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Academic and pastoral teams working in partnership to support distance learning students according to curriculum area

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ABSTRACT

The Open University has provided distance learning opportunities for 50 years and succeeds in offering its students many of the attributes of flexible learning. This article is a case study of the development of a highly successful partnership model of academic and pastoral support in mathematics and statistics at The Open University, and its application to flexible learning. The model involved reciprocal governance structures and equal status in the making of curriculum-related decisions. The model is illustrated by three examples throughout the student learning journey before, during and after study. The partnership model is applicable regardless of the curriculum area; hence the article is relevant to all disciplines. Equally, although the model was developed in the context of distance learning, its ethos remains relevant in the face-to-face context, all the more so given the prevalence of flexible learning and the growing number of distance learning courses being offered at traditional Higher Education Institutions across the sector.

Abbreviations: OU: Open University; School: School of Mathematics and Statistics; SST: Student Support Team; VLE: Virtual Learning Environment

1. Introduction

The Open University (OU) is the UK's premier distance-learning university. It provides learning opportunities for around 150,000 students. Most study on a part-time basis, often alongside employment and family commitments, with an academic level ranging from preparatory access to MSc and beyond.

The OU has a world-wide reputation built on its distance learning methodology and delivers favourably in the focus areas of the Higher Education Academy (2016) flexible learning framework, notably *technology-enhanced learning* and *pedagogical approaches*. To this end, the OU combines high-quality learning material (both printed and online), correspondence tuition, and online and face-to-face support provided by a network of about 6,000 tutors (officially designated Associate Lecturers). Since its inception in 1969, the OU has continually updated its practice to incorporate developments in both pedagogic theory and technological developments.

Students at the OU may enrol irrespective of their academic background and qualifications – this is the OU's open access policy. The OU is justifiably proud that it removes barriers to higher education, but the open access policy guarantees widespread variation in the prior educational experience of its students. Therefore, the range and breadth of pastoral support that students need, to embark on the OU's flexible learning offer vary considerably and require a high degree of personalisation and tailoring. This pastoral support includes course choice and programme planning advice and guidance, financial and fee advice (which varies if a student alters the intensity of their study from year to year), administration and registration advice, assessment of prior learning, credit transfer, personal development planning, induction to the University, exit advice and careers and employability support, academic references and assessment needs. There are particular groups of students who need specialist support and additional requirements including disabled students, students studying in secure environments (many prisons do not permit internet access for students) and British Forces on overseas duties.

Historically, such pastoral support was provided on a geographical basis, via a network of Regional Centres spread throughout the UK, to support students living in those regions. Staff in Regional Centres grew to understand local student behaviour well, and this expertise was a great asset to the University. However, the dispersion across multiple locations made it difficult for academic units (which are based at the OU's main campus in Milton Keynes) to engage with each individual pastoral team. In 2014, the OU reorganised its pastoral support, aligning it with curriculum rather than geography. Each Regional Centre hosted an individual, curriculum-specific, Student Support Team (SST) which provided pastoral support for students studying that particular discipline, regardless of where they lived. This risked the widespread loss of local expertise, but addressed, at an institutional level, some shortfalls in the Education Academy (2016) framework focus area *institutional systems and structures*.

The School of Mathematics and Statistics at the OU comprises around 50 FTE academic staff, 500 tutors and provides learning opportunities for around 20,000 students studying mathematics and statistics material. The mathematics and statistics SST created in 2014, comprised around 35 advisory staff and was based in the Nottingham Regional Centre. This team had the responsibility of providing the full range of pastoral support for students including additional requirements for students with disabilities, future study planning and registration, assessment and policy queries and funding issues including student loans.

The OU provided an institutional framework for the interaction of support teams and academic units. One institution-wide advantage to the SSTs was the ability to support students through their entire student journey. Thus, the University enabled a student to decide upon and follow a pathway with appropriate support, but also to be able to reassess the fitness of that pathway and choose to change if there was a clear advantage in doing so. By aligning pastoral support with a subject it was proposed that students would be better supported as all interactions with a student would have a routing in specialist discipline knowledge.

Considerable autonomy regarding operational detail was devolved to the teams and units themselves. The School and its SST saw the alignment of pastoral support with the curriculum as an opportunity to establish a strong partnership mode of working and

indeed advocated that such a partnership was the only way in which support of the student throughout their entire student journey could be realised.

2. Research literature

The concept of flexible learning has been established since at least the early 1990s. A formal definition was given as far back as 1994 by Wade, Hodgkinson, Smith, and Arfield (1994): 'an approach to university education which provides students with the opportunity to take greater responsibility for their learning and to be engaged in learning activities and opportunities that meet their own individual needs'.

Other authors refer to flexible learning in various contexts, often with reference to online learning, blended learning, student centred learning and other related concepts. Whichever definition one chooses to work with, an underlying principle of flexible learning is of 'finding ways in which individual learners can study what they want and need in order to achieve their personal goals', Le Cornu (2018). According to the same author, this manifests itself as offering to students 'choices about how, what, when and where they learn'.

The appeal of flexible learning is such that it is not merely a theoretical pedagogical construct, but has been popularised in society, with articles appearing in the UK press including Thomas (2014), and the production of a short video from UCAS (2014).

According to Le Cornu (2018), several factors have driven the flexible learning agenda; one of the primary factors is the increased need for students to combine work with study thanks to tuition fees. This change in student behaviour is one reason why pastoral support is of increasing importance.

The Higher Education Academy (2016) has developed a series of strategic frameworks, of which one is dedicated solely to flexible learning. It has four key areas of focus, namely institutional agility, personal flexibility, learner choice and balanced pragmatism. If one takes the view that personal flexibility and learner choice include the holistic student journey as a whole, then pastoral support is arguably just as important as academic support in the key areas of focus. This is all the more so in the flexible learning environment, where course choice discussions involve not only the academic content of modules, but must take into account combined workload across study and employment, family or other caring issues and other personal circumstances.

It has been established by Smith and Wade (1994) that specialised support is critical to success in the cases of flexible and distance learning. Indeed, Wild (1994) states that students who take responsibility for their own flexible learning require a great deal of psychological support in terms of reassurance about the course, the academic team in charge of the course and their own abilities. Coupled with this, Clark (1994) states that students need reassurance that they are 'learning the right thing'. This type of support needs to be tailored to the student at the appropriate time in order to ensure that the student is able to continue with their course of study and fulfil their learning potential.

According to Carlsen, Holmberg, Nehina, and Owusu-Boampong (2016), the category of student support receiving the greatest attention in the literature is academic support. This is hardly surprising, given the majority of the literature's authorship will comprise academic staff. There have been investigations, such as Wilcox, Winn & Fyvie-Gauld (2006), into the social support of students as they transition to university,

focussing on the need for students to integrate into peer groups. Other studies, such as Mcclery and Wilkie (2009), have considered pastoral support primarily in the traditional face-to-face context. Arguably, such studies are of less relevance (but by no means of no relevance) in the flexible learning context, where adult learners already have well-developed social peer groups, and are not studying in the traditional face-to-face environment. However, students in distance learning institutions are members of multiple learning communities, through a variety of methods including face-to-face interactions, synchronous and asynchronous communications, ensuring an overarching community of learners, which provides students with a place where they feel there is a common voice.

3. Methodology

The School and its SST constructed a partnership model of working based upon a fundamental principle of operation, namely that pastoral support should be offered in full partnership with academic support in the context of the subject the student is studying. Indeed, the partnership model itself espouses many of the principles of flexible learning; for just as Wade et al. (1994) state 'flexible learning requires a balance of power between institutions and students', the partnership model requires a balance of power and engagement between academic and pastoral support teams. In addition, this model provides a *single* community of practice in mathematics and statistics where all elements of student support can be housed, giving students a clearly defined community of learners.

To implement the partnership model, the School and its SST acted in several ways.

(1) The governance structure of each group was reflected in the other. Reciprocal membership of executive and management teams ensured equal status in decision-making for both the SST and the School. Joint ownership of decisions stimulated engagement from staff and ownership of ensuing tasks.
(2) Away-days and conferences between the groups were feasible in a way they had never been when pastoral support was spread across multiple locations. Academic staff were welcomed to the Regional Centre in Nottingham for team building events.
(3) SST staff provided feedback to the School on common student issues. Availability of 'live' or 'on-module' feedback is more limited in the distance learning context, where the OU has traditionally relied on end-of-module surveys. The concentration of expertise in the SST provided feedback that could be acted on in 'real time'.
(4) Conversely, academic staff were able to provide subject briefings to the advisory staff at the level the advisory staff felt they needed. This could be targeted to a particular module or even a particular assignment on a given module. See §4.2 for an example.

The SST itself took a business planning approach to delivering support; this meant that all unit objectives including careers, four UK nations, Faculty, School and disability support could be woven into the SST plans. This transparent and shared ownership of support enabled many projects with their own methodologies to emerge, some of which have already been published by Calvert, Hilliam, and Coleman (2016).

There are several stages to the student journey, and the introduction of SSTs meant that students could be supported throughout their journey in a far more holistic way.

This begins with ensuring that students are enrolled on the right course, so initial contact is offered by staff with knowledge of key requirements of subject disciplines. This encourages a student to enrol in the subject most suitable for their needs, and specifically on the appropriate first module in that subject – a *significant* challenge, given the OU's open access policy. In the preparation stage of the journey, students are offered information of relevance to them, this again is often specific to the subject area. At the decision phase, students need to be advised of the teaching support available for their chosen course; this differs in subject areas with essay writing, group work, e-portfolios, etc., all of which need explanations within the context of the subject. If a student has a low level of previous educational qualification or study experience it may be advantageous to take a diagnostic quiz to assess readiness to study. This leads to a need for appropriate advice *based on the outcome* of such a diagnostic. During study, a life crisis may intervene, meaning that students need advice on how to pause study, decrease or increase study intensity, how to work through assessment deadlines, etc. These conversations are multi-faceted, and the discipline area and knowledge of the course mean that the most appropriate advice can be personalised to each individual case. Careers and employability advice are again subject-specific; integrating careers teams fully into the discipline-specific SST provides a way of ensuring employability skills are developed throughout study and that careers advice is tailored towards the subject.

4. Case studies

We present three examples, each one from a different part of the student journey (before, during and after study).

4.1. *Pre-registration information, advice and guidance*

The School has long been aware that the cumulative nature of mathematics, combined with a symbolically rich notation, presents discipline-specific challenges in building a community of enquiry at a distance. Moreover, the open access policy amplifies the need for pastoral support to be delicately interwoven with the academic. The School offers information and advice to students about entry to OU maths courses via its MathsChoices website, Open University (2018). Applicants with questions are encouraged to contact the pastoral support teams for further guidance.

The curriculum-based model, with advisory staff focussing on just one subject, facilitated specialised staff training. Advisory staff then felt confident that their advice was well grounded alongside the academic support available.

In the other direction, the concentration of subject-specific registrations provided intelligence which had never previously been available to the School – and the partnership model meant this intelligence could be acted upon. In 2015, the MathsChoices website was completely redesigned with SST contributions given equal weight to the School's. Pre-module diagnostic quizzes were made more prominent, and SST feedback suggested integrating quiz outputs with mainstream module activity. Consequently, quiz scores were embedded within the *Gradebook* facility of the VLE, allowing tutors access to the information before the module start. SST staff proactively contacted registered

students who had not completed the diagnostic quiz; according to Calvert et al. (2016), participation increased from 7% to over 20% within a year.

This activity was recognised by the University, eliciting comments such as 'the opportunity for [advisory staff] to tell the relevant academics about problems for enquirers, applicants and students that with a fair wind we academics might be able to resolve represents an astonishing breaking down of institutional barriers within the OU' Open University (2014).

4.2. Curriculum changes

Students need to make sensible and appropriate study choices; flexible learners in particular need freedom to change their study choices as they progress. Even more so at the OU, where part-time study makes a degree course relatively long (median 6.8 years in mathematics), during which a student's goals can change significantly. Moreover, the open entry policy means students may enrol without an academic background and are often unaware at initial enrolment of where their interests at higher levels will later lie. To facilitate these facets of flexible learning at the OU, advisory staff help students through changes in study intensity, and qualification and module enrolment and hence are the best-placed staff to report on student trends.

Under the partnership model, SST staff were able to make full contributions to curriculum decisions within the School. The School ensured full involvement of SST staff in workshops considering its portfolio of qualifications, the pathways through them and the modules which make them up. Several high-level outcomes were realised as a result; for reasons of brevity, we focus on just one here.

A challenge faced by those designing University courses is the embedding of group working within qualifications. It is exaggerated in the distance and flexible learning contexts, where, by definition, students are rarely working on the same part of their courses at the same place and time. Historically, the OU's BSc Mathematics degree delivered this component of the qualification's learning outcomes via face-to-face residential schools. However, improvements in synchronous online teaching tools such as those discussed by Mestel, Lowe, and Williams (2016) meant that a natural alternative to consider was to embed it within the School's Level 2 applied mathematics module, in which mathematical modelling is taught.

The advisory staff recommended, at the module design phase, an approach in which group working was not dependent on a single point of failure, such as compulsory synchronous attendance at an online tutorial. That is impractical for many adult learners at a distance and outright impossible for some, including those studying from a secure environment such as a prison. Instead, the module team developed an asynchronous alternative in which students could still contribute to group working. Despite the inclusion of this skill, the module is highly popular with students, with internal surveys rating satisfaction at 92% in 2015–16.

4.3. Careers advice

Subject-specific SSTs meant that there was an opportunity to provide dedicated careers advice. In general, students with clear and well-informed career goals are more likely to

be retained, to progress and to complete their chosen qualification. Utilisation of dedicated careers advisers linked to the SST facilitated a series of mathematics and statistics careers events.

Careers advisors identified a lack of knowledge amongst OU students (even those studying mathematics and statistics courses) about the wide range of careers open to students of statistics in particular. As mitigation, the School proposed and hosted a statistics-focussed careers event, which over 50 students attended. The event consisted of external speakers, time to move around exhibitions and access to Royal Statistical Society careers materials.

Feedback was so positive that recordings of the external speakers were included within the School's VLE pages, and a second face-to-face event was organised and expanded to include careers advice specific to mathematics as well as statistics. This event attracted over 150 students and included presentations by more than 15 employers on topics ranging from careers in education, government and finance to biological and medical modelling. Students had opportunities to browse stalls hosted by the careers team, library, Students Association and the School's postgraduate team. SST advisory staff were on hand to guide those students wishing to change study options as a result of the event.

The demand for such events was realised by the School listening to its pastoral support team; the high popularity of the events is attributed to the partnership model of working between School and SST.

5. Discussion

The School of Mathematics and Statistics has for many years maintained a strong academic community of practice as discussed by Cox (2005), as indeed had pastoral support staff when geographically dispersed. Interactions between the academic and pastoral communities were previously limited, often relying on a different member of academic staff to interact with each pastoral community across the country. The alignment of pastoral support with the academic discipline provided the opportunity for a community of practice to be genuinely shared between academic and pastoral support staff.

Application of the partnership model of working cemented this shared community of practice. Reciprocal membership of executive and management teams enabled new ways of working: SST advisory staff contributed to modules (§4.2) at the design phase. In the context of the OU's previous model of pastoral support, such contributions would be considered radical indeed, with the norm being that pastoral support staff might offer feedback *after* students had studied a piece of the new curriculum, but never in the design phase.

The partnership model encouraged an atmosphere of mutual trust and respect between the academic and pastoral support teams. SST staff engaged with the academic business of the School through attendance at Programme Committee meetings, and the reciprocal arrangement meant that the School was far more visible to advisory staff than previously. Indeed, the advisory staff asked the School to run *Ask the Programme Director* events, at which the School's Programme Director would be available to SST staff to answer informal questions, address concerns and take suggestions back to the School.

The Mathematics and Statistics SST was described in internal institutional reviews as a 'beacon' SST in its piloting and dissemination of innovative initiatives, three of which

have been described in this paper. The close working relationship with the School was cited as an exemplar of how academic priorities could be tightly aligned with, and direct, the work of the SST.

Student support in general needs to be holistic; particularly so in the flexible learning context. For this to be successful *all* areas of support need to be fully focussed on the multi-faceted needs of the individual student in question. Hence, advisory staff need knowledge of the requirements of the qualification in order to provide the correct information, advice and guidance to help the student along their personalised journey towards their goal, whilst enjoying a positive student experience.

6. Conclusion

The creation of the OU's Student Support Teams in 2014, in which pastoral support was aligned with curriculum area rather than geography, was widely regarded as a success within the institution, but see Note below. In particular, the partnership model of working adopted by the School of Mathematics and Statistics and its SST was heralded as a 'beacon of success' by the OU's Institutional Scrutiny Group, a sentiment echoed in many reports by external assessors and internal committees.

The fundamental underlying principle was that pastoral support should be offered in full partnership with academic support in the context of the subject the student is studying. Equal status in decision-making produced significant benefits, both in terms of the quality of the student experience and in terms of the morale of staff from both the academic and pastoral teams.

The subject under consideration in this article is mathematics and statistics, but the principle of partnership working is valid in the context of other disciplines. The authors encourage all staff working in HEIs which place an emphasis on flexible learning to consider how academic and pastoral support can better work in partnership to improve the student experience.

Note

1. The Open University took a decision to close the majority of its English Regional Centres in 2016, with profound implications for Student Support Teams (and other staff) and the students they supported. The current structure relies on a smaller number of large Student Recruitment and Support Centres, in which staff are responsible for pastoral support of students across a *faculty*, rather than a single academic *school*. By necessity, the majority of the staff cannot specialise to the extent that SST staff could, meaning the partnership mode of working has yet to return to the level that it did under the original SST structure. However, the ethos of partnership working provided such strong links between School and SST that many of the principles have survived and are still bearing fruit. The School of Mathematics and Statistics continues its endeavour to provide integrated support based on this partnership model and, alongside the ongoing enthusiasm of the pastoral support staff, has retained this mode of working, albeit to a lesser degree, despite institutional structures making this more difficult.

Disclosure statement

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