Part II

students in Britain (and now, increasingly in Europe) while AU serves approximately 11,000 students. AU, in serving all of Canada, faces the challenge of developing support services which can be delivered through a variety of modes, whereas the counsellors at the OU are able to support telephone and written counselling by face-to-face contact with students through the highly developed regional network. While both institutions cater to working adults who are studying part-time, there are differences in the student body which to some extent determine the nature of support services. For example, the time commitment (and possibly, therefore, the personal commitment) of OU students is much greater than that of AU students because of the major difference in course unit sizes.

While AU has regional offices and the support services have now been completely decentralised with no coordinating directorate, the existing services were developed using a centralised model with a goal of consistency throughout the system. The professionalisation of student support at AU (all counsellors are required to have the same disciplinary base and membership in the same professional association, and consequently have a common body of knowledge) has contributed to the development of a common philosophy and service model. On the other hand, the OU regional offices and study centres have had more autonomy in service development, and each regional office has its own service modes; though the introduction of a distributed admissions system, based on an enquiries and admissions service in each region, from late 1991, is leading to much greater consistency and coordination between regions, and a concern for a university wide standards of quality of service. As well, at the OU, counsellors each have their own disciplinary base, leading to greater variation in philosophy of student support.

Another major difference between the two institutions is that they have chosen very different paths in terms of linking tutorial support with advising and counselling. The OU made a conscious decision early on to have many tutors also provide counselling support so that the functions are interlinked; its introductory guide to tutorial and counselling staff affirms 'the principle of educational counselling informs and is at the root of all Open University teaching.'[25] AU has taken a different approach with a model which creates a

dichotomy (possibly a false one) between counselling and tuition. Faculty and tutors refer students who want assistance with non course content based issues to an advisor or counsellor. Finally, while the OU seems to have fully embraced counselling and advising as an integral part of the educational process, AU has chosen to cut back the counselling function to the point where it is no longer viable in its current form. Despite these differences, the two institutions face remarkably similar challenges in provision of student support services.

The future

Alan Tait, in an address at the 1987 ICDE Conference,[24] spoke about the historical development of distance education from an industrial model involving mass production of knowledge, embodied in a more or less interactive course package, to one where there is 'individualisation and socialisation of the educational experience to which the course contributes'. He described the integral role of student support in contributing to individualisation and socialisation by 'democratising' the educational process and the institution. In other words, the role of student support is to help students in whatever way necessary - information provision, study skills assistance, explaining bureaucracy - to ensure that all students not only have equal opportunity with regard to access but also in achieving their educational goals as adult and independent learners.

Pressures are increasing on AU and other open institutions to respond to growing demands for credit coordination assistance, special needs and minority groups, and a new group of younger students who cannot gain access to traditional classroom based education. More than ever, flexible and imaginative student support systems are necessary to 'democratise' the institution in order to meet the widest possible variety of needs.

With the advent of lifelong learning, much greater geographical mobility, and the tremendous increase in the number of part-time adult students, there is much greater pressure on institutions to provide credit coordination systems. In response, there have been major developments, between institutions, between nations, and worldwide, in credit transfer including courses with a common curriculum rating leading to common qualifications (e.g.

National Vocational Qualifications in the UK; the Canadian credit transfer system); accreditation of prior learning and experience (the British Columbia Open University credit bank); and systems where credits may contribute to more than one qualification (as recommended by the OU's 1990 report on the Classification and Certification of Open University Courses). Both at AU and the OU, students may take part of a degree or other qualifications through distance education, and part in a conventional institution. Increasingly, this is likely to be an international process. For example, in the UK, the Secretary of State for Education (April 1991) comments 'Under the Erasmus Schemes, study at European universities already counts towards the award of a UK degree. There is now a pilot scheme for credit transfer across Europe'. The marketing of OU courses as a whole for 1992 will increase this cross-institutional activity.

In this context, a single institution will be less and less likely to be the 'whole' answer for a given student, but it will be increasingly part of the answer as students pick and choose courses and programmes at appropriate times in their lives and in different geographic locations. For such credit coordination schemes to be effective, many students need the best possible advice from those providing front-end information, advising and counselling services. Students will particularly benefit from unbiased 'brokering' services which help them to assess their needs and make the very best use of a variety of educational resources.

Access

Another major issue facing open institutions is the degree to which they are open to disadvantaged groups and minorities. Although the mandate of institutions such as Athabasca and the UK Open University includes providing for those students who would not otherwise have educational opportunities, institutional reports indicate that the profile of the average student is still white and middle class with at least secondary school qualifications. Close to half of students entering AU have already completed some university courses.[24]

Examples of successful programmes for minority students, such as the university transfer and Health Administration Certificate programmes which AU offers in cooperation with the Yellowhead Tribal Council, show that support systems specifically adapted to the special needs of the group are essential for

student success. In this case, classroom based courses are offered on site in a familiar and supportive environment for native students. Counselling and advising services are also provided on site and include such features as on-site registration with a counsellor present to explain how the post-secondary system works, credential regulations, transfer options and procedures, and how to use resource materials such as institutional catalogues and transfer guides. This type of service builds confidence and helps the students to become self sufficient so that they can take better advantage of the educational system. As well, programmes which offer students basic 'learning to learn' skills are very important. Many native students are disadvantaged, not just socio-economically, but geographically, in that many of the northern schools which they attended are substandard. In the OU, parallel initiatives in increasing access for ethnic minorities and other educationally disadvantaged groups have developed and expanded under the aegis of the University's Equal Opportunities policy. In 1990 funding was provided for a range of initiatives which are now being evaluated by the Institute of Educational Technology, and all units have submitted plans to the University's Access Advisory Team for reaching targets for recruitment and retention of disadvantaged students. Reflecting the experience of Athabasca's cooperative scheme above, group entry schemes to the BA degree, in which the OU collaborates with local institutions to recruit to access courses, supported by a tutor-counsellor leading into a foundation course, are a key feature of these initiatives; and supported preparation is being introduced for all new BA students this autumn. If open institutions are going to be successful in attracting and keeping minority or other disadvantaged groups, (and in the UK, funding will certainly in future be linked to student retention) support services will have to play a key role.

While pressures are increasing to serve the needs of new groups of students and those created by a constantly changing context, resources in the post-secondary system are finite. HE in the UK is moving into a new unified funding arrangement, which will include the OU, and the emphasis will be on a substantial expansion in higher education, with student numbers as a major driver for funding, and irresistible pressure to reduce the cost per student. Although in the UK the emphasis on increasing access to higher education has

included a recognition of the need for counselling as part of access courses, most major new sources of funding in both countries are likely to be specific to academic programme development, with little attention paid to the counselling and advising infrastructure required to support new programmes. Counselling systems are not cheap. In particular, full-time university staff, requiring premises and with other high overheads, are extremely expensive. There is little realistic prospect in any distance education institution of increasing their numbers in the current fiscal climate. The most likely way of meeting new service needs is probably through the use of part-time staff. There are also considerable intrinsic merits in this prospect, in terms of increased localisation of the service. As an example, the greater integration of counselling and advising functions with tuition at the OU has proven to be cost efficient and is probably one of the very best ways to provide comprehensive services effectively (with less danger of some students falling between the cracks as can happen in a system where counselling and tutoring are totally divorced). With increased use of part-time staff to deliver services and perhaps to take on some local coordination, and peer support and appraisal roles, the major role for full-time counselling professionals will become staff and systems monitoring and development, and the production of support materials (for both staff and students). Counselling services at the OU and AU are already moving in this direction.

Student support staff will also have to find new ways to use existing resources. While academic courses and programmes are delivered through a variety of media, counselling and advising services have tended to rely on print, face-to-face, and telephone. There is great potential to use the numerous distance delivery technologies such as computer conferencing, teleconferencing, and interactive video and computer programmes in order to deliver support services more cost effectively and reach a wider audience. Experimentation and cooperative projects with those involved in educational technology are long overdue.

Conclusion

Although AU and the OU provide two very different case studies in historical development of student support, they face very similar

challenges, in common with open institutions world-wide. The OU still retains the infrastructure to meet these challenges, having a well developed network of student support. It appears to be long past the question of whether to provide counselling services, and well into the very pressing questions of what to provide and how best to provide it. Its major concern over the next five years will be to maintain those services within the new economic environment and in the wake (at the most optimistic) of a severe recession. Athabasca University, on the other hand, appears to have taken some backward steps in virtually eliminating their existing student support system, and will have to struggle to rebuild before they are ready to meet current student needs, let alone future challenges.

It is difficult to speculate about the future, particularly when our environment and our student bodies are changing so rapidly. The importance of systematic evaluation and institutional research to investigate the best ways of meeting student support needs cannot be overlooked. In the final analysis, time and objective evaluation programmes will best tell us whether we are meeting our stated objectives of providing support systems which humanise and democratise our institutions, and maintain and develop open access.

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