Part II

'I was scared'
'I thought I would be overcome'
'I was frightened to be honest because the materials came in one go. When the first pack came I thought there was an awful lot of material - I was quite frightened in that respect'
'I was new to OU style of work and hadn't studied for 15 years. I was also new to the study area'

Comments such as these raise the question as to whether in our current promotion of OU School of Education courses we are sufficiently aware of how intimidating, to begin with, the OU might look from the outside. Does our promotional material do anything at the present time to allay the concerns of those who might enrol?

The comments above might therefore be taken to endorse our hypothesis regarding new students and their level of likely approval regarding tutorial support. However, when we analysed our data to compare the responses of new and continuing students, we were to find that we were wrong in our hypothesis. Using

The comments made by new students both underpin their ratings and disclose exactly how it came to be that their earlier pre-course fears about workload or coping with a new mode of study had been converted into very positive approval of the tutorial support:

New students' comments on tutorial support received

'The tutor eased me in. He was open and welcoming and not condescending. Ten out of ten for personal contact and back-up. I felt good about it.'
'I am impressed with the tutorial system and the whole organisation.'
'It was a big jump from the first assignment to the last but my tutor helped me to go higher.'
'The tutor contacted me because I hadn't been to a tutorial and I explained that I had moved. He [also] rang me just before the exam which was nice.'
'The tutor was extremely helpful. At first I didn't know what to expect and then we got this (group) telephone call. It was nice to

Table 7 Approval of Tutorial Provision, New and Continuing 1992 Education Students in Wales Compared

	New Students		Continuing Students		All Students	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Very Happy	11	92	18	44	29	55
Reasonably Happy	1	8	18	44	19	36
Not Very Happy	0	0	4	10	4	7
Not At All Happy	0	0	1	2	1	2
Totals	12	100	41	100	53	100

first of all the '4 Category Happiness' response measure, Table 7 shows that the new students were very happy indeed with the level of the tutorial provision - decidedly more so than continuing students:

What is to explain this 'contrary-to-expectation' response from new students which was further corroborated by the second measure - the 'scale of ten' responses (Table 8)?

Table 8 Scoring of Tutorial Arrangements on a Scale 0-10: New and Continuing Students Compared

	New Students	Continuing Students	All Students
Mean Score:	8.1	7.2	7.4

talk to other students. The tutor sent some helpful notes beforehand.'
'I benefited from an obviously experienced tutor who could include all the group well. We had a clear idea of what work to cover. The tutor supplemented the materials with a written summary of each unit and the important points. I think this enhanced the tutorials as the notes were sent out in advance.'

What these comments reveal is that it is the *detail quality* of the tutoring which counts and not necessarily the mode. What came through time and time again in the telephone interviews with these students was the nature of the crucial umbilical of distance teaching support; namely, that the tutor keeps frequent interactive contact

with the individual student, and indeed customises that support to the individual's circumstances. The initiation of this support at the beginning of the course is an important *rite de passage*. A number of new students mentioned (as indeed did some continuing students) the importance of the tutor's introductory letter to them. This is clearly a general practice and one that is much valued. Only a very small minority of students who we asked said that there had been no such letter:

The initial letter from the tutor
'He wrote to me before the course began.'
'The initial letter helped and I was impressed with the tutorial organisation as a whole.'
'I had a letter from the tutor if I remember rightly.'
'I found the initial letter very encouraging. They said welcome to the university. It took away some of the initial tension.'
'She wrote a very nice letter. She was my tutor last year so she wrote personally addressing me by my first name.'
'There was no introductory letter - I initiated the contact. Normally tutors are supposed to write to the student. This time it didn't happen.'

This evidence of the importance of introductory letters has influenced the content of our staff development provision for 1993. Tutors have met in cross-course groups to exchange views on the scope and specific content of the introductory letter and initial contact with students more generally, and a 'best practice' view has emerged.

On the evidence of this survey, the tutors of Education courses in Wales in 1992 should feel pleased that their work produced this kind of overall response, and very pleased with the level of approval for their tutorial support from students who were new to the Open University. But what about the continuing students? The tutors have behaved towards them exactly as they have done towards new students. Yet the 'old hands', though still very positive on the whole about the tutorial support they received, are not so pleased as the new students were. It seems to us that this phenomenon is to be explained by the fact that many continuing students have arrived at post-foundation level to find the tutorial support significantly less in quantity than that experienced at foundation

level, and consequently feel less happy than they may have done in the past. For the new students, on the other hand, this is the only level of support in a distance teaching context which they have known.

The student view of components of tuition
The three main components of interaction between tutor and student are: the completion and marking of written assignments; face-to-face tutorials; and (perhaps of most importance in a region such as Wales) contacts by telephone either on an individual or a group 'conference call' basis. Our student survey group was invited to comment on any of these modes of contact as well as more generally regarding tutorial support.

Assignments
Only very few of our student respondents commented explicitly on these, and, among those that did, there were a small number of negative comments. For example, one student felt unfairly treated because s/he had had to rely upon outdated course material and had been 'marked down' because the latest policy had not been referred to in the assignment. (However, another student following the same course commented specifically on the effective way that course materials had been modified to keep up with the rapid changes.) Two students complained about the standard of legibility of comments on work and on the summary sheet (PT3). Another found the opening remarks of the tutor on the return script - 'A very odd piece of work' - lacking in encouragement; also that no specific guidelines had been given by the tutor for improving the standard of this student's work.

However, of those commenting on assignments, the majority had found their tutors' remarks to be helpful and constructive.

Scheduled face-to-face tutorials
Attendances at face-to-face tutorials is not a compulsory element of tutorial contact in the Open University. We know from OU experience over its first 20 years that, whilst many students feel a great need for them, both in terms of meeting their tutor and as a forum to meet other students, there are some students, no less successful, who seem to ignore them completely.

In speaking with our interviewees about face-to-face tutorials, broadly speaking, our questions focused on two issues. First, did the

students attend face-to-face tutorials and if not (or only a minority) why was this the case? Secondly, we wanted to know what made a 'successful' tutorial for the students.

We asked our student interviewees whether they had attended 'All', 'Most' (i.e. a majority), 'Some' (i.e. a minority), or 'None' of the tutorials provided for them. We wanted to assess whether their perceptions of their own attendance matched our own impressions, and to find out the 'customer view' of tutorial quality.

Table 9 Student Perceptions of their Attendance at Education Tutorials in Wales in 1992 (N=54)

Response Category	No. of Students Responding	% Survey Sample
Attended All	17	31
		(46%)
Attended Most	8	15
Attended Some	8	15
		(54%)
None	21	39
Totals	54	100

We found, first, that among our interview sample there was, as might have been expected, about a 6 per cent representation of the 'lone ranger' student category. These students said they preferred totally independent study and wished to exercise the option of not meeting in person either their tutor or fellow students. The majority, however, said it had been their policy to attend tutorials, or expressed to us some sort of regret that factors had prevented their attending.

Table 9 shows a bi-polar pattern: about a third of students attended all tutorials and somewhat over a third of students attended none, either, as they told us, because of logistical or domestic problems or because they wanted to be 'lone ranger' students. These student perceptions of

their own tutorial attendance align with the Staff Tutor view as seen from the Welsh Regional Centre, and do not really present any new pattern to those already known about over the years in the Region.

Within this overall response pattern regarding tutorial attendance, there is, however, some significance to the sub-regional distribution. The non-attendance by sub-region (Table 10) exhibits the North to South gradient already revealed in students' approval of tutorial support as we saw earlier, and this was something of which we were not fully aware. Table 10 shows the clear distinction in patterns of attendance between North and South Wales. In South Wales 37 per cent attended all tutorials and 30 per cent none; in North Wales 29 per cent attended all tutorials and 53 per cent none.

The gradient of attendance between sub-regions revealed by Table 10 does suggest some linkage between the level of overall approval students accorded their experience of tutorial support and the access ability to attend tutorials. For demographic reasons the ability of North Wales students to attend face-to-face scheduled tutorials is less than in the remainder of Wales.

In this respect, we asked those students who stated that they attended none or only some of the face-to-face tutorials why this was the case. The modal reason (72 per cent) was the distance involved in travelling to the centre where it was held. Further analysed into sub-regions, 100 per cent of students from the North, 75 per cent from Mid-Wales, and 56 per cent from the South and West mentioned a travelling factor, in the sense that distance from the tutorial venue often decided whether they attended or not.

However, a number of students when elaborating upon problems of travel to distant tutorials indicated that an additional factor is the ratio of travelling time to tutorial time. One

Table 10 Student Attendance at Education Tutorials by Sub-Region in Wales in 1992 (N=50)

Response Category	North Wales		Mid-Wales		S & W Wales	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Attended All	5	29	1	14	11	37
Attended Most	3	18	2	29	3	10
Attended Some	0	0	1	14	7	23
Attended None	9	53	3	43	9	30
Totals	17	100	7	100	30	100

student was faced with an eight hour return journey to the tutorial venue, whilst for many from the rural areas the situation is that conveyed in the following comment:

> ... '[I] had to travel two hours each way for a two hour tutorial.'

The challenge in managing tutorial support for the more rural parts of the country is clearly one of how can we best compensate for demography.

The student view of face-to-face tutorials

We also asked the students to say something about the tutorials themselves: what they found to be helpful to their progress on the course, and also what they saw as needing to be changed so as to make the tutorials more rewarding for them. In assessing overall what our student interviewees said about their tutorials, there are a number of important points of qualification to bear in mind. First, the number of statements of commendation that we received outnumbered the 'complaints' approximately in the ratio of 3:2. Secondly, some of the adverse points raised were often a matter of resource allocation or other factors outside the actual control of the tutor, e.g. 'there are insufficient students attending the session to make for a full discussion'.

It is significant that 44 per cent of students' comments given in approving of their tutorial encounters referred to some aspect of tutor preparation and organisation. For example:

> 'They were well prepared.'
> 'The tutor sent us a schedule in advance and it was stuck to...'
> 'The tutor provided a synopsis of the unit to guide our discussion'.

On the negative side, other students made critical comments about the structure (33 per cent of all negative comments) of their face-to-face tutorial sessions. For example:

> 'lacked specificity'
> 'They were too democratic' [i.e. the session rambled]
> 'They tended to be dominated by one student'
> 'There is a lot of ground to be covered in [the course] and we needed to be guided through it'.

In our staff development work with regard to face-to-face tutorials, we have long recognised

that there can be sometimes a 'no-win' problem faced by tutors in that their tutorial group can contain wholly conflicting expectations on the part of its members. Some of the comments we received illustrate this dilemma. One student, for example, complained that the tutorial sessions over-emphasised 1:1 encounters with individual students to deal with their TMA's whilst the remainder had been assigned a study task; but for another student interviewee the concern was: 'Perhaps there needs to be more time for tutors to get to know about students as individuals'!

It is also important to realise that some of the complaints are complementary to the strengths that are perceived. For example, the biggest single category of adverse criticism (24 per cent) concerned the length of scheduled tutorials: that the time was too limited, may have been from a student who had spoken very approvingly of the tutorials and really wanted more of the same.

From the responses made by students to the questions about their face-to-face tutorials it is possible to draw up a classification of the qualities which for them are important (Table 11). We have already discussed above the importance of the organisation/preparation type of commentary made by students, but as Table 11 reveals, also high amongst students' priorities is the opportunity to meet and discuss professional and course issues with other students. Indeed, it has been justifiably argued that the background and experience of the students is the greatest single resource for the Open University tutor.

Networking with other students

Our enquiry about tutorial contact and interaction more generally between students revealed an area of opportunity for us to catalyse more student support in a way not previously fully appreciated. The example of one student in our sample most strikingly bears out the need to establish strong and active networks of students. She had worked her way through her course for the year and had taken the examination, at the end of which in the examination centre, she exchanged a few remarks with another student - a stranger to her - sitting in an adjacent desk. She discovered that not only had the student been tackling the same course, but that they lived within half a mile of each other and that her neighbour had been a home-bound student having three children. Our student interviewee very much regretted

Table 11 1992 Welsh Education Students' Perceptions of the Strong and Weak Aspects of Face-to-Face Tutorials.

	Positive (N=29)	%	Negative (N=20)	%
Organisation				
Provision of Notes, Schedules, Synopses		18	Loose Structure	20
Well Prepared		25	Dominated by One Student	10
			Tutorials Rushed - Insufficient Time	20
Student Interaction				
Meet Other Students		17	Small Number of Students in Group	10
Opportunities to Discuss With Other Students		10	Insufficient Class Discussion	15
Other Qualities				
Other Qualities of Tutor (Humour, Knowledge)		10	Sessions Dominated by Tutor	15
Guidance given on TMA's		10		
'Being Helpful'		10	Too few & lacking Continuity Between Them	10
Totals		100		100

this missed opportunity and expressed herself in strong terms. Although this is a somewhat extreme example, in our sample of students, active self-help or support groups were in a minority.

> 'Have been in contact with other students. We've got networking down to a superb system.'

A number of students told us that they had agreed to the publication of their names and addresses but were surprised that nothing had come of it. On the other hand, one student agreed that her tutor had invited the group to exchange details about each other but it had not been taken up. 'I suppose that I should have taken a lead but I was a bit shy. I shall certainly be more forthcoming next year'.

Other student comments on networking

> 'There were no local groups - it would have been useful to be put in touch with others on the course'
> 'It would have been useful to circulate a list of students to form a support group. A letter

was sent out about this but nothing came of it. I will be more pro-active in self help groups next year'.
> 'It was a 'lonely' course'.
> 'Better networking would be available in the city'
> [Belief expressed by rural student.]

The conclusion that can be safely drawn from our data is that the majority of students value the support from, and interaction with, fellow students both within and aside of the formal tutorials. These data strongly suggest to us that the process of networking requires more active promotion by tutors to overcome any reluctance on the part of students to take the lead in convening groups and scheduling activities. We have, therefore, already built this topic into future staff development activities, and urged that stimulating networking becomes another priority task for tutors in their initial contacts with students, along with the introductory letter, telephone introduction, and any initial face-to-face encounter.

Tutorial support - the telephone component

In a region such as Wales, the telephone for many OU students is a life-line. All of the students in our sample were aware of the availability of their tutors to discuss issues and problems over the telephone. The great majority of the students with whom we spoke found this not only helpful in dealing with course matters, but as a general support. Most of the individual contacts were initiated by the students themselves ringing in with specific requests for specific course help or the extension of submission of work beyond deadlines. In addition, some tutors enact a policy of contacting students by telephone from time to time, as well as when a particular circumstance requires it, and this is much appreciated. For example:

> 'My tutor rang up to see why I hadn't been to the tutorial'
> 'Tutor rang for feedback from the last tutorial'
> 'I have spoken to the tutor [by phone] on a number of occasions, I thought it would be difficult but I am used to it now.'

We have found this line of feedback from our customers to be very valuable in that it has enhanced our view of the value of an ongoing periodic telephone contact between tutor and student. We, therefore, counselled our 1993 tutors proactively to contact their students by telephone on a periodic basis, even if there is no apparent problem or issue to discuss.

Three of our student sample had taken part in scheduled group telephone tutorials and all found them to be a great support in their study.

> 'It was wonderful. I hadn't done it before. We were sent preparatory notes. It was fantastic that the thing [i.e. the course] came to me at home!'
> 'I was apprehensive at first but it was very good indeed. It was an opportunity to talk with other students [but] I listened a lot - listened hard!'

As with face-to-face sessions the students appreciated the care with which tutors had prepared the session and it appears that the actual technicalities of the telephone hook-up went without a hitch.

Overall, the survey responses show that, once students have learned that telephone contacts with tutors are a normal part of the interaction expected in Open University courses, the facility is greatly valued by them even if it is only to deal with the routine tasks associated with the course. Given the student perspectives on telephone contact - whether on an individual or group basis - which we have discussed above, we are taking the view that there is yet more personal interaction which can be exploited to the advantage of the student and of the institution by using more of this medium than we have done in the past. This will, of course, be especially true the more dispersed and rural the student group, and the less access students have to attend tutorial groups.

General conclusions on findings and for strategy

This first report from the survey was primarily addressed to our tutors in Wales, who can take heart from its findings and perhaps consider some of its detail as a basis for further enhancing the excellent work they do. Our general conclusions are:

● Student approval of the tutorial support provision for Education courses in Wales is generally at a good level. The data suggest that we are most likely to improve the current level of customer approval by strategies which compensate for rurality in North and Mid-Wales; enhance student networking; exploit the telephone more; re-align the profile of expectations held by continuing students regarding the reality of the level of post-foundation tutorials.

● There are implications for tutors and for promotion and marketing policy from the responses received from new students in the survey sample, which are, generally, that we at present insufficiently understand the view of the OU world which the potential OU Education Associate Student customer holds. It seems that OU reputation may have given the impression that the standards expected are ultra-demanding, and this could be off-putting to enrolment. It also seems, from the study experience of new Education students, that the OU distance teaching methods package works very well indeed and that students without previous distance based higher education study can be quickly assimilated into its requirements, enjoy it, and have confidence in it. These new students are in a very real sense our most vulnerable customers and most valuable future recruiters.