

Part I

The student view of tutorial support: Report of a survey of Open University Education students

Colin Morgan (Staff Tutor) and Glyn Morris (Assistant Staff Tutor) of the Open University's School of Education in Wales (Y Brifysgol Agored Yng Nghymru) report on a survey of 1992 School of Education students. Setting their work in the context of Total Quality Management, the survey aimed to uncover what students really thought of tutorial provision in the School of Education in Wales. The survey reveals a high level of general satisfaction with provision, but the authors also point to the need to improve services in order to compensate for geographical dispersal of students, with attention to rural issues in particular; the need for more student networking and telephone tuition; and to bringing about more realistic expectations of face to face tutorial provision on the part of students.

Colin Morgan and Glyn Morris

The work of School of Education tutors in the OU Region has become more complicated and challenging over recent years. In the early years students on Education courses were exclusively undergraduate, and almost without exception they were teachers seeking to 'top up' their professional qualifications with a degree for the additional status and financial incrementation that would bring them. The taught nine month Education courses are now provided at Diploma, BA, and Masters level, and many courses are open to both degree and associate students. The associate students can constitute about a third or more of the Education student body in the Region and many of them can be taking a single course on a 'one off' basis. In addition to the core professional constituency of teachers, there nowadays can be a significant proportion of non-teachers on many courses: para-professionals, parents, school governors, 'aware citizens', parallel subject interest people etc. The greater choice of courses available today can also mean a greater geographical dispersion of students on all courses in a country such as Wales. All in all, then, the Education tutor in Wales now faces the challenge of delivering tutorial support to a much more heterogeneous and scattered body of students than in the past.

In staff development activities over recent

years, this challenge has been recognised by the collective attempt to share experience of the changed context and to tease out its implications for tutorial activity. There has, however, been an important missing dimension to our knowledge base in endeavouring to do the best job we can: what do the students really think of the tutorial support we bring to them; are we really meeting their needs?

Of course, there has been available to us a whole range of feedback from students and tutors but this is derived on an ad hoc, anecdotal, fragmented basis, often only capturing the polarities of tutorial interaction by way of significant success stories or 'worst case' happenings. It is likely that the everyday 'traffic' of reports on student and tutor behaviour reflects nothing from a 'silent majority'. Moreover, there is the important point that the relative absence of dissatisfaction as indicated by the 'traffic of normal feed back' in the way described above, is not necessarily proof of customer satisfaction.

For the above reasons alone, we have felt that it was high time we surveyed on a systematic basis the students' view of their tutorial support received on School of Education courses in Wales. We were also driven to do so, however, by the development in recent times of our commitment to the tenets of *Total Quality Management* (TQM). TQM requires a culture in which there is the primacy of customer requirements, and two of the prime focuses of TQM are: (i) the *Customer Survey or Audit*: how do our students as customers really define

'quality' in terms of tutorial support; and: (ii) *Process Quality* - are the various processes of the tutorial transaction conforming to 'quality' criteria.

In education there is often a tendency to keep 'Quality' as an abstraction which can enjoy a range of definitions according to individuals' taste. In the TQM perspective, it is important to remove any abstraction from the conception of quality, and to obtain a full understanding of how the customers define it.

The survey context

This study, then, focuses mainly upon the tutorial provision which a carefully constructed sample of OU students in Wales had experienced in 1992. Inevitably, the students also commented upon the course materials themselves as they responded to our questions, but we have not elaborated on this element. It is sufficient to say that, for the most part, they were very happy with the course material and the challenges it has presented to them. There are, of course, from time to time, concerns voiced about the amount of work required but these have been expressed mainly in terms of the need for tutors to help students map their way through the course. There were only two respondents (4 per cent of the surveyed population) who complained that material was out of date (this at a time when education was undergoing the most rapid change since 1945). On the other hand, other students paid tribute to the part played by tutors in bringing the issues into line with current policy. Finally in respect of course content rather than tutorial matters, a small number of students made comments to the effect that, with hindsight, they felt that they had opted for the wrong course. This and other issues connected with the content and presentation of course materials, however, lay beyond the intention of the study, which was to measure students' views of the tutorial support they had received. Nevertheless, student comments on other matters, (for example, choosing the wrong course), have marked out for us other topic areas about the world of our customers which can bear some further investigation if we are to fine-tune our tutorial provision.

The major part of this survey was conducted by telephone, and for our part, it was gratifying to talk to students who both had a clear commitment to their OU studies and to their involvement in their work in schools. From

some comments made, it seems that some students regarded our survey which we might have designated as 'a telephone intrusion' into their already busy lives, as an extension of the Open University's service to its students. This point is perhaps best exemplified by the comment (said with some enthusiasm) from an interviewee who had previously withdrawn from another HE institution in the Principality:

'My tutor has been in touch with me and kept me going through the course. My counsellor has rung me a couple of times to see how things were, and now **you** are ringing me to see what I thought of it all. You are never alone in the Open University!'

[1992 Education student from South-Wales]

Although we have used telephone interviews in external research work, this is the first occasion we have used this method to survey the clientele of our own department of work. The telephone survey method has worked so well on this occasion that we see considerable promise in its wider usage in the future.

The survey methods

We had chosen the telephone approach in the first place in order that we, as interviewers, could elaborate lines of enquiry by supplementary questions and hear the detailed voice of the student at first hand on the topics we were raising. Where we were unable to reach by telephone a minority of those in our sample frame, we sent them a questionnaire.

Altogether, we contacted a total of 54 students in late October and early November 1992, 43 of them by telephone using a standard check list of questions. The survey population was derived from a quota sample frame which took into account the all-Wales gender balance, the demography of the Welsh students on post-foundation courses to give three sub-regions as strata, and the whole range of Education undergraduate, MA, and associate student nine-month courses. We did not include in this survey students in the School of Education's Certificate of Further Professional Studies programme, as these students in Wales had, at the time of the survey, only just started on their courses. In any case, this programme area has a unique profile of tutorial support which would merit

investigation in its own right.

We sent out by post a total of 21 questionnaires together with a pre-stamped and addressed envelope for reply. These contained the same core questions we had used in the telephone interviews, though in some cases slightly adapted to suit the postal method of enquiry. We received a return of 11 postal questionnaires - that is 52 per cent - which is very respectable for postal surveys but not as high as we had been hoping for.

The survey sample

For the courses within the scope of the survey the population data base was as follows:

Table 1 The Survey Population

	Total	Male	Female	North	Mid	South & West	Other ++
N	273	91	182	52	21	198	2
%	100	33	67	19	8	72	1

++ 'Other' means students living outside Wales but attending tutorials with a Welsh OU tutor.

The number of female students following OU Education courses in Wales is double that of male students, and, were MA course students to be excluded, the ratio of female to male students would rise to approximately 4:1. As might be expected from the geographical distribution of the population in Wales, the bulk of students are from the South and West with the more sparsely populated area of Mid Wales accounting for less than 10 per cent. However, the basic demography can be affected by the policy of LEA sponsorship of their teachers.

The achieved sample of 54 represents 20 per cent of the survey population and the distribution of those surveyed by telephone or postal questionnaire is shown in Table 2.

This out-turn distribution does not have exact correspondence with the population strata features because of the inability to control the

postal response in the way which we could with the major telephone part of the survey. We had arranged our telephone respondents carefully so that they had concurred exactly with the strata profiles of the macro population, but the non-response factor to the postal sub-group has meant that there is a reasonable but not exact match between the respondent sample and survey population. In fact, the survey out-turn has loaded-up the level of response from students from the 'North' and 'Mid-Wales' sub-regions to about double the level of their proportion in the population as a whole. There is some clear advantage to us in this 'over-representation' since it is exactly these rural, dispersed students, situated furthest from the

Regional Centre in Cardiff, who present the greatest challenge to providing tutorial support on a distance basis. Given the level of representation, then, of North and Mid-Wales students in the survey data, there is a positive advantage to the strength of the findings from the interviewees in these sub-regions - there is a sufficient response level to have avoided sampling error or ambiguity.

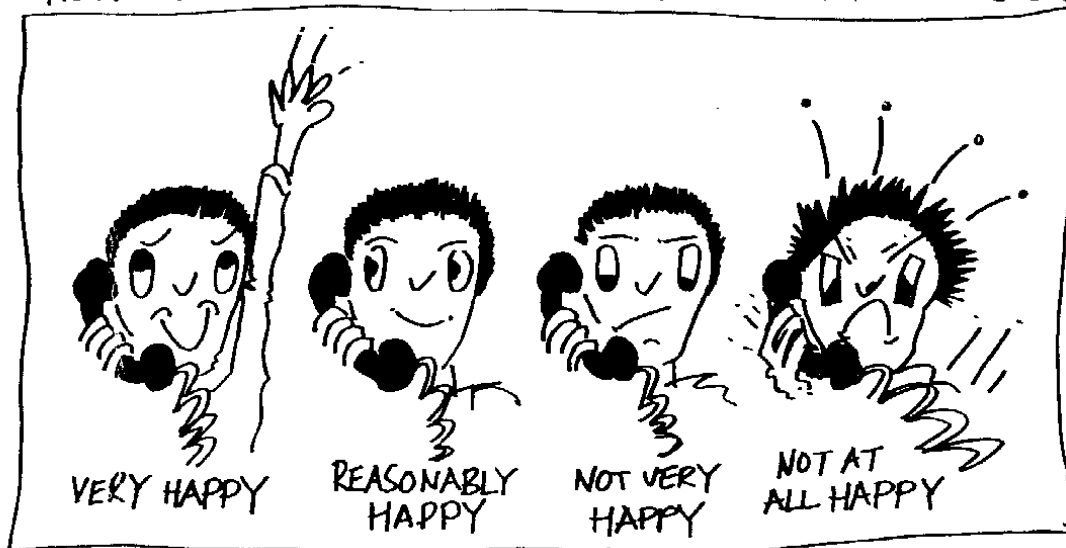
The student view of tutorial support

We present below the findings of this survey, first in terms of measures to convey the levels of 'overall' customer satisfaction, and secondly in respect of the various components of the total tutorial support which students receive.

Table 2 The Interview Sample

	Sample	Male	Female	North	Mid	South & West
N	54	14	40	17	7	30
%	100	26	74	31	13	56

HOW HAPPY ARE YOU WITH YOUR TUTORIAL PROVISION?



Overall evaluation of the tutorial support provision by Education students in Wales

We had designed into both the telephone and correspondence components of our survey two general measures of student reactions to the tutorial arrangements made for their courses in 1992. The first of these asked them to sum-up how happy they were with their tutorial provision (this to include their tutor's handling of their assignments, face-to-face tutorials and telephone contacts, both individual and group) by affirming one of four response positions: 'Very Happy'; 'Reasonably Happy'; 'Not Very Happy'; or, 'Not at All Happy'.

A second measure was provided by students being asked to score on a scale 0-10 their overall appreciation of the tutorial

Table 3 Student Happiness with 1992 Education Courses Tutorial Support in Wales - including handling of TMA's, Telephone and Face-to-Face contacts (N=53)*

Response Category	No.	%
Very Happy	29	55
Reasonably Happy	19	36
Not Very Happy	4	7
Not At All Happy	1	2
Totals*	53	100

*One postal respondent did not reply to this question.

Table 4 Education Students' Scale of 10 Scores in Overall Rating of their 1992 Tutorial Support in Wales (N=51)*

Scale Position	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Mean
% Response	0	2	0	2	4	6	8	21	25	20	12	7.4

arrangements they had received, bearing in mind that the Open University is intended to be a distance teaching based institution.

This second measure was placed towards the end of the interview and, therefore, could be said to constitute a summative evaluation by the student after discussion of particular issues related to aspects of tutorial provision which in the telephone interviews followed our opening with the first measure. Tables 3 and 4 present the students' response on these two measures.

By any standard the data given in Tables 3 and 4 represent a very positive reaction to tutorial provision. 91 per cent of the students surveyed stated that they were 'reasonably happy' or 'very happy' with the tutorial support they had received. Also, it was clear, from treating different responses from the same person in relation to each other, that even some less positive responses to the 'measure' questions were qualified by later comments. For example, one student who had given a response that she was not at all pleased with her tutorial arrangements (she had scored 3 on the 'scale of 10'), qualified this opinion by the additional statement that she was 'disappointed

Table 5 Education Student Ratings of 1992 Tutorial Support by Gender

Measure	Female % Response	Male % Response
'Very Happy'	55	50
'Reasonably Happy'	35	36
Mean STEN* score	7.5	7.1

*STEN = scale of 10, though we always use 0 to 10, and not 1 to 10 as some respondents in this kind of survey can insist on giving a value of zero.

with *the course itself* as much as with the quality of tutoring'.

With nearly all the students' responses, there was elaboration of their rating of tutorial arrangements which paid tribute to the helpfulness of their tutors. Not surprisingly the *quality* of contact was as important as the number of times tutors made contact with them. Representative comments made by the students were:

Widespread praise for tutors

'Very pleased, best [tutor] I have had...'

'Helpful and constructive...'

'Good feedback on assignments...'

'Very helpful [Tutor] eased me into the system... 10/10 for personal contact and back-up'

'Without the tutor, I should not have completed the course'.

All things considered then, we take these student evaluations of our 1992 tutorial support for Education courses in Wales to be saying that our tutorial support provision is good, perhaps even approaching very good, but it is not yet excellent, as about 10 per cent of our students are below the line of reasonable satisfaction, and even more could be in the 'very happy' category (Table 3).

We were, however, concerned to analyse further the data presented in Tables 1 and 2 in order to determine whether there were any relationships between survey responses, and a range of factors including gender; the demography of Wales as reflected by sub-regions; or with student status regarding experience of the Open University, i.e. whether the respondent was a 'continuing' student who had previous experience of the Open University or a 'new student' who was taking a course with us for the first time. We had hypothesised that an examination of

relationships such as these, might expose reasons why student approval of tutorial support was weaker in some cases than others.

Approval level of tutorial support by gender

We manipulated our data base to expose whether there was any relationship between responses on the two approval measures we have already discussed above and gender (Table 5).

As Table 5 shows, no significance to different response levels can be attributed to the gender difference of students.

Approval level of tutorial provision and student location

Whilst we had not expected any particular relationship with gender in the level of approval given to tutorial provision arrangements by students, we had speculated that there was likely to be a relationship with geographical location.

Mid and North Wales have low and very dispersed populations and this demography is reflected in OU student numbers from these sub-regions of the Principality. On post-foundation courses it very often means that student numbers are low to the extent that arranging face-to-face tutorials within these sub-regions becomes the exception rather than the rule. The consequence for students is that any face-to-face contact with their tutor (who is often operating on an 'all-Wales' group basis) would mean a very long journey and a commitment of time in excess of the face-to-face tutorial time. In many cases, then, for Education students in North and Mid-Wales the reality of their OU study is likely to mean a mix of support which excludes face-to-face contact with their tutor, and which moves the basis of contact very much to a written and telephone basis only.

Table 6 shows that there is a very clear

Table 6 Student Approval of 1992 Tutorial Arrangements on Education Courses by Sub-Region in Wales (N=53*)

Category of Response	North (N=17) %	Mid (N=7) %	South & West (N=29) %
Very Happy	35	57	65
Reasonably Happy	53	29	28
Not Very Happy	12	0	7
Not At All Happy	0	14	0
Totals	100	100	100

* One respondent did not answer this question.

relationship between approval level regarding tutorial support provision and demography - there is a gradient of most satisfaction which diminishes from South to North Wales. Almost twice as many of our Education students are 'very happy' in South Wales compared to North Wales. In our telephone interviews we did in fact receive a number of comments from North Walians to suggest that they felt that they were relatively disadvantaged regarding tutorials compared with the South. For example:

*'need more tutorials in N. Wales'
'Would have liked more tutorials, but if you live in this part of the world (Wrexham) you miss out'*

This relationship between being 'best pleased' with tutorial support and sub-region within Wales is therefore something which presents us with a definite focus for improving further our 'customer satisfaction' level. The challenge is how to find an enhanced quality of support for students in Mid and North Wales whilst recognising that the scope to deliver face-to-face tutorials locally is unlikely to be increased. We do, however, need to note that, if the two categories of 'very happy' and 'reasonably happy' are combined across sub-regions, the great majority of students across sub-regions are satisfied customers. The issue here is therefore one of enhancement of satisfaction and not one of trying to deliver satisfaction where it does not currently exist.

Approval of tutorial provision - new and continuing students compared

Almost all nine-month courses in Wales will have both continuing students and those for

whom the course represents their first time studying with the OU. If a student's first experience with a new tutor and new course is a critical event, how much more so must it be for a student new to Open University distance teaching? A number of the continuing students in our sample implied that becoming used to independent study was a developmental process and that they had learned the ropes over the years. This included, for example, learning that phoning tutors was not necessarily an invasion of the latter's privacy but an accepted part of the tutorial process.

We knew that our sample frame included new and continuing students in the proportion of about 1:3, and therefore analysed our data to see whether there were any differences in the respective ratings of these two groups of students. We had hypothesised that: (i) continuing students who were used to the system and who were 'old hands' at independent study would be more approving of the tutorial support than new students; (ii) that new students who, as trained professional teachers would previously have had experience of full time face-to-face courses, might be disappointed with the necessarily reduced (or even absent) face-to-face tutorial provision on their present distance based OU course, and consequently be less approving than continuing students.

New students in our telephone interviews did indeed reveal that taking an OU course for the first time as an Associate Student is an intimidating experience:

Initial fears for Associate Students

*'At the start I was worried about it'
'I was frightened at first - 15 hours a week [part-time study] seemed a big undertaking'*