

**“We’re all joined up really!” –
Coordination between academic schools
and student support services**

**Helen Higson
Aston Business School
Paper for Supporting Students Workshop
March 2002**

This paper is not meant to set me up as an expert, but to provoke discussion. In my role I have an interesting position as a facilitator of contact between staff and students. This has given me an opportunity to stand back and observe student attitudes to University life.

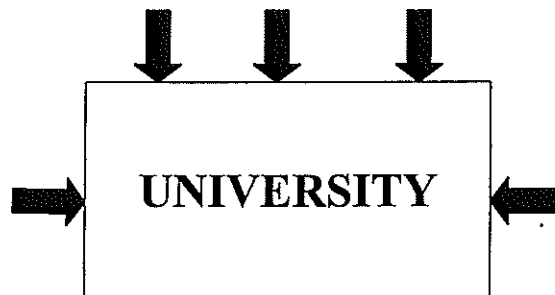


Diagram 1

This diagram is an image of how students think that student support operates in Universities. They regard the University as one homogenous mass in which all staff know each other and talk to each other all the time. During these transactions students think that we pass on information to each other. Students are perplexed, for example, that if they tell one area of the University their address, they will be asked for it again at a number of other places as well. They often expect you to have information in one area of the University that they have given to someone elsewhere. In the past we could perhaps ignore their perceptions and work on the basis that during their time at the University students would come to learn and fit in with how we want to operate. How many of us

have, however, felt the frustration of finding that it is not always possible to persuade students to change their behaviour. Nowadays however, we are more aware that students are our customers and we can no longer afford not to start adapting our processes to suit their outlook.

Diagram 2 is an image of how Universities actually intend to operate.

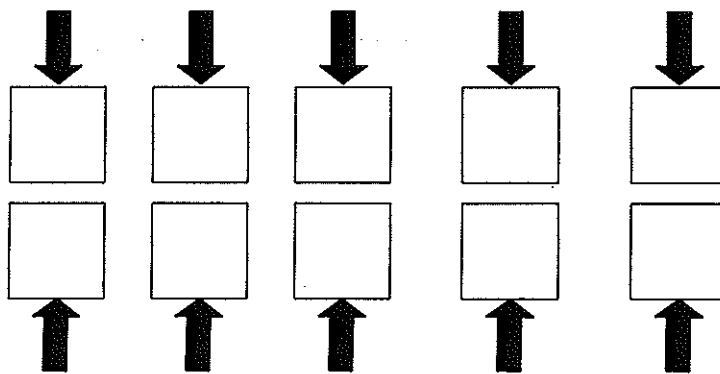


Diagram 2

Those of you working in HE will be familiar with this picture. This is because we all work within our distinct boxes in Schools, Departments, Units, etc. On this diagram there are no arrows between the boxes. Students interact with each of the boxes but there is no interaction between each box. It is not always as distinct as this of course, but my image is not much of an exaggeration.

We are all so busy within our boxes that it is easy not to look beyond our own tasks and functions. It is easy for us not to think about the implications of our actions on other people in other boxes. It is, using the example of the student address, easy to take down

the information, type it into your own database and not pass it on. What I am suggesting is that this is no longer good enough and we have to find ways to bring the second diagram nearer to the first.

There appear to be four main ways in which we could do this. I will go through these briefly now and then later spend a bit of time on each. The first way is communication. We need to facilitate ways of trying to get to know each other. We need to find ways of reminding each other that we exist by getting to know the face at the other end of the telephone; by sessions like this, for example, or perhaps informal lunches or visits or meetings. The second way is via joint activities. We need to create ways in which people in different boxes can work together on joint projects. In this way the boxes will start merging, the arrows will start being drawn and we will find, if only artificially at first, we are working in the way that students expect us to be doing.

The next way of integrating is documentation in its widest sense. We need to develop handbooks, fact sheets, leaflets, websites and intranet sites which will help us to develop shared information. Finally, and perhaps most difficult, we should all try to imagine that we are students. Many of us were students a long time ago and think we can remember what it was like. But even if we can remember, things work differently now, student pressures and preoccupations have changed. We need to keep an open mind and ask them how things work for them. This has to be done formally via quality assurance feedback mechanisms and informally via the many interactions that we have with students.

To go back to communication, it is easy to let confidentiality get in the way of communicating – it is a good excuse not to remember to be joined up. Of course it is a serious issue that must be borne in mind when supporting students. The demands of the Data Protection Act and the Human Rights Act have meant that we have to be more careful in what we ask students, what we write down, what we keep on record and what we pass on, and quite rightly so. There are, however, ways round these safeguards. If a student tells you something that needs to be passed on it is possible to say “May I pass this on to X”, or even better empower them by saying “I think you should tell X”. This is a good way of showing students that you know about their image of the University and at the same time indicating that being joined up does not happen as automatically as they assume.

Another useful mechanism, which involves considerations of confidentiality, is the student’s personal file. It is very useful to go to that file and find relevant information placed there by someone else. In our office, for example, we have a form, which we fill in with notes of our meetings with students. Mindful of the Data Protection Act it is essential to show students what you have written and tell them that you are putting a copy on their file. We operate a similar system for personal tutor meetings. There is a simple form to record that the meeting has taken place, which the students sign to indicate that they have given their permission for this information to be put on file.

Communication would also be improved if we got to know each other better across functions. This is easier in a small institution like ours but it has to be worked at even here. So what I am suggesting is that we need to find ways of getting us to other parts of the institution. The chaplains, for example, have allocated themselves to each Department. They turn up unannounced; sometimes you wish they would not. But we all know them and they are very good at passing on information. At Easter everyone in the University had an email from them – there was no escaping it. I am not suggesting that most of us could behave in such an outrageous way, but it has been suggested that we walk around more, that we get ourselves on cross-functional working parties or we hold at-homes or coffee mornings. It sounds a bit impractical in a busy working day, but it is worth thinking about.

It is also important that we use all possible ways of passing on information. Email is excellent, of course, because it is quick and easy and you can manage it in your own time. It is like the chaplains turning up uninvited but it does not have to be read immediately. Committees and meetings are also very important. It is how you get to know what is going on, it is an easy way to pass on information and it is also how to get to know people and for them to know you. Such formal University mechanisms are not just routine and dull; they play a big role in helping us to be joined up. Finally, of course, there is our new student record system. This is forcing us to communicate even when we do not want to and it has enormous potential to facilitate even more of this – eg by recording of absences, logging of coursework submission and recording transactions with

students for us all to share as appropriate. I hope we will not be too reticent in letting some barriers down to use this system for effective communication.

Now we come to joint activities. There are infinite possibilities in this area and everyone will be able to identify the one relevant to them, but here are a few examples. Freshers Week provides plenty of scope. Across the institution we already invite a wide range of people to come to meet our students in the first week – Counsellors, Health-Centre, the Guild, security staff, the Library etc. In some small way by doing this we give the impression that we are joined up. During this week new students are given so much information that not all of it will sink in, but some of it will.

Increasingly there are mechanisms that facilitate us coming out of our boxes in the form of joint ventures where the end product is comfortably joined up. An obvious example is the Supporting Students Event that this paper contributed to. A very wide range of staff across the institution attended and shared best practice. There are other initiatives being funded. A cross-function group is, for example, working to develop on-line study skills materials to students. The working party on Personal Tutoring allowed us to share good practice and to come up with a more workable set of University guidelines to fit today's student population.

Those of us within an academic school can all too easily isolate ourselves from what is going on outside. I would, therefore, make a plea that support services are not regarded as an add on but as a partnership. The Counselling Service, for example, responds

magnificently to all kinds of referrals and students can be seen very quickly. If your students want more practical help then the Student Advice Centre is equally responsive.

A recent partnership which has been set up is that between the Student Services Disability Officer and Admissions Tutors to ensure that disabled students can make an informed choice about coming to Aston and for the University to be sure that they can offer students the best kind of support. None of us can provide all requirements to all students, for example, personal tutors cannot be expected to be professional counsellors, and we need to build partnerships to provide the best support to students that we can.

In terms of documentation there is already a wide range of material to choose from but little coordination in what is produced. It was only recently, for example, that we incorporated sections contributed by the Counselling Services, Library and Careers Advisory Services into our Handbooks – the bibles that we tell students have everything that they will need to support them through their studies. There are plenty more areas that it might be appropriate to have contributions from. In another initiative, my School and LIS have been collaborating to coordinate the production of reading lists, an activity which has the advantage of reducing work as well as being more joined up. There must be other activities that would make both these gains.

Other documentation that has proved very useful has been the cards provided by the Counselling Service to be handed out to students and the posters to advertise the existence of the Service. One of the most effective publicity gimmicks was a folding

penholder, which advertised all the Student Services contacts. The pot was bright green, we liked getting the gift and it was useful for holding pens. Many of us still have those penholders on our desks creating awareness of that service, but may be it is time for another one.

Increasingly new technology has made sharing of information easier. I have already mentioned the new student record system and the study skills project. In addition all areas of the University have their own websites, which potentially provides the opportunity for us to be really joined up. We need, however, to judge whether this is really so. Who, for example is looking after the links between sites and is it easy for students to move from one site to another? Do the sites look physically like one joined up whole? I suspect that in most institutions that the answer is no.

Finally, we need to imagine what it is like to be a student at our institution. As previously stated, we need to be active in doing this both formally and informally.

Informally we need to be inquisitive about students who come to see us. We need to find out about their methods of communication, their worries, and their way of life. More formally, we need to include them in Committees and Working Parties. We need to gain their feedback before we introduce new initiatives, which will affect their support.

Student apathy does not lend itself to successful focus groups, but we need to use other methods to gain their opinion, give them information and feed back actions to them.

Technology once more plays a part, as email on-line questionnaires may provide some answers.

So, by a range of the methods that I have mentioned in this paper we need to reach the position portrayed in Diagram 3 below. In this, although we remain in our little boxes there is information of all sorts flowing backwards and forwards between us. Students can come to any individual box and there will be a fair chance that their concerns reach other boxes.

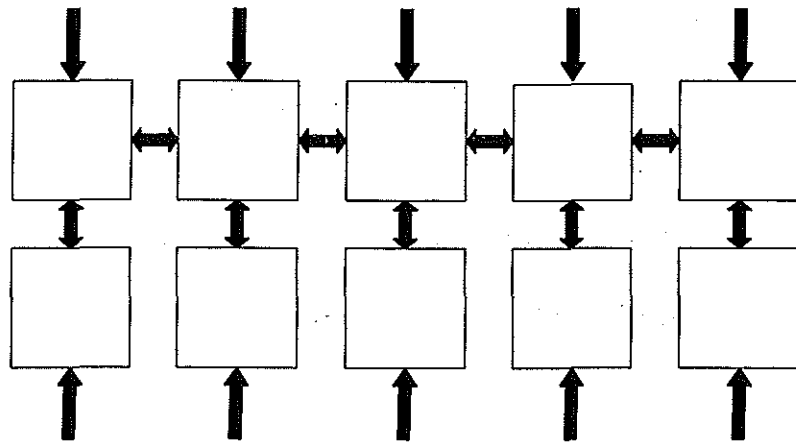


Diagram 3

Perhaps then students' image will be fulfilled and at least it will be in our minds and inform our behaviour.

