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Perceptions of Learning Support or Advice

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Introduction

Over the last three years, the number of students accessing the Effective Learning Advice Service (ELAS) at Brunel University has increased by 310% (ELAS, 2007). Feedback from both students and staff has indicated that when the Learning Advice Service is mentioned, it is referred to by different names. For example, students will often refer to the service as “You are the people who help us out with essays and stuff” or refer to us in person, while staff make reference to “learning support”. Learning Advice or learning support has always been a contentious name. On the one hand, ‘support’ symbolises assistance, with a tendency to be more financial, while ‘advice’ represents guidance or recommendations with regard to prudent action (OED, 2005). It seems that ‘advice’ is much more the area that we as a learning development service focus on, emphasising the importance of showing care for the future of the student. In other words, we are interested, as learning developers, in developing the learning skills of our students, and encouraging them to become better learners.

Our work as Learning Developers stems partly from the increasing numbers of non-traditional students entering Higher Education, and the government’s plan to raise the number of 18 – 30 year olds entering Higher Education to 50% (HEFCE, 2005). These new types of students have multiple identities which shape the students’ learning (Gosling, 2006). These identities are shaped by gender, age, class, nationality as well as the students’ own goals, abilities and language skills. This is not a neat category and some of these students may need more advice than others. Like other universities, Brunel has responded, and as a Service, we are part of this response: we help to get students from their existing knowledge to achieving higher grades in their chosen courses.

The question being asked is whether the service being provided is developmental or remedial. By definition, learning support is remedial. It concerns itself with proofreading, the correction of grammar and emphasises that it is to help the failing students, which focuses on the few. While advice is for all students, it is a developmental approach, and it is inherent that all students can achieve higher grades (Cottrell, 2005). This approach is ongoing, part of a student’s first and final year. It is a holistic approach, in that for some students this means IT skills, while as for others the emphasis is placed on how to write an essay, or how to give a presentation. What is key in this approach, is that students are encouraged to explore new ways of thinking about academic writing by being reflective in their work.

The remedial, ‘bolt on’ model is divorced from the subject area, nonetheless, students will develop some academic skills’ techniques. However, the embedded approach of developing learning throughout a student’s degree course is possible, but perhaps more complex. This method involves the ELAS in the development of academic skills in modules and part of the students’ degree programmes. By providing this input, students will be able to develop these skills, embedding on a smaller scale.

The question seems to be one of how to frame student support. If student support is embedded then making students aware of such learning services is not an issue as the provision will be part of the package included in their chosen course of study. However, if student support is not embedded the question arises of how to make such a service developmental rather than remedial. Clegg et al (2006) found that both mature and young students have difficulty in seeking help from academic (such as learning development services) and non-academic services (such as financial and accommodation advice) that are theoretically available to them. Help seeking seemed particularly problematic because students felt it diminished proper pride in their own coping skills and capacities. This meant that students did not want their difficulties to be viewed as something that should prompt them to seek extra help, and hence drew on a wide range of informal support mechanisms such as peers (Clegg et al, 2006). In

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CETLs Research Symposium – June 26th 2007**

addition, learning advice services were accessed by mature students, who found it easier as they felt they had peer connections with tutors and university staff.

Despite the reluctance by students to access learning advice services, staff at Glasgow Caledonian University found that the one-to-one support that is available is essential to students' development (Figg et al, 2006). This is in part due to the increasing numbers of students at university and the burden this is having on academic staff in giving tutorials. They also found that those students who did not access the Service believed the service to be remedial, and that it supported students in basic proofreading.

It seems that services which support students, or indeed advise, cater for those students who want it, but who may not necessarily 'need' it. The support (or advice?) builds students' confidence and provides students with the tools to develop their learning, rather than providing a 'quick fix' remedial tag which merely 'corrects' students' work. However, there is still the issue of whether learning advice services 'advise' or 'support' students. The literature so far suggests that support implies a remedial service, while advice suggests a developmental approach.

With regard to Mathematics advice or support, learning support centres supplement normal mathematics teaching programmes, and the support is often aimed at those students not specialising in the subject (Atkins et al, 2005). The emphasis here is on 'support', rather than 'advice', and the support offered provides students with an opportunity to practise through examples areas of Mathematics they may be having difficulty with. This support is provided by 'centres' within HE institutions through drop-in clinics and surgeries which support students individually and confidentially (Kahn and Kyle, 2002). The students who are less equipped at intake in terms of quantitative knowledge and skills to meet needs of HE (Croft, 2003; Lawson et al, 2001) such as engineers and biologists are most likely to access Maths support.

At the Harper Adams University College, Parsons (2004) organised a first year mathematics module in the foundation of engineering. The course was for non-traditional students who lacked any pre-requisite knowledge and confidence in mathematical abilities. The students on the course also lacked a grade C or above in GCSE Maths. Feedback from the course emphasised the benefit of motivation and reassurance that was provided through one-to-one tuitions and small groups. These sessions indicated to students that somebody was taking an interest and the basic Maths problems were met, such as fractions, which had persisted from primary school. The course benefited the university in that it improved retention and increased student progression.

The examples given above emphasise the importance of not only supporting students in their Maths abilities, but also raising the levels of confidence. It has been suggested that this should be provided on both a one-to-one and small group basis.

At Brunel, the Effective Learning Advice Service offers both one-to-ones and workshops. In 2006/07, the number of tutorials totalled 780 for 400 students (ELAS, 2007). The gender split was 70% female, and 30% male while as for Maths there was a more even split; 54% male and 46% female (ELAS, 2007). Despite these statistics, the total number of students is a small percentage of all the students at Brunel university (approximately 3%). More than half of the students are from the School of Health and Social Care. A large proportion of students from this particular school are non-traditional, mature students (Brunel, 2007). Hence, these statistics indicate that an advice service, such as the Effective Learning Advice Service at Brunel University, appeals to mature female students. This raises questions of what students' perceptions of the terms 'advice' and 'support' are and whether this influences their decision in terms of accessing such a Service. In addition, does an advice/support service appeal only to students who are from a non-traditional background, and if so, how the profile of such a service can change to make it more accessible to a wider network of students.

Methodology

To investigate students' perceptions of a learning advice service, and to identify whether there is a difference if a service is referred to as 'advice' or 'support', we decided to run six focus groups, with an average of 6 – 8 students in each group. These groups were split between students who had accessed

**Presented at Liverpool Hope University
CETLs Research Symposium – June 26th 2007**

the Effective Learning Advice Service (ELAS students) and those who had not (non-ELAS students). It was of interest to identify what the difference was in terms of students' perceptions from those who had experienced receiving advice and those who had not been in contact with our service. Four groups also consisted of students who had to undertake some aspects of mathematics as part of their degree programme. To stimulate a discussion between the students in the focus groups, four key questions were used, where the term 'advice' and 'support' changed depending on the group:

- What is a learning advice/support service?
- What would you want learning advice/support to be?
- How do you want the advice/support to be delivered?
- Under what circumstances would you access support?

Findings and Analysis

On analysis of the transcripts from the focus groups it was found that results differed in terms of students' perceptions of a service such as the ELAS, in terms of students who had accessed the service and those who had not and between students who had accessed the service solely for mathematics. The common themes that emerged from each group of students (ELAS and non-ELAS students) to the four questions that were asked will be analysed, stating differences that occurred when the term advice was used and when the term support was used.

What is learning advice/support?

The first question that was asked to all groups was what they thought learning advice/support is. Regardless of the term that was used (advice or support), students responses to this question were very similar. Table 1 summarises the themes that emerged from the focus groups, split between ELAS and non-ELAS students.

| ELAS Students | Non-ELAS Students |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Confidence building ▪ Time with academic staff ▪ Independent learning ▪ Academic skills <p>But Support also includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Non-academic | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Questions and problems with learning ▪ Financial issues ▪ Aimed at specific students (such as students with disabilities or with learning difficulties) |

Table 1: Themes that emerged from students comments when asked 'What is learning advice/support?'

When the three groups of ELAS students were asked what they thought learning advice/support was, their views were very similar. Students saw it as being a service that helps build confidence since they can obtain advice, both positive and negative, on work they have completed or that they are in the process of completing. Students also commented on the fact that they found it beneficial to have some time with academic staff to discuss their learning and to discuss feedback received from lecturers on completed work. This indicates that students that accessed the service saw it as one that provided a developmental role to their learning, since they used the service to obtain advice at different stages of their learning. This in turn encouraged or promoted independent learning because students were not reliant on the service coming once a week for a face-to-face appointment. Some of the responses were:

“advisers can advise about work done and whether it is on the right track – up to academic standard.” (ELAS student)

**Presented at Liverpool Hope University
CETLs Research Symposium – June 26th 2007**

“...have independent view point (outside lecturer and tutor).” (ELAS student)

ELAS students also stated that a learning advice/support service was one that helped develop academic skills, where advisers did not need to be subject specialist:

“Knowing about a particular topic is not helpful to us. It is knowing how to go about it”. (ELAS student)

Regardless of the term that was used, ELAS students were able to articulate more thoroughly a clearer understanding of what a learning advice/support service is, which was based on their experience of accessing the service.

In comparison, it was very difficult to actually tease out a clear definition from the students who had not accessed the service, non-ELAS students. These students had a much broader definition of learning advice/support and simply saw it as being about receiving help with specific questions and problems that students have with learning.

In the cases where the term support was used, both ELAS and non-ELAS students thought these also incorporated non-academic support, such as financial issues. Non-ELAS students also thought that learning support was for specific groups of students, such as students with disabilities or with learning difficulties. This interpretation could be construed as perceiving the service as remedial, helping those students in need and for the few.

When students were asked specifically about mathematics advice/support, the difference between the two terms was more apparent. When the term advice was used, ELAS students interpreted this as meaning help with specific concepts, whereas non-ELAS students saw it as being a sign posting service, one student making the comment:

“...advise students where to go to get help.” (Non-ELAS student)

The term advice has been interpreted by two groups of students as two different ideas. One is to do with aiding students with their difficulties and the other to advise students of where to go to receive help. Despite these differing notions of what learning advice or support is, all of these students were still at university and were progressing through their courses. It might be the case that what the Effective Learning Advice Service is offering is pedagogic support, whereby students do not need to ask for help, but that support is factored into good practice (Clegg et al, 2006). In other words, by offering support either on a one-to-one basis or in workshops, students' learning needs are being met. Due to limited number of resources and ever increasing numbers of students, this good practice could be provided on a semi-embedded approach supporting students and staff in the development of academic skills within their chosen courses.

When the term mathematics support was used, ELAS students saw this as helping students who are having difficulties with their work. This concept is similar to that stated by ELAS students when the term advice was used. Again, this clear definition probably arises from the fact that students who accessed the service have a more coherent idea of what an advice/support service entails and hence use the terms interchangeable to mean the same thing. Non-ELAS students also saw mathematics support to be about providing assistance if students are falling behind or struggling. Students who accessed the ELAS to receive help with mathematics easily identified that they received help with understanding particular concepts, rather than being supported with difficulties with particular mathematics problems, as was the case with non-ELAS students when the term support was used.

What would you want learning advice/support to be?

When students were asked what they wanted learning advice/support to be, the students who had accessed the service, ELAS students, did not want it to be anything more than what they had

experienced, regardless of whether the term advice or support was used. Non-ELAS students also gave similar responses, regardless of the term that was used. Table 2 states the themes that emerged from this question, split between ELAS and non-ELAS students.

| ELAS Students | Non-ELAS Students |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Not correction service but learning from mistakes. ▪ Collaborative approach. ▪ Guidance <p>But Support also includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Always available | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ More accessible – drop-ins. ▪ One-to-ones. ▪ Academic skills combined with content. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Subject specific – knowledge of subject/topic |

Table 2: Themes that emerged from students comments when asked 'What would you want learning advice/support to be?'

Based on their experiences of seeing an adviser, ELAS students liked the fact that ELAS was not a correction service and that a collaborative approach was used such that they received constructive advice and guidance. When the term support was used, students who had accessed the service wanted it always to be available, where they did not have to book an appointment. This point was raised by a group of male students, all of who agreed that the service, if referred to as support, should be readily available, rather than having to book an appointment.

Non-ELAS students wanted learning advice to be everything that the service currently is. These students wanted one-to-one sessions and the opportunity to drop-in and seek advice; the ELAS currently offers both of these on a daily basis. Although students knew about the Effective Learning Weeks, they did not know that they could receive one-to-one advice which may indicate that the service is not as well advertised as the learning weeks. Non-ELAS students specifically stated that they wanted the adviser to not only provide academic skills advice, but also have specialist knowledge of the subject area. Students who had not accessed the service did not see the relevance of receiving advice on generic skills alone, rather than tying it in with the content, whereas students who had received advice from the service, knew that skills can be developed independent of the subject content.

Similarly, when the term support was used, non-ELAS students also wanted subject specific support. However, in one group this raised an interesting discussion between the students about what the difference would then be between an academic tutor (who students saw as someone who provides support for subject specific difficulties) in comparison to someone in learning support.

When students were asked specifically about mathematics advice/support, ELAS students said they would want a learning advice/support service to be supportive and helpful and be a mentoring service, where students saw the same adviser on a regular basis. Non-ELAS students again stated that the adviser should have knowledge of the subject area, one of the quotes indicating this point was:

"If you don't know the subject area then you will only be able to help with the basic concepts...the difficult part is applying it to the subject area."
 (Non-ELAS student).

This comment started another interesting debate on students becoming too reliant on such a service and one that does not encourage independent learning.

How would you want learning advice/support to be delivered?

The responses to this question were the same for ELAS and non-ELAS students. Students, as a whole, would want to receive advice or support via one-to-one sessions or by attending workshops. ELAS students made additional comments on the benefits of receiving advice on a one-to-one basis. Based on their own experiences, students emphasised that the one-to-ones helped them to build confidence and were interactive, which was seen as a positive reinforcement. This is in line with Figg et al (2006) who emphasised that one-to-one support is essential to student development. Hence students perceive that the tailored one-to-one advice provided is key to their academic skills development. Although this should no doubt remain an integral part of any learning development service, the demand will outweigh the supply. Other mechanisms of support such as workshops and self-directed learning materials might help to meet this demand. By making students aware that such support is available, indicates to students that somebody is taking an interest in their work. This in itself is reassuring and can support non-traditional students (Parsons, 2004).

Non-ELAS male students stated that they would also like to receive advice/support via email or on a one-to-one basis over the internet. This indicates that male students would like to receive advice but not on a face-to-face level. Male students seem more comfortable receiving advice via other means.

When would you access learning advice/support?

When the term advice was used, ELAS students said they would access a learning advice service when they receive feedback on work they have handed in or before submitting work. Clearly, students see advice as being developmental, not just remedial. Students reflect on work they have done or completed and see it as an opportunity to go through feedback or receive feedback before submitting. When the term support was used, ELAS students saw the service as being more remedial, stating they would only access a support service when they were struggling or when they faced a particular problem. Students also thought that learning support would only be accessed as a last resort.

When the non-ELAS students were asked this question, students were very reluctant to actually say that they would access an advice/support service. Students listed reasons as to why they would not access a learning advice service such as not needing “extra” support, not feeling confident enough to approach a service in fear of being labelled as ‘thick’. This coincides with Clegg et al (2006) who found that students did not warrant their difficulties as ones which would prompt them to seek extra help. This indicates the negative stigma that is attached to a service that provides additional support or advice to students, which is not directly linked in with their academic studies.

Conclusion

The number of students accessing the Effective Learning Advice Service at Brunel University is increasing. Statistics indicate that although only 3% (400) of the total student population at Brunel University accessed the service in the last academic year (2006/7), 70% of these students were female and more than half were from the School of Health and Social Care, studying subjects such as Social Work and Physiotherapy (ELAS, 2007). This indicates that the average student profile of a student accessing the Effective Learning Advice Service is a female mature student. Although the name of our service incorporates ‘advice’ rather than ‘support’ (which was a conscious decision), both ourselves, other staff and students use ‘advice’ or ‘support’ interchangeably. This raised questions as to whether being referred to as ‘advice’ or ‘support’ influenced the decision of a student accessing the Service and whether such a service appeals only to students who are from a non-traditional background. In addition, if the name of the service does have an impact on a student’s decision to access it, can the profile of such a service change to make it more accessible to a more diverse student population.

Focus groups were organised with students who had accessed the Effective Learning Advice Service and those who had not (non-ELAS students). Results from these groups indicate that student perceptions of such a Service change depending on the term that is used, i.e. ‘advice’ or ‘support’. Although students who had accessed the Service (ELAS students) could define the purpose of such a Service, based on their experience of receiving advice, non-ELAS students were unable to articulate an understanding of the

**Presented at Liverpool Hope University
CETLs Research Symposium – June 26th 2007**

purpose of a service such as ELAS. However, all students thought that if a service is referred to as a 'support' service this should also include support with non-academic issues, such as financial. In addition, non-ELAS students thought that a support service is aimed at specific groups of students, such as students with learning difficulties, rather than being available to all.

When asked what students would want from an advice service, non-ELAS students listed the key elements of our existing service, such as one-to-ones and drop-ins. This clearly indicates that not all students are aware that our service exists and the mechanisms that are in place to aid students to develop their academic skills. This may indicate that the methods that we advertise need to be revised to indicate to students that one-to-ones are available for development of academic skills and that the service is available to all students, regardless of academic background or current level of study.

This pilot study has raised three points. First, the provision of one-to-one advice is essential to the academic success of most students (Figg et al, 2006). Students see one-to-ones as being important aspects of their learning development and hence these should not be disregarded. However the demand for one-to-ones outweighs the resources available which suggests that this valued time could be offered on a "needs" basis rather than a "want" basis. Second, there appears to be a difference in students' perceptions of 'advice' and 'support'. While advice for some students implied a 'sign-posting' service or financial advice, for maths students there was not a learning advice service but a learning support service. This distinction could be because maths students may require ongoing support rather than a single advice session. Third, one of the recurring issues that non-ELAS students thought was important for any 'academic' service was that the adviser should have knowledge of the subject. This issue suggests that advice services should collaborate more closely with academic schools. This approach is not completely embedded within academic programmes, but is semi-embedded allowing for advice and support to be provided over and above what is offered within academic schools.

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**Presented at Liverpool Hope University
CETLs Research Symposium – June 26th 2007**

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