

RE-THINKING LEARNER SUPPORT IN THE OPEN UNIVERSITY UK: a case study

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Introduction

This chapter reviews the range of factors both internal and external that makes imperative a review of the ways in which learners are supported in the OU UK, and by extension more widely in open and distance learning. The factors include from within the institution: declining retention figures, the nature of learner expectations in the change of status from 'student' to customer', changes in the division and distribution of labour brought about by ICT, pressures on costs and the effect of competition, and from the external perspective the nature of consumer behaviour, the deterioration of time available for study with the increase of long working hours, difficulties with space for study in the context of increasing domestic overcrowding, and changes in the characteristics of learner populations with the impact of lifelong learning as governmental policy arena. Discussion concludes with what supports student 'engagement'. All of these lead to the observation that a fundamental review of learner support in the OU UK is necessary after some 30 years of teaching and learning. As the OU UK has been so significant in the modernisation of open and distance learning from the perspective of learner support as much as in multi-media course design, it is felt that an analysis of change in this field is of broad interest and significance.

Discussion of change is structured in this discussion within categories of those driven from inside and outside the institution: such a structure has its limitations as the institution is itself of course part of its environment, and the reader will find common threads in both parts.

Internally driven change

Student Retention

The immediate context for a review of learner support in the OU UK proposed here, undertaken it should be immediately said on a personal basis, is the decline in student retention over the last 5 years of some 5%, or to put it another way, that in the teaching year 1997/8 of 166,000 registered students, 95,000 completed and passed their courses (Open University Retention Project Report 2001:1). That is a non-completion and failure rate of some 43%. Declining student retention figures, with their implications for the access mission of the OU UK, led to the establishment by the university of the Retention Programme, a significant action research project at strategic level tasked with the identification of a range of retention-supportive activities. This report makes its recommendations under four broad headings, namely:

- 1 Managing open entry: increasing student progression by rewarding achievement;
- 2 Reducing student workload;
- 3 Building stronger relationships with students: paying attention to the key role of the Associate Lecturer (tutor);
- 4 Changing the focus of funding of central academic units.

The most significant areas of attention it addresses include firstly the need to provide more obvious markers of success for students, e.g. a student who successfully completes part but not all of the continuous assessment in a year should be able to carry forward that part to a succeeding year, rather than suffer the de-motivating experience of effectively losing all that work. Secondly, the need for

course teams to manage the workload they create for students more effectively: it seems that little has been learned over the last 30 years about how student workload is created. This has been complicated by the introduction of new technologies for learning and teaching, including electronic conferencing and CD-ROM resources, where timing of workload has in some courses been badly misleading, although at the same time recognised as providing effective and motivating learning resources. Thirdly, the need to embed more firmly the support that students gain from their tutor, that is in the OU UK system the part-time teacher who assesses and teaches each individual student through her or his assignments during the course. The tutor role in being able to support students through the difficulties of study is recognised as absolutely central, although at the same time the learning environments have become so complex that the tutor is less able than ever to offer comprehensive information and guidance to the learner, and needs to be supported by teams of staff involved in what is termed 'Student Services', both in the 13 Regional Centres as well as at headquarters in Milton Keynes. Lastly, faculties and schools in the university should, as the university as a whole does, receive an element of funding for student success and not just on student recruitment.

A little history

A little history as to how the OU UK has got to where it has is helpful initially in the development of discussion. The university was remarkable in establishing itself for teaching in 1971 in recognising that one of the core ways in which it would take forward and revolutionise the tradition of correspondence education would be to offer student support alongside professionally designed multimedia teaching materials, in particular through individualised tutoring and counselling and a range of local study centres. Student support was conceived for a single programme, with which the OU UK was originally established, namely the undergraduate programme. The most significant change in that overarching design has been the removal of the counselling system, that is in OU UK terms, support of an educational but non-course specific kind. In the undergraduate programme where it was developed this led to the core concept of 'continuity of counselling', that is that the tutor supporting a student in his or her first year remained as the counsellor for an entire 5 or 6 years degree, thus giving an individual student a continuity of acquaintance over and above the range of tutors who would be specific to a course each year (see Tait 1996: 60-61 for an account of the original design of learner support in the OU UK). As the first Vice-chancellor Walter, now Lord, Perry wrote in his personal account of the OU UK:

I am sure that Robert Beevers (the first Director of Regional Tutorial Services, AWT) was fundamentally correct in deciding that students would need continuous counselling, but it was not a view that was shared widely by academics. They tended to believe that most of the advice that students would want would come best from the academic staff who were teaching them (the tutors) and that counselling would become a relatively peripheral and minor activity. This runs counter to the experience of most people who have worked in the field of adult education, where the belief is fairly general that adults need a great deal more supportive help, in areas divorced from their purely academic studies, than do students in conventional residential institutions.

Perry 1976:113

This counselling system has been removed, and the reasoning behind this derived from a complex of internal and external pressures including the need to control costs at a time of expansion (Tait 1998:124). We have in fact arrived at the situation where support is most significantly given by the tutor, who may or may not feel that he or she wants the range of questions raised by a student whom the tutor barely has time in many instances to get to know at all during a nine month or less course of study at a distance. Secondly the student may seek support from a team of student advisors based in Regional Centres (typically say for the OU in the East of England, a team in the region of 3.5 advisers for some 17000 students). It is clear in the latter case that students have almost no opportunity to get to know anyone apart from their tutor, as the student advisor is very much offering

support on the 'Call Centre' model, which has an efficiency which does much to please the institution but for all of us who use such services in other contexts offers frustration as much as it offers rewarding communication. This chapter challenges whether such 'light touch' relationships are adequate in the context of adult higher education, in particular in supporting student 'engagement'.

However, while the non-completion of students as already noted has increased over recent years there are newer developments already bringing change although without any evidence yet of their impact on completion. These derive principally from the new opportunities for communication through electronic conferencing between students and tutors, and students and each other, and secondly from the opportunities through web-based information and guidance systems to make available to students on a 'self-help' basis more and more of what they need in more manageable, attractive and dynamic ways than can be done with the production of student handbooks and support materials. These offer not only opportunities to supplement what has been available, but also to change the overarching pedagogic assumptions to those that have constructivist ideas at their core, namely that students can rely less on prepared materials and more on exploration of information and resources, creating their own learning and support to a greater extent than even before.

Does place still matter?

Some 30 years ago when the OU was established there was a need to be 'near' the students, that is to say the fundamental shape of the organisation was defined in the form of a headquarters-periphery model. At the headquarters the writing of courses took place, together with central organisational direction and core administrative and operational services. However, a network of 13 Regional Centres was established more or less at the same time to support the even greater network of some 260 study centres, where in turn students met tutors. The primary locus of contact for students was the tutor in her or his region, and the services provide from the Regional Centre. There was no other way to conceive proximity at that time within the context both of technology and the social culture of learning and teaching. The impact of ICT on this core design characteristic is only just being understood, and has yet to be acted on in any consistent and agreed way. For example, now that course teams located at the headquarters can and do relate to their tutors through electronically supported conferences, this radically changes the division of labour which hitherto has made almost all support to tutors be delivered from Faculty staff based in Regional Centres.

The greater complexity of programmes of study leads now to more than 80 awards being available as against the one award of the BA with or without Honours back in the early 1970s. The greater plurality of programmes, including the emerging importance of work-related programmes such as social work and initial teacher training with their relationships to employers and workplaces, brings a plurality of students with distinct in addition to common needs. On the volume side, registered student numbers have grown to some 200,000. The combination of the dimension of scale and complexity also throws up significant challenges to the imperatives of accuracy and timeliness of information and support to students: who knows the answers to the questions that the students now ask, and how quickly can that expertise be found in order to be able to respond in an acceptable way? Thus the former ways of working with generalists available everywhere are having to give way to expertise available from perhaps only one location. Where a Programme is supported for the whole of the UK and Continental Western Europe from one location, rather than the 'traditional' distribution of labour across all 13 regions, the question quickly comes into focus as to why the concept of a Regional Centre is needed, at least for the smaller and more specialist programmes of study. In what sense do these students relate to any regional sense of identity, or do they rather relate to a 'Programme identity' which is geographically independent and electronically free of location. In other words, does place still matter? Further, in the context of the regionalisation of HE and the increased importance of the workplace as a setting for learning with associated partnerships with employers and trades unions, it is necessary to ask whether the traditional headquarters-periphery model represents a dated structure. It may be possible to conceive a networked institution, with faculty distributed across the UK rather than based in the centre of England. This may be particularly the case for the curriculum areas with strong links to the professions such as Education, Health and

Social Welfare, and Management. Place and proximity can be expected to remain important in the organisation of services for learners, albeit at least in part for different reasons. Re-thinking the purposes of the Regional Centres in many distance teaching institutions founded in the 1970s and 1980s thus represents a core task for the next 5-10 years.

In all of this it can be seen how the advent of ICT demands a fundamental examination of the ways in which the core tasks of supporting enquiry, application, teaching and assessment can be carried out, and that these affect in deep not surface ways the organisational structures in education, as in other service industries such as insurance or banking.

External Factors

Consumer behaviour

The identification of the learner as a consumer has been most consistently attended to by Field (1994; 2000). The main thesis is that when institutions are in competition, working practices have to foreground the student interest as a consumer, and therefore the student should be constructed as the customer. It is certainly true in the UK that the OU had in the beginning a near monopoly in most parts of the country in serving adult students with part-time degrees, challenged only and to a limited degree by the University of London External Studies Programme and the tutorial colleges that supported it, and by Birkbeck College in London for those who could attend it. The situation 30 years later would have seemed incredible then: that of the 130 or so HE institutions now in existence the majority offer some part-time study, and many also offer some opportunity for distance study. Some universities have as many as 50% of their student body as 'mature' students. The multi-mode university is on the horizon, where students can move between full and part-time, and campus and distance based modes, in a relatively seamless way according to their life situation over a number of years. This offers a very serious challenge to the single mode distance teaching university. The OU UK has to work harder and harder and to spend more and more money on advertising and promotional activities in order to meet government directed recruitment targets in such a competitive situation, as the following suggests:

The cost of attracting a new undergraduate student and converting them to registration in response to advertising or direct marketing was £395 in the year 2000.

Open University Retention Project report 2001:1

While one could question the wisdom in the UK context as a whole of using public finance to pay for publicity for so many universities to compete against each other, there is considerable truth both that students can choose in many instances between institutions in ways that were never before possible, and secondly that more generally adults bring expectations from other contexts like shopping or travel and expect to meet levels of service that treat their interest as primary rather than secondary to university academics and systems. This is reflected in the time now expected for queries to be answered, and what is termed the 'complaint culture', that more and more complaints are received about the quality of service. This last change has been influential in changing the ways in which services to students have been organised, with a move towards the Call Centre supported by web-provided information and guidance, and a centrally-based student complaints office.

It is worth noting that the rise of both consumerism and the notion of the student as customer derives from a number of streams in social development. Core to these is the construction of education as a commodity, with its providers as competitors in a market. Thus while on one hand the elevation of the student to the status of customer may enhance her or his self-esteem and no doubt removes the legitimacy of using academic status as an excuse for ignoring the needs of learners, it can only be done at the same time as market related fees and institutional competition are introduced for education, in an overarching context of neo-liberal approaches to social policy. In such a scenario the

individual who cannot afford the fees cannot become a customer (or student). The notion of the student as customer is therefore not 'ideology free', but belongs to a larger agenda of the endorsement neo-liberal approaches to policy very dominant at present in industrialised countries.

The extent to which the customer notion can work effectively in the educational context (as well as other similar areas of practice such as medicine) is problematic. The issue can be highlighted by the term the 'naïve customer', i.e. in the educational context can she or he really know what is on sale when the ability to judge derives to a significant extent to what is learned from study itself. In other words, the act of purchase often takes place with inadequate customer understanding, and must be supported by professional advice. Further, for as long as educational institutions such as universities carry the authority for credential award, i.e. the right to award or not to award qualifications, the customer cannot always be right, or at least cannot always have what she or he wants. However, in that educational institutions cannot control the environments in which they work, they must respond to the trend that sees students behaving as consumers and customers. Sewart has argued that this means to behave in important regards as a service industry, with systems and quality standards (Sewart 2001a).

Working hours

Working hours in the UK are the highest in the EU (Business in the Community 2001). The Paid Educational Leave Campaign has also stated that:

Research demonstrates that lack of time is one of the biggest barriers to people taking up learning. Research has also highlighted the high social costs associated with training outside of work. For example, a recent study into the effects on the home and family life of nurses, midwives and other NHS staff found that 49% of interviewees undertaking continuing education courses in their own time found it a strain, 10% thought it was causing serious detrimental effects.

Paid Educational Leave Campaign (n.d.)

Thus while at one and the same time we have governmental policy which places lifelong learning more and more as an imperative both for economic success of the UK and for individuals in order to stay employable, it can be surmised that pressures from the workplace have made success more and more difficult. Certainly increased pressure from work is jointly cited as the largest single difficulty contributing to withdrawal by OU students, along with pace and workload of the course, both being cited as the principal reason by 36% of students who withdraw (and these could of course represent some common causal explanation) (Open University Retention Project Report 2001:20). The issue is such that the Paid Educational Leave Campaign has been established within the UK, supported by the OU. The campaign was initiated within the Trades Union movement and aims to promote legislation that would permit time off as a statutory right for study in organisations above a certain size (Paid Educational Leave Campaign 2002). Such legislation, already in place in the majority of EU member states, typically gives 5 or 6 days paid leave for study of an approved type (this was implemented in Sweden as long ago as 1974). This development is of particular importance for those concerned with open and distance learning, which has unfortunately assisted in masking the real implications of time for study in its rhetoric about flexibility. This has implicitly and even explicitly at times promoted the idea that study by adults especially in vocational contexts can be shifted into the individual's private time and out of paid time ('You don't need to send your employees to college', is a not unfamiliar promotional statement to employers from providers of open and distance learning). The increasing acceptance by employers of open and distance learning methods is thus a double-edged sword in terms of the lives of employees.

In conclusion, the intensification of working hours in many industrialised countries, reinforced by the greater distances that many people now have to travel to work and the decreasing quality of road and rail infrastructure, makes the pressure on learners more and more intense when they engage in part-time study of any sort, but especially so when that study does not involve time which can be clearly marked out to employers as involving attendance at an institution. Lifelong learning policy masks a pincer movement of driving the population more and more towards compulsory or semi-compulsory learning throughout one's life in a credentialled society, and at the same time making it more and more difficult. Thus new categories of elites and the marginalised are unwittingly created, and social divisions reinforced by the very institutions and ideologies that were established to challenge them. In rethinking what the institution can do about managing hours of study for learners, the external dimension of societal change cannot realistically be ignored, either in the institution's interest, or in that interest of the student. Large universities do however have the capacity to influence policy both individually and through national organisations such as the Vice Chancellors' Committee (now entitled Universities UK), and have responsibility to act on the external dimension in support of their sphere of activity, as indeed do most large commercial organisations.

Living conditions

A further dimension of external social change relevant to the OU is the nature of living conditions, and their suitability for home-based study. The adoption of distance and flexible learning methods has seen the positing of the home as a campus over the last 30 years, and the advent of the WWW has redoubled that trend, seeing the arrival of a range of resources including world class libraries in potentially every house on the street, along with the PC as workstation. However, while the digital divide is well written about, the relationship of homelessness, temporary accommodation and overcrowding to education is relatively little studied. Shelter, a UK housing NGO, produced a research report in 1995 which examined this issue from the perspective of children whose education suffers because of temporary accommodation following homelessness, and noted that there had been a fourfold increase in homelessness between 1980 and 1994. In that latter year, there were in the UK some 54,000 homeless families living in temporary accommodation including 60,000 children (Power, Whitty and Youdell 1995:8). This figure excludes street sleepers. By 2002 the number of children living in homeless households had risen to 102,000, while the number of households living in temporary accommodation had risen to 78,000, representing an 8.5 % rise from the previous year (figures relate to England only). Once again Shelter explicitly comments on the negative effects on children's education, as well as on health and happiness (Shelter 2002). In the same period it was also reported that 'The number of households in England has overtaken the number of homes for the first time since records began', identifying overcrowding as an increasing problem (Observer Newspaper 2002). The point to be drawn out in this context is that discussion of learner support for adults as well as for children should take into account the needs of those in overcrowded conditions or temporary accommodation, and should not assume that potential learners have space and quiet in which to pursue their studies (this issue has been addressed in the South African context: see SAIDE 1999). While it might be argued that in terms of a hierarchy of need education is not going to be high on the list of street sleepers (although I have had one homeless student with the OU UK who used the post office as a mailing address), this is surely not the case with those who have accommodation even if of an inadequate kind, and for whom education may provide an essential route for personal and vocational development to better circumstances. The need therefore remains in the UK context for a minority of students and unknown proportion of potential students for study space in study centres, libraries, Community Centres, or the newer development of 'Telecentres' where ICT facilities represent an additional and increasingly important service for the marginalised (Latchem and Walker 2001). While this sort of need might be thought to be restricted to developing country contexts, increased divisions in the industrialised world create first and third world conditions in the same society. Services to learners cannot therefore simply ignore the mapping of study facilities for students, especially the substantial minority of the population of the UK who live outside the magic circle of financial adequacy and stability. Any attempt to widen participation further in Higher Education will surely need to address learner support from this perspective.

The Impact of Government Policy

Governmental policy in the UK impacts in this context with 2 further main pressure points. Firstly, the expansion of participation in higher education to 40 % of the population at school leaving age, with the intention to drive this upwards to 50%, and the supplementary reward through funding of recruitment of traditionally non-participative populations, means that competition from other Higher Education institutions for part-time adult students has as already noted become intense. It also means that the pool of 'second chance' students is changing in nature to one where support, it could legitimately be argued, is more not less important. Secondly, the government's commitment to reshaping the ways in which we understand the UK as a looser collection of regional groupings is seen most dramatically in the devolution of a significant degree of devolution to Scotland, with its own Parliament driving educational policy amongst other areas. Within England the Regional Development Authorities are also increasingly demonstrating their interest in regional dimensions of HE provision, with funding made available for a range of research and development as well as course provision activities (Higher Education Funding Council for England 2001). Thus a university founded on a political settlement from the 1970s, and a division of labour that suggests essentially that Programmes and courses are uniformly delivered across all four nations of the UK, has significant challenges to its core concept, its division of labour, and its cost effectiveness, which all impact on the ways in which structures to support to learners are organised. While the uniformity of the ways in which services have been organised across 13 Regional Centres may diminish with the advent of electronically delivered communication for significant elements within the range of learner support services, there may at the same time be the need to grow the OU presence in regions and the nation states that make up the UK in order to be able to play an adequate role in the ways in which HE is going in the future to be organised. This may represent an essential element in any strategy for re-thinking learner support organisational structures in the OU, and indeed more widely in a 'Europe of the Regions', as has already been the case with EuroStudyCentres (see European Association of Distance Teaching Universities 2002).

Engagement

Finally, this chapter examines contemporary developments, in particular as they relate to ICT and Call Centres, that support and/or threaten student 'engagement'. The term engagement helps us to reflect on the elements that support the persistence of students, i.e. their desire and capacity to relate strongly to the institution and persist with a programme of study. For many students in more conventional situations this is likely to come from their families and peers, and from one or more members of staff who attract significant interest and admiration, and /or offer significant support of one kind or another. This is no less true for mature adult students than it is for young adults going to college at the age of 18 or so (Earwaker 1992; Asbee and Simpson 1998). Marton and Säljö's well-known distinction between surface and deep learning, much used at a certain period in discussion of learning in distance education (see Morgan 1993), allows us to posit that students may also engage emotionally as well as and learn in deep and surface ways (and indeed these are likely to be closely related). While the pressures of time and the formally or informally compulsory nature of lifelong learning may push some students towards a more and more instrumental approach to learning opportunities, thus reinforcing both shallow engagement and learning, there is no evidence that for most adults the activity will be affectively 'lite'. Rather we can expect it to continue to offer significant opportunity and/or threat to self-esteem and personal development. A core challenge for learner support for the OU as well as for other distance learning providers will therefore be to find ways to support that engagement in the face of the pressures of time etc. sketched out in this chapter, within the light-touch environments of the WWW and Call Centres that are increasingly influential. Distance teaching institutions have to recreate the traditional ways in which attachment can be created, whose intensity is generated through place and individuals across time.

It is precisely this mix which the OU UK is at the first stages of adumbrating for the future. While for a small minority of Programmes there will be the replacement of all other media by web-supported environments, policy for teaching and learning as well as for student support proposes a

mix for the majority, the so-called blended learning environment (see Stenning and Hemsworth 2001 for a recent account of the importance of 'putting a name to a face' in the OU UK context). While more than 70,000 students relate to the OU through electronic means at least in part, the variability of practice with regard to computer conferencing, legitimately seen as offering opportunity for peer-peer support, ranges in fact across the extremely successful to the wholly unsuccessful. The blended learning environment might draw from mainstream organisational experience, to wit that there is an informal hierarchy for communication which moves from email to telephone in the advent of a certain level of complexity or delicacy, and again from telephone to face to face when that is further felt to be necessary. There is no evidence in academic continuing professional development that face to face meeting is on the decline – viz. the increased number of conferences advertised and attended – and thus no reason to think that anything other than a blended environment would be attractive and adequate for the majority of learners and programmes of study, at least for the foreseeable future. In this context Sewart insists on the continued importance of personal intervention as a strategy of 'attack' for the OU UK, seeking out students who find themselves in need of support, for example when the information system picks up that they have not sent in an assignment, or at the time of year when choices about future study should be made (Sewart 2001b). In this way a 'real' human being intervenes by telephone as a result of prompts from a sophisticated management information system. It is planned that continuity of interest (the generation of engagement across time) will be supported by the student's own WebPage, which offers a record of progress and reflection on study which can be shared with tutors and student advisors (the OU response to the HE Funding Council demand that all HE institutions support the building by each student of a 'Personal Development Portfolio').

Evidence of what works

There remain crucial and as yet relatively unresearched aspects of learner support, despite 30 years of modern distance education. Primary amongst these are answers to the question as to what evidence there is as to the actual effects of learner support systems and services in all their variety. For example, if student success is taken as the primary output of an ODL system, at what point does the law of diminishing return begin to reduce the worthwhileness of further investment in learner support? We have evidence that students find learner support useful, that they like it and indeed want more of it. But the difficulty from the ethical point of view of setting up control groups of registered and paying students who do not have access to services available to others has made it impossible to give answers to such questions. Where we have had systems with little learner support at all, such as unsupported students in the University of London external system or that of UNISA in South Africa until the recent past, the evidence is so complicated by variables, in the latter case of the effects of apartheid, that it is very difficult to say with surety that we know what the results of not having learner support in distance education are over and above the general observation that systems with little or no learner support seem to have high levels of drop-out and non-completion (Tait 1994). While it may currently be the case that commitment to learner support services are substantially driven by values, culture and expectations in a particular social and educational context, the increased role of business planning methods in education as a whole means that more evidence-based practice is rightly necessary. Evaluation of changes make an invaluable contribution, although too often in the press of events that drive institutional change, evaluation seems to be overlooked, even in relatively wealthy and sophisticated institutions.

Conclusion

In sum, the range of issues discussed in this chapter lead to the conclusion that a fundamental review is needed of learner support in the OU UK and in distance education more widely. Signs of such a review taking place in the OU UK are indeed in evidence at the time of writing, although the recognition of the issues of time for and place of study are not in this writer's view adequately foregrounded. A learner-centred rather than an institution-centred review would need to begin with an assessment of the learner's world, beginning with the challenging question of 'Who is the learner?' (see Tait 2000 for discussion of a planning mechanism for learner support in distance education). The review would need to address how learner support impacts on the core issues of

study/life conflict management and student workload, academic support, space and facilities for study, and lastly student 'engagement'. It would need to take into account the external influences on learners' lives as well as the internal levers available to the institution. The role of the workplace as a site of learning and the impact of devolution and regionalisation within the UK will demand recognition, perhaps even bringing about the possibility of a networked rather than a centre-periphery model. Such a review would need to be prepared to reshape organisational structures while identifying and incorporating lasting values. It would further need to acknowledge change in learner behaviour brought by the migration from student to consumer/customer status as well as the role of ICT, in particular as it relates to place. Above all, there must be a recognition that the plurality of learners found in the variety of programmes of study that exist in any large institution will demand a plurality, not uniformity of approaches. While this challenges the cost-effectiveness of the 'one size fits all' systems that have characterised large scale distance teaching over the last 30 years, there is no way back to a simpler world from the point of view of either curriculum or learner support.

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