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## Specifying student support services in the OU - the so-called Student Charter

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Colleagues in the UK who receive utility bills will have noticed a recent growth in 'Customer Care Charters'. Nationally there is the British Gas leaflet for gas users 'Our commitment to you'. In my area there is the Anglian Water Company's leaflet 'Customer Service - your guarantee of our service (Sewerage)', and Cambridge Water Company's 'Our services to you - guaranteed standards scheme'. The Woolwich Building Society has a similar publication containing the sententious phrase: 'we recognise that customers are enormously valuable people...'. At one level these appear to be public relation exercises. And yet...Five years ago when I wrote to Cambridge Water it took four letters (one to the local newspaper) to get a reply. Last year I had the reply within ten days. And if large companies are spending money and time on this kind of thing they must be expecting some kind of pay-off - possibly even for their customers.

There is evidence that customer's charters, contracts, bills of rights are also creeping into education - one Further Education college in my area issues a contract to its students covering both their responsibilities to the college and what college services are guaranteed to them. Even the recent Woolf report in the UK on

prisons contemplates the idea of a 'contract' between prisoners and prison authorities

That is one of three strands that came together for me recently. Another occurred in a discussion at a conference recently about student support services. It was the suggestion from Chris Baker, a colleague in the OU South Region, that there should be a Student Charter of Rights for Open University students. The final strand was spun for me by an Australian colleague at the International Conference in Cambridge who said that the most effective support you could give distance students was assertiveness training, so they could ask for the help they needed more appropriately and effectively.

Weaving these strands together I wrote (in early 1990) an Open University Student Charter for the OU East Anglian Region. It specified standards of service in face-to-face and correspondence tuition, counselling and administrative services from teaching and counselling staff and Regional Centre. It also covered how and who to contact at the Regional Centre. As this formed a rather impenetrable document a summary box was placed on the last page headed 'Your Consumer Rights'.

The hidden agenda of the document was the feeling that too many students failed to progress



because they felt unable to ask for the help they needed. This finding turns up again and again in surveys - 'I didn't like to bother the tutor because he seemed so busy...'; 'I couldn't understand her comments but there didn't seem any point in going back to her'; 'When I approached the counsellor he told me it was too late'. (Comments taken from a recent survey of Student Support Services in East Anglia.)

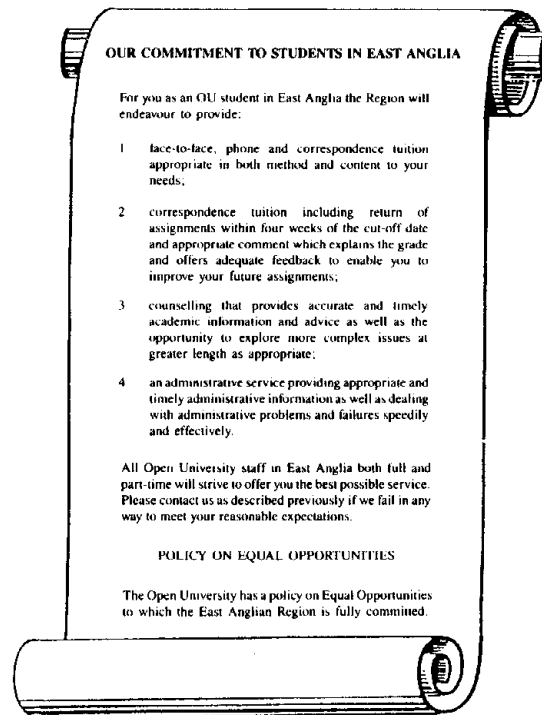
If such students knew what services they might reasonably expect then they might feel better able to ask for those services - and complain when they did not receive them. Such complaints would activate a better mechanism for improving services from staff.

On circulation of the first draft it became clear that it was controversial. There were objections from various sources. One was the feeling that the document should be two-way, specifying not only our obligations to students but students' obligations to us. I was unhappy about this as I could not see what obligations we could place on students that were not either self evident ('pay your bills'), covered by disciplinary regulations ('plagiarism is wrong') or futile ('get your assignments in on time' - how could that be an obligation in a Distance Education system?). I noted that equally British Gas did not impose anything on me other than standard legal obligations, mostly to do with not using gas in such a way as to cause explosions. This debate was (probably only temporarily) resolved by adding a section 'Help Us to Help You' containing good practice for students on making the system work well.

Another objection concerned specifying the level of service we could offer and the possible

legal come-back that students might have if we failed to reach that level. Here two forces were engaged - my own feelings that the tougher and more specific the criteria the better the hidden agenda would work and the opposite feeling that to be too specific would create problems that could not easily be solved.

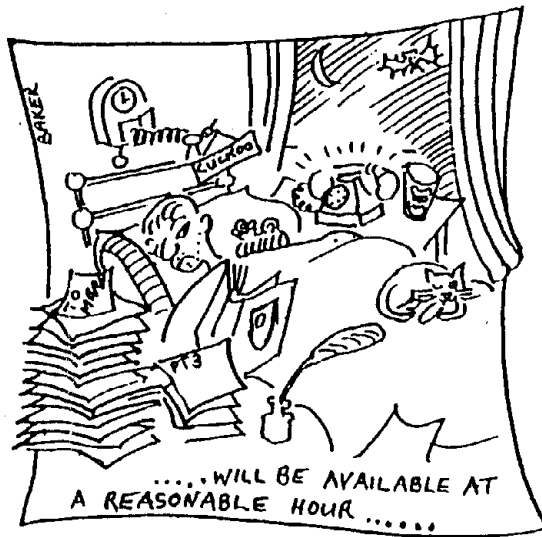
Some watering down was thus inevitable and the final version is perhaps too dry, unspecific and impenetrable. The term 'Student Charter' has had to go, and the document is now called 'Undergraduate and Associate Student Services - your guide to Teaching and Counselling Services in the OU East Anglian Region'. But the summary box is still there as the heart of the document, and although retitled 'Our commitment to Students in East Anglia' the box is in the shape of a scroll - the 'charter' element survives (Figure 1).



**Figure 1 Student Guide to Teaching and Counselling Service**

## Evaluation

Such a document of course forms only a tiny part of the materials sent to students. The only way in which its effects could be measured would be a 'before and after' study of the level of complaint



received at the Regional Centre. But any such effect would probably be too small and have too many other possible causes. Nevertheless it seemed important to see if the document had any effect on students' perceptions of the University and a small scale 'illuminative evaluation' was undertaken.<sup>1</sup>

Preliminary results from the evaluation suggest that:

- undergraduate students generally filed it on receipt without reading it. This is unsurprising as the document was not particularly attractive; arrived at the same time as a considerable package of other material; and was sent only to existing (and therefore experienced) undergraduate students. The needs of such students for such help might well be less than new students. In any case those students who had a good relationship with their counsellors clearly saw him or her as a natural first contact.
- as partial confirmation of the above, Associate Students (who were new to the OU) had read the document and thought it valuable.

The rationale for the document received some support from the discovery that half the

students contacted in the survey had less than satisfactory relationships with their counsellors usually due to loss of continuity. Such students may be more likely to experience ongoing difficulties as a result of encountering otherwise soluable problems. Whilst the sample is too small to draw substantial conclusions it would seem that there is indeed an issue about some students finding it difficult to ask for appropriate help because they have lost their easiest links with the support network.

## Conclusions

The implications of the evaluation are several:

- there is a case for continuing the publication of a Student Services document;
- the document should be much more attractive than its current version, and our next edition will be illustrated by cartoons;
- it should be sent to new students who are not only most likely to need it but most likely to read it as well.

Whatever the final results of this valuation or longer term decisions about a University-wide Student Services document I hope that our students will remain students. Whilst the term 'customer' offers some interesting alternative perspectives and insights into the institution-student relationship, the role of student is far more complex, emotional, and involved than that of a purchaser of goods or services.

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## Reference

- <sup>1</sup>*Promoting Student Rights - the Student Services Brochure*, East Anglian Region Projects Research and Other Developments (EARPROD) No.9 by Anne Phillips. Available from the Open University East Anglia Region.

## Acknowledgement

The illustrations in this article (which appear in the new edition of the Student Services brochure) are by Richard Baker.