

Brindley, J.E., and Fage, J. (1991). Counselling in open learning: Two institutions face the future. *Open Learning*, 7(3), 12-19.

## Part I

# Counselling in open learning: two institutions face the future

---

Jane Brindley of Cambrian College, Ontario, Canada, and Judith Fage of the Open University UK examine the very different development of counselling services in open higher and continuing education through the history of two open universities: Athabasca University in Alberta, Canada, and the Open University, UK. A comparison is drawn between the universities' attitudes to counselling in an educational context, and future development is analysed. The work was made possible through the support of the British Council for staff exchange.

## Jane E. Brindley and Judith Fage

### Athabasca University – history of student support

**A**thabasca University (AU) was founded as a pilot project of the Alberta government in the early 1970s. The mandate was to find new, unique ways to serve the ever growing numbers of adult students who for several reasons could not take advantage of traditional campus based educational opportunities. Print based packaged learning materials supplemented by individual telephone tutorial support was and still is the main mode of delivery. Tutorial support is provided by discipline based part-time staff (approximately 350) who work out of their homes and report centrally to full-time faculty. The tutor's role is seen as being largely course content 'facilitator and guide'.<sup>1</sup>

Although students often ask their tutors questions outside of the arena of course content, advising and counselling are not seen as a legitimate part of the tutorial role. These services are provided by student advisors and counsellors who are in a department separate from the faculties, and have been developed over time in response to the expressed needs of students and faculty, institutional demands, and research and evaluation studies.

Early in the history of the institution, a small department called 'Student Development Services' was created to provide student support unrelated to course content. The emphasis in the formative years (not surprisingly, for a new institution with few courses and students) was in areas of

recruitment, information provision, and advising of prospective and new students. The titles of the staff who performed these functions, 'Student Orientation Specialists', reflected the focus of the job - to help bring new students into the institution and orient them to a new mode of learning.

As the institution expanded, it became necessary to rethink the role of student support. Surveys of other institutions were done, and student services staff collected information pertinent to the unique AU student population and method of study. Educators such as Malcolm Knowles, Patricia Cross, and Allen Tough heavily influenced this stage of development. Within this context, student services staff (who had been renamed counsellors) developed skills and self-help materials in the areas of academic advising (programme planning) and career development, these being the most in demand by students at that time.

As Athabasca University continued to grow at a rapid rate into the 1980s, there was institutional concern about withdrawal and non-completion rates. In response, the counselling staff developed services such as a comprehensive orientation to distance learning packages and learning assistance materials which were aimed directly at student success. During this period, counselling positions became much more clearly defined as professional counsellors requiring appropriate credentials, i.e. in Alberta, eligibility to become a Chartered Psychologist which requires a minimum of a masters degree in psychology and a specified number of hours of supervised clinical practice.

With the increased emphasis on professionalism, counsellors had some concerns that most service development had been based on guesswork (albeit based on first

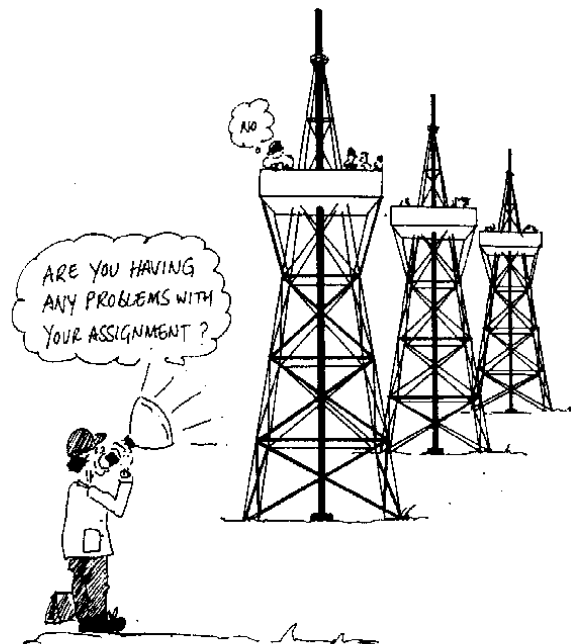
hand experience) about what might help students to complete courses. As a result, there was a move to become much more systematic in research and evaluation activities to support theories of student success and support. Developmental research with regard to new services and evaluation of existing services became a regular activity of the department. Evaluation of services raised the issue of consistency of quality across all offices and staff and led to the development of more sophisticated training and staff development programmes.

Until about 1985, Student Services experienced modest but steady growth in resources until there were ten professional staff as well as a fairly sizeable support staff and a number of contract and part-time positions. After that period, reduced government grants and the need to expand academic programmes resulted in staff and operating budget losses. Student Services responded by becoming more efficient (e.g. using more packaged materials to deliver services), and by developing a new staff category called 'Student Advisor'. These are highly skilled clerical positions for which there is an ongoing in-house training and supervision programme provided by counselling staff. The Student Advisors provide course, programme, and financial aid information as well as academic advising assistance. Students are referred to a counsellor by a student advisor only if they require specialised assistance such as career planning help, learning assistance, or diagnostic testing. This new level of staffing is much more cost efficient, and was intended to allow counsellors (who had been much reduced in numbers) to spend more time in development of materials which could be used by a greater number of students that they would be able to speak with on a one to one basis.

The next stage of development in student services was to ensure that the goals and objectives of the department were aligned with those of the institution. Although AU has had a mission statement for some time, there was no formal Strategic Academic Plan until 1988. Professional staff in student services participated in the development of the plan, and ensured that the services offered supported the goals of the University. Specifically this meant placing slightly more emphasis on retention strategies in the area of pre-admission services and learning assistance, a direction which had already been adopted, but which

was formally written into the Strategic Academic Plan.

By 1990, the services offered by Student and Regional Services (the most recent name), included the following: pre-admission services (information, self-assessment materials, referral); academic advising; financial aid advising; diagnostic testing in mathematics and writing skills; study skills development; career, educational and personal counselling; and access to resource centres in the regional offices. The latter contain career and educational information, post-secondary directories and calendars, and sample course packages. These services were offered by four offices: the central office and directorate delivered all services at a distance to students across Canada and played a very important central coordinating function. The two large and one fairly small regional offices offered face to face services to students in each of their areas and each reported through the central directorate.



It has been well documented that support services can and do make a difference to student success.<sup>2-6</sup> Institutional studies research regarding students at risk also points to the need for learner support in the form of specific targeted interventions.<sup>7</sup> Research and

evaluation studies carried out by counsellors at AU show that students benefit from receiving services, and that services can make a difference to completion rates.<sup>6-11</sup> Despite this evidence and self reports from students about their needs, support services have now been cut at AU to the point where they are not viable in the current form. Paul has discussed this issue pointing out that decisions to cut support services often have not much to do with student success and much more to do with institutional politics.<sup>11</sup> Unless resources become available internally through measures such as reallocation or an organisational restructuring, services to students other than course content based support will be offered only at a minimal level.

In the face of such drastic cuts to student support services at AU, it is difficult to look ahead and speculate about the future. How student support might be provided is definitely in question. The fact that it is needed should not be. If anything, the rapidly changing context within which open education occurs demands that more attention be paid to support services which are essential to the achievement of student and institutional goals.

## **The Open University - history of student support**

The UK Open University (OU) was founded in 1969, and, like Athabasca, its core method of educational delivery was through written course units, though supplemented by TV and radio, and supported by comprehensive assignment marking. Around 3,380 part-time staff were appointed in 1970 and 1971, the first of whom were admissions counsellors. Their main task was to provide advice and counselling to applicants to the BA degree programme, thus establishing the counselling role from the start within the educational guidance framework, rather than the personal therapeutic context. Full-time senior counsellors based in the 12, later 13 regional centres were also appointed to supervise the work of part-time counsellors and were expected to have 'knowledge and sympathy with the problems of adult education'.<sup>12</sup> After admission, students were allocated to correspondence tutors and to counsellors, based on the 250 or so study centres. From the start, according to the first Director of Regional Tutorial Services, Robert Beevers, 'the OU counsellor was placed firmly

within the teaching system, rather than in the area of socio-psychological services. He has been called the 'anchor-man' who helps the student to relate the necessarily diverse and potentially disparate elements of the University's teaching system, and to articulate them to his personal needs and learning characteristics. Essentially he is concerned with the factors which contribute to, or mitigate against, the student's successful progress with his studies'.<sup>13</sup>

In 1976 the roles of tutor and counsellor were combined, at foundation level only, in one person to be known as the 'tutor-counsellor'. The essence of the tutor-counsellor model was, that the student's tutor and counsellor in the first foundation course would remain the student's counsellor through the degree course, continuing to provide counselling on the basis of a solid relationship built up through substantial contact in the foundation year. This principle of 'continuity of counselling', though not perfectly implemented, has been a cornerstone of counselling support for undergraduate students in the OU. Beevers predicted that, whatever changes arose in the University's curriculum, the student would need 'an academic mentor whose work is predicated on him rather than on the course material'.<sup>14</sup> Sewart<sup>15</sup> saw the counselling role as also providing a bridge or mediating function' for the separation between the system and the students' inevitable within distance education. Counsellors were essentially local, providing support by telephone, letter, and, where possible, face-to-face in group sessions or individually.

From this beginning, we see through the pages of the journal 'Teaching at a Distance' the development of a number of strands in the counselling role in the UK OU.<sup>16-20</sup> These strands are, broadly, supporting learning needs (confidence building and preparation; developing study and learning skills), often in groups; educational guidance, including vocational guidance and career counselling; helping students work through life conflicts which affect their study or motivation; and providing advice and information on the OU's systems and facilities. By 1983 Sewart saw referral 'to a wide range of agencies' as necessary to complement the legitimate areas of support in the OU.<sup>21</sup>

Debate on counselling in the Open University has continued within the above framework broadly unchanged over 20 years. Professional training as counsellors has never been a

requirement of counselling staff, though staff development has been refined. The most significant developments affecting the counselling service up to now have probably been the growth of the regional enquiry services, offering impartial guidance and counselling to people interested in joining the OU and now advising at least 80,000 enquirers every year; and the development of something that used to be called CE (continuing education) into a major activity of the University, with over 14,000 management education students in 1990, a substantial in-service education programme for teachers, and a developing health and social welfare and community education area. Counselling support is still, however, firmly linked to a particular programme of study, and the effect on the counselling scene of introducing new programmes has therefore been to expand the kinds of counselling support available across the university; so that, for example, in the BA degree programme, students are counselled by tutor-counsellors on the 1976 model which has proved so successful; students taking single degree-level courses have a separate course tutor and counsellor; and management diploma students have a tutor with a counselling role; neither of these latter offer 'continuity of counselling' as a principle, even within the programme.

However, there are problems. Firstly, the same level of support is not offered across all study areas; to the extent that the Steering Group of the Academic Review of the University, reporting in 1989, had as one of its recommendations: 'Work should begin on redressing in the 1990s the inequalities of counselling provision as between different levels and types of study programme within the University'.

Secondly, a growing number of students are not following a discrete path through a single programme of study, but are moving from one to another, and from one counsellor and counselling system to another. A 1990 estimate showed that around 14,000 students had had meaningful contact with more than one line of study, and of this figure, some 89 per cent had contact with two lines, and 9.4 per cent with three lines of study. In addition a new Health and Social Welfare Diploma about to come on stream will include courses from both the BA degree and the management education programmes, thus attracting students already in other study areas. Given these circumstances, it is hard to see how the continuing needs of

students for longer term educational development can be met through the existing programme based counselling service.

As a result of these concerns, a working group was established with a brief to examine the question of support for students on all programmes of study outside the BA degree. In essence, two opposing models, each with its own validity, were debated: the first suggested that every tutor should act also as a counsellor, with the advantage that the tutor already had close contact with the student and was well placed to provide counselling support. The second suggested a personal counsellor for all students who would follow them through their career with the OU, regardless of course or programme of study, building up a knowledge of their students and advising them on their educational development.

The group reported in January 1991 and its main recommendations were as follows:

- the basic counselling model for students in all programmes of study should consist of a local or easily accessible counsellor who would provide continuity of counselling throughout a student's career in the Open University. Such counsellors would be expected to have firm links with the Open University's teaching system and with programme or study areas.
- local counselling support should be backed by stronger links between students and tutors and counsellors and tutors. The tutor's role needs to be more clearly defined to reflect good practice, with greater emphasis on in-course support.
- the existing provision of counselling support through the Regional Centre should be consolidated and should involve not only vocational guidance, study skills and other centrally organised counselling provision, but also a concentration of easily accessible expertise for each substantial programme.

This new counselling system is more than merely a rationalisation: like the counselling system of Athabasca and all Open Universities, it needs not only to be relevant to the new environment now, it must also be flexible enough to cope with future developments and possibilities.

## **The two institutions – a contrast**

The AU and OU systems of student support have developed along different lines, mainly due to differing context, tradition and geography. The OU is a much larger institution serving 180,000