minorities and disabled students who might not wish/or be able to access other forms of support.

Examples

Bournemouth University have set up a website dedicated to the PALS scheme. In addition to providing general information the website includes a discussion forum and a Database of Good Practice regarding peer support.

One London HEI has been trying to develop

virtual socialisation for students to help overcome travel and accommodation costs in London. The university has set up an electronic peer support scheme to enable students to get to know each other.

A HEFCE funded collaborative project, between the four Manchester Universities, called DEMOS is currently exploring the effectiveness of developing online staff development resources to support students with disabilities.

Further investigation in this area is essential to determine the potential of IT provision.

7.12 Integrated student services

Within contemporary HEIs there is a trend towards the creation of integrated student services; indeed many of the examples of good practice submitted to the research project were either an integrated student service itself, or a policy or practice embedded within an integrated student service. Integration is not in itself a new idea, but it is re-emerging as a popular mode of organisation. The concept of an integrated student service can be understood in different ways; the interpretation which was prevalent in the research examples, and which is discussed below, is the bringing together of a number of different services, perhaps into a shared physical location or under the same management structure, or as a virtual grouping. It can be perceived as a horizontal integration. Such an approach often facilitates vertical integration – reaching students throughout the lifecycle, from pre-entry to progression into employment or further learning.

7.12.1 What services are included in an integrated student service?

Three examples of integrated student services are provided within this report (Greenwich, Nottingham Trent and Teesside), and from these it is apparent that there is no single integrated model, and certainly the intention is not to prescribe an ideal

type. Often an integrated student service will include 'traditional' student services, such as counselling, mental health, disability, careers, and chaplaincy. The choice of other services to include tends to be influenced by the institutional context, including for example historical management responsibilities and sensitivities about changing these. Other services may include childcare, sport and recreation, financial services (including administering bursaries etc), part-time employment agencies, accommodation, health services, self-help groups/mentoring/peer-support, academic support and learning skills.

7.12.2 How is an integrated student service created?

A prior issue – what is the purpose of creating an integrated student service, in part, determines the answer to this question. One response to this is related to the ease with which students can find the appropriate student service, a second is related to the relationships between staff and inter-disciplinary practice and a third is encompassed in the notion of a holistic approach to student support (i.e. identifying and dealing with all aspects of an individual's well-being). A single information and referral point may assist with the first of these motivations, while an integrated management structure and mission may contribute to the second, and a diagnostic process or multi-skilled advisers may achieve the final goal. A clear purpose is therefore an important starting point.

An integrated management structure appears to have advantages. It facilitates the co-ordination of services and can be used to promote integration between staff. (e.g. roles that cut across professional boundaries – in one institution management staff within student services had responsibilities across professional areas e.g. staff development). Such an approach will usually require some level of re-structuring, and encounter some resistance.

Many integrated services are associated with a shared physical location, preferably one that is highly visible, and so 'attracts' students in, or at

least is easy to find. Alternatively this could be achieved in a virtual sense, but such an example was not offered to the research project. The advantages of this are readily apparent, for example in a parallel research project one institution reported a significant decline in usage when student services was temporarily relocated to a less visible location during building work (Action on Access, 2002, forthcoming). But there are limitations to such an approach, and there are some disadvantages.

Some institutions may not have a central, visible and sufficiently large site available, but this perhaps should not be viewed as an insurmountable limitation. Non-campus-based institutions, or those with multiple sites may however face more complex problems: how to provide a single location for each area in which students are based. In some institutions the size of the service varied from campus to campus but the type and quality was the same. An information or referral point may however be sufficient at a range of locations. This may be supported by other referral mechanisms e.g. tutors, academics, networks and peers. All institutions supporting HE within FE partner-colleges, other forms of community-based learning and distance learning should bear in mind how these students access student services. Veronique Johnson² commented that her research indicated that students did not mind travelling (e.g. to the main site) to access services, but what was off-putting was being passed from pillar to post, or not being able to find the location of the appropriate service. A further consideration may be whether the space is ever big enough. Each of the case studies visited noted that there were further services which were not integrated, but which would be of value to students – but it is difficult to draw the line.

The initial disadvantage of a shared physical location is the cost involved of re-locating others, refurbishment and installation of each of the student services. In the constrained financial climate of HE this may create tensions and resentment about expenditure priorities. A large, visible and well-used location may be off-putting to certain students;

many counselling professionals expressed concern about privacy.

A common feature of integrated student services is a referral point to direct students to the appropriate service. This may be perceived simply as a 'reception' but the importance of this role should not be underestimated or minimised. These staff often need an overview of the whole HEI in order to direct students to the appropriate service. This requires staff to be very familiar with the roles of the various student service professionals, and to have the ability to engage with a presenting student to clarify their need(s), priorities and urgency. For example, one institution reported that it is not uncommon for students to turn up and say that they want to withdraw and have been told to come to student services. This opportunity for intervention before a student withdraws is potentially invaluable, but it is not immediately apparent which service such a student should be directed to. The integration of Student Services into a single location is often perceived as an opportunity for cost savings, for example as fewer reception staff will be required, but such a re-organisation creates the need for a more highly skilled referral team (one person would be insufficient in view of holidays and illness).

7.12.3 Advantages of an integrated service for students

It is widely perceived that an integrated service makes it easier for students to access and find the appropriate service for them. For example, the induction message is kept simple for students:

“When students arrive at university they are bombarded with information that they forget, so we try to keep message very, very simple... ‘If you got any problem, any issue, need any information, come in here. That’s the only thing you need to remember’”
(Director of Student Services).

Furthermore, it may be unrealistic for students to know which service they need in every instance.

By integrating a range of student services, including services such as accommodation, sport and recreation and job shops, student services can become an 'essential port of call', rather than a 'last

resort', and thus the stigma of using Student Services can be reduced. Once students have had contact with Student Services, perhaps in relation to a less personal or sensitive issue, this provides an opportunity for other problems to be dealt with. For example, seeking financial support may provide an opportunity for other problems to be picked up and support offered:

“Emergency loans are a fantastic scheme to get hold of students early, because they think ‘I need to borrow some money’ so they come in here and we lend them some money, but that gives us a wonderful five minutes to get hold of perhaps what’s going on there” (Director of Student Services).

Integrating student services also allows a holistic approach to students’ problems. Otherwise the institution can simultaneously be the cause of the problem, as well as trying to offer the solution! For example, in relation to accommodation and rent problems Student services can make an informed decision about what is best for the student, and not demand payment if this will have other detrimental effects on the student.

“I actually believe quite fervently that it’s in the right the place...I think accommodation is a very important part of what we do, and I think locating it in Student Services as opposed to estates makes a very clear statement about what our priorities are in terms of offering accommodation... the students that are using our accommodation service are largely our first years, they’re new to the area, away from home for the first time, and so are quite vulnerable students... What do we do about rent problems etc? Bringing it together allows us to take into account the circumstances when we demanding rent, but students should also learn about the consequences of signing a contract!” (Director of Student Services)

Other advantages include more efficient referral, early contact with other services e.g. careers, being able to get to know more members of staff and being able to see an interim person if the person wanted is not available.

7.12.4 Advantages of an integrated service for staff

It was recognised that bringing student service staff together (either structurally and/or physically) had the advantage of breaking down professional boundaries between services. Initially staff tended to find this problematic, perhaps threatening, but in due course this was seen to be advantageous by all concerned. Working more closely together enables staff to share experiences and professional ways of working and to enhance the knowledge they have about each others fields of practice. This learning can take place informally, and people stressed the importance of the kettle and sink. In addition, an integrally managed service allows the organisation of student service wide staff development activities. This greater interaction can have other positive benefits, such as developing confidence and pride in people's work, and encouraging them to adopt good practice from other professions within their own work:

“It has enhanced staff's own understanding of their professionalism, because they can see how others do that...and its driven the quality of what we do up, and the staff's own confidence and pride in what they do up” (Director of Student Services).

Other advantages include a supportive working environment, the ability to maintain high intensity of workload and recognition that every service is seen as equally important.

7.12.5 Limitations of an integrated service

The most substantial potential limitation of an integrated student services is the reliance on students accessing the service. There is concern that an integrated service moves away from targeting at risk students. It was noted in the Harris report (2001) that the students who most need the services are the least likely to use them. In the field of widening participation the need to target specific groups is a recognised feature of good practice (Woodrow, 1998; Thomas, 2001) Students at risk of early withdrawal, part-time students, non-traditional students, and international students, have all been identified in this research as being less likely to

access student services than other student groups. Conversely, it has been argued in this research that an integrated service makes it more likely for these target groups to access services:

- it removes stigma of use;
- it is easy to find – unrealistic to expect students to know where they need to go;
- some targeting does take place – e.g. finance, disability, mature students, ethnic minorities, etc;
- it runs promotional campaigns, etc;
- works with staff across the institution to assist them to give students support.

It remains a concern, that cannot be mitigated by recourse to usage data in many instances, that at risk students do not fully utilise the services available. A further issue may be that it is more difficult for on-going relationships to be established with students throughout the student lifecycle as they may be referred to other staff members. An institution-wide strategy, with multiple referral points is therefore required. Napier University have intervened in a range of ways throughout the HEI and have succeeded in significantly improving reported rates of retention.

There is also a potential tension in the relationship between an integrated service and staff located in other parts of the institution, such as academic departments and the Students' Union. Academic staff may perceive (aspects of) a centralised service as a threat to their autonomy, and thus not refer students to the services available.

Alternatively, they may view it as absolving them of all responsibility for the academic and pastoral welfare of their students.

7.13 Partnership with the FE sector

Within the current framework set by 'Partnerships for Progression', sharing student support services and, in particular, supporting HE students in FE and the transition of students from FE to HE, is a clear priority. Although there is evidence that some student services are trying to address this issue, for example Teesside has student service networks involving FE partners to discuss contemporary issues, share good practice

and ultimately facilitate progression from local FE colleges, this is an area which requires more attention and more resources. Partnership is not a one-way process, FE has a great deal of expertise to offer, indeed one institution spoke of 'poaching' its study skills tutors from FE. Caution must be maintained, however, not to associate student support too strongly with FE, as this will endorse the stigmatisation that student services have worked so hard to resist.

“They proposed locating us in a partner FE college, we resisted that tooth and nail. It sends students absolutely the wrong message that they have to go out of the university in order to get support.” (Head of Learning Support)

Partnership between institutions, as in the Impact project, provides good models of how student support can be shared and maximised. However, if the same quality of student support is to be dispersed across both HE and FE then this does imply an increase in resources:

“We would like to extend our support services to students in our partner FE colleges, that would be an ideal for us, but without more resources it's impossible.” (Head of Learning Support).

7.14 Resources

The consultation with the sector demonstrated a severe lack of financial resources to support greater diversity within HE within an overall tight financial situation. The following comment sums up the problem:

“It is a paradox - mass higher education, less resources yet the students have greater needs. That's something the Government has got to recognise if it wants us to achieve its target of 50%.” (Director of Student Services).

The research indicates the need for more resources for student services and support in general but this is only possible if resources to HEIs are increased

too. Although finance is an important issue, the resource question is a broad one. It is interesting, and significant, to note that comparatively few directors of student services had either access to, or any say over how the Widening Participation Premium Funding was spent. Two projects were funded from this source, but most departments did not receive any funding from this budget.

It was noted that the visual image of student services is significant, as this communicates an important message about the value placed on student support within the institution, and the quality of services provided. Institutions cannot therefore afford to let student services operate from run-down premises, as this may be counterproductive. One interviewee suggested that tatty premises suggested to students a poor service, and low priority being attached to student support by the institution.

The majority of examples of good practice examined as part of this research project are reliant on short-term external funding. Thus these initiatives are not sustainable, unless the institution is subsequently able to divert money to this work. Project funding means that staff are employed on fixed term contracts, and this creates uncertainty amongst staff. They are thus more likely to secure alternative employment, and significant amounts of experience and organisational learning are lost. One director of student services commented that moving to:

“...on going contracts made a huge difference. You're not going to get the same commitment from someone on a short-term contract. Even if they know you want to extend them, at the end of the day they haven't got that security”(Director of Student Services).

An issue related to that of external funding streams is the relationship between these and institutional priorities. Student services are largely responsive to external funding streams, and while they are happy to accept the extra finance, this may be in an area which is not an institutional priority. For example, funding for disability support staff is

welcome, but in some institutions there are more pressing needs. One director of student services commented:

“You may have priorities that you think are very important but if there’s no funding you can’t actually do a lot” (Director of Student Services).

For example, within one of the integrated student services the director felt that attention should be directed towards the reception staff who play a key role in diagnosing the needs of students when they present to student services, and directing them to the most appropriate services, but this is not an external funding priority. In some areas, the external funding has not followed legislative changes. For example the Special Education Needs and Disability Act requires action on the part of institutions in general, and student services in particular, but this has not been accompanied by additional finance. Learning and teaching and Estates strategic funding is available from HEFCE but is limited and often requires a bidding process.

New projects are time consuming, and require support from other staff in the institution, but often this is not their priority. Time should therefore be valued as a key resource, in addition to finance. Investing time in student service projects is more likely to be achieved if this area of work is accorded priority by the institution’s senior managers. In many of the projects visited reasons for their success, or the difficulties they faced, were related to priorities within the institution.

It is noted elsewhere in this report, and is demonstrated in the case studies, that there are difficulties associated with calculating the overall and per student cost of services as there is no agreed formula relating to what should and should not be included. In addition, is cost effectiveness the most meaningful way of evaluating support services for students?

In order to maximise value for money a number of strategies were discussed by research participants. Partnerships can offer a cost-effective way of

delivering services. Partnerships may be between institutions, such as the four institutions involved in the Impact Project (Universities of Huddersfield, Bradford, Leeds and Leeds Metropolitan).

Alternatively, partnerships may be between departments within an institution, such as the Mature Students’ Adviser at the University of Hull which is financed and divided between recruitment and student services. External support, e.g. from employers is helpful too, but it is time consuming to build up strong systems and a high profile.

It was also pointed out that institutions should avoid duplicating services. Institutions are communities, and students are entitled to access services available to other community members. There is the possibility of duplication between student services and the Students’ Union within the institution but when this issue was discussed with institutions and at the participative conference this was not seen to be problematic and complementarity and choice were seen to be important. These overlapping services were most apparent in relation to financial advice. Choice may however be a luxury which the sector should question.

8. Conclusion

This report began by noting the important contribution student services and other non-academic support staff can make to enhancing the student experience and ultimately maintaining and improving student retention within higher education today. This research has demonstrated that this is indeed the case – student service and other support staff are committed to developing, delivering and improving services to meet the needs of successive student cohorts. This is an on-going challenge because as the goal of increased student diversity is being embraced, the needs of the student body are shifting and expanding – but the sector has responded well to date. There is still a need for personal support and spiritual guidance, but there are growing areas of work in relation to developing appropriate academic practices and supporting students to thrive within an academic environment. This includes promoting social interaction and networks between students from increasingly diverse social, economic and cultural backgrounds and assisting students to understand and benefit from the financial support that is available. Other challenges facing the sector include the development of a proactive and responsive service, identifying and targeting at risk students and creating links across institutions with the many other departments and staff who support students to succeed in higher education. In particular, there is an increasing need for collaboration between academic and student services departments, and the Students' Union, to provide coherent and integrated academic and personal support and guidance for students. Links also need to extend out of the institution to other education providers, employers and the community in order to facilitate the transition into HE.

It has been difficult for this research to demonstrate a direct and quantifiable relationship between student services and student retention rates. This is due to a number of factors. Firstly, student services alone are not responsible for student retention; secondly, assessing and measuring the impact of

any intervention is difficult as so many factors influence students' decisions; thirdly, there is a lack of evaluation and research into the impact of student services (because it's difficult does not mean it can be ignored); and finally, there is not an agreed way of calculating the cost of delivering student services and support. The many examples of good practice identified in this study, both those that are detailed as illustrative examples, and all of those nominated but not researched, lend great weight to the assertion that student services have a direct positive impact on student retention. This research demonstrates the need for monitoring, tracking and evaluating the impact of student services. The survey also highlights the need for developing further mechanisms to share good practice and innovative approaches with colleagues throughout the sector. Such a strategy avoids prescribing 'best practice' which may not suit differing institutional contexts and missions.

A major achievement of this research has been the identification and application of ten criteria for good practice. This provides a framework for institutions, Student service departments and individual practitioners to evaluate their own work against. Again, this is not a blue print, but guidance on what constitutes good practice.

Expansion and greater diversity within the HE sector are priorities for the future. For student services to be able to continue to innovate and support students to succeed they need more money, and in light of the fiscal climate in HEIs at the moment, this requires more funding to be allocated to the HE sector in general. Increasing the postcode premium allocation would offer a way of linking funding to the institutions where students from more diverse backgrounds are studying. Any model of funding however must recognise that early withdrawal from HE is not necessarily a failure; student success can be measured in different ways. For example, participating in HE, or successfully completing one module, may be a sufficient achievement for some learners; alternatively, withdrawing to pursue a chosen career opportunity may well equate with success in the eyes of the

student concerned. For the maximum value of student services to be felt by students, staff and the institution as a whole, student services should enjoy a level of priority equal to other key institutional practices, such as teaching and learning and research. Student services have much to contribute to maintaining and improving student retention within an institution, and in the sector as a whole, and so should be involved or integrated into strategic planning. This research report is the beginning of the investigation of the relationship between student services and student retention. There is still much to be done.

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Notes

¹ Current research being undertaken by Action on Access (forthcoming) indicates that an integrated approach to student services is contributing to student success.

² Comment made at University of Central Lancashire Student Support Conference, June 2002.

Appendix 1

STUDENT SERVICES PROJECT: EFFECTIVE APPROACHES TO RETAINING STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Universities UK has recently launched a new project to identify a range of effective approaches by student services in retaining students in higher education. The project will consider the most effective ways of ensuring access to services, particularly for those students at risk of non-completion. The research is being funded by the DfES and will be carried out by the Institute for Access Studies (IAS) at Staffordshire University. The DfES' interest in this area was highlighted early last year by Baroness Blackstone, who pointed to the need for welfare and other pastoral services to reach out to students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Acknowledging that there are already examples of very good work within the sector, the Baroness stressed, not only the need to universalise best practice, but to go beyond this and learn from overseas experience wherever possible.

The project will focus on support services available to students for the period they are attending a higher education institution. This will encompass both academic support, welfare related support and other student services, for example, finance and student employment services. The research will include a number of case studies of institutions examining both specific initiatives and overall provision, followed by further consultation with the sector to discuss guidance for good practice. The research team will report throughout the project to a steering group which includes representatives from Universities UK, SCOP, the DfES, the NUS, HEFCE, UKCOSA and AMOSSHE.

Please return the completed proforma by 26th April to

K B Slack,
Institute for Access Studies,
Staffordshire University,
College Road,
Stoke-on-Trent,
Staffordshire,
ST4 2DE.
Tel: 01782 295731
E-mail: k.b.slack@staffs.ac.uk

Contact name:

Role of contact person:

Contact address:

..... E-mail:

What do you see as the current role of student services? How do you think their role will change or develop in the next two or three years?

.....

.....

What are the resource implications of this?

.....

.....

What are the staff development needs of supporting a more diverse student body?

.....

.....

What do you think are the different needs of specific student groups? How have student support services been developed to meet these needs?

.....

.....

What are the incentives for HEIs to deliver high quality student services?

What are the disincentives or obstacles?

.....

.....

How would this research project be most useful to you?

.....

.....

We are seeking examples from institutions of ‘good practice’ to support students to succeed in higher education. ‘Good practice’ includes student services, policies, special initiatives or institution-wide strategies.

Title of ‘good practice’:

Contact person:

Role of contact person:

E-mail:

Telephone number:

1. What category of ‘good practice’ is this? (tick appropriate box): service special initiative (time-limited project) policy or institution-wide strategy. Can you give a brief description of the ‘good practice’?

.....
.....

2. Which student groups are targeted? To what extent and how have you consulted with this target group?

.....
.....

3. What does the ‘good practice’ aim to do?

.....
.....

4. How long has the ‘good practice’ been in place?

.....
.....

5. How is usage and/or impact of the ‘good practice’ monitored? Is it well used by the target group?

.....
.....

6. What evidence do you have that this good practice is successful? Please provide numbers of students who have benefited if available.

.....
.....
.....

7. What staff development supports this 'good practice'?

.....
.....
.....

8. How is institution-wide student support co-ordinated and managed? Please state whether or not your Students' Union is involved and if so how?

.....
.....

9. Does this 'good practice' extend to any FE colleges you work with in partnership?

.....
.....

10. What is the cost per student of running this 'good practice'?

.....
.....

11. Is this 'good practice' transferable to other institutions?

.....
.....

12. What difficulties have you encountered and are there any weaknesses you can identify in this 'good practice'?

.....
.....
.....

The Institute for Access Studies at Staffordshire University is a research centre, focusing on widening participation in post-compulsory education and promoting lifelong learning amongst non-traditional learners.

The Institute is a national and international centre of research, and consolidates and disseminates information on widening participation to those people who might not otherwise view learning as an option, or who may be discouraged by social, cultural, economic or institutional barriers. The main activities of the Institute include:

- undertaking applied and academic research;
- disseminating research and good practice through publications, conferences and seminars, meetings, networking and electronically;
- encouraging scholarly activity in the field.



The overall aim of this research is to examine the ways in which institutions, and in particular, student services, can support diverse students to remain in higher education in order to achieve educational success. This research complements other work on widening participation and retention.

The research answers the following research questions:

- In what ways is a more diverse student population supported in both England and other mass systems?
- What research has already been undertaken and what can be learnt from this?
- What are the key issues of concern for the higher education sector in England in relation to supporting a more diverse student population?
- How will student support systems need to develop in the foreseeable future and what are the implications of this?
- How can these services be targeted at and rendered more accessible to students?
- How can effective policies, services, and special initiatives with respect to supporting different under-represented groups, be identified and shared?
- How can the expertise of student services professionals be accessed and disseminated across the sector?
- How can staff (academic, non-academic and support staff) be supported and developed to provide more effective student services?
- How can institutions be encouraged and assisted to develop a strategic approach to supporting student diversity?



This report is part of a series produced by the Institute for Access Studies to disseminate research carried out nationally and internationally to widen participation in post-compulsory education.

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