

On Institutional Models and Concepts of Student Support Services: The Case of the Open University UK

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Introduction

I want to do three things in this paper:

- give a history of learner or student support at the Open University UK, and explain why that institutional example is of significance;
- fit that history on top of a longer history that seeks to explain where we – practitioners and researchers in the field of learner support – have come from, and to offer some examples of other institutions that might give us a sense of how and why we do things;
- and thirdly, and more speculatively, to seek to locate that history of student support in distance and e-learning in a wider framework of social attitudes and moral values. I will conclude by suggesting that this dimension of moral values is too often excluded by the demands of technological change and imperatives of business planning.

A Little History

I will begin not in the order that I have set out above, but with some historical context, drawing out three exemplars of practice that illustrate a number of important themes. We know that in England in 1844, Isaac Pitman saw an opportunity with the arrival of the postal services, themselves enabled for the first time on a general basis by the railways – to offer a correspondence course with an interactive dimension (Threstha, 1997). He sent out learning materials that taught shorthand, but offered to revise student exercises and send them back in a timely way. We can see straight away how technology – an industrialised postal service itself carried by the technology of the steam engine – permitted the separation by time and place of teaching and learning. We can see in this well known example too the birth of key characteristics of student support in our field that have come down to the OU UK: the integration of support in assessment; the importance of timeliness when teaching and learning are separated by time; and the centrality of direct personal feedback to the student.

The second exemplar lies with the critical move of the University of London External Programme in the slightly later period of the 1860s – the first full account was published by Bell and Tight in 1993, and is interestingly elaborated on in our conference papers by Richard Arnold. The University of London did something quite extraordinary in 1858 when it decided to allow students to take University of London examinations anywhere in the world without ever having set foot in London, except as it happened for the subject of Medicine. The university broke the link between place and study in a way that is still too radical for some universities. This permitted a number of things to happen. It increased access enormously, providing the basis for the social mobility that the

External Programme offered in the mid to late nineteenth century, not least from the dimension of gender (cf. also von Prümmer in this volume) as well as place and occupation. (It was going to be another 60 years or so before women in Oxford and Cambridge were permitted to take degrees.) It was a fundamental modernising step by a secular university in the country's capital (as opposed to the elitist universities of Oxford and Cambridge, dominated by the Church of England, the establishment, and the upper classes, and not least men). The differences in 1891 were explained thus

The great advantage an Oxford or Cambridge man claims over his London rival is his social education. It is he says a moral training. His university career is far more than the acquisition of knowledge. He is no lowly student, working narrowly for his own hand, but a man among men, and he points to the union debating society, to the collegiate and university football, cricket and boating, as influences to this end. (University Correspondent 1891, as cited in De Salvo, 2002, p. 38)

We can note the gender of this mythical student, and wonder over the moral education that football, cricket and boating provided, and pass quickly on. I will want however to return to some historical legacies of a positive kind that these universities bequeathed to teaching and learning in Higher Education in the UK, and to the OU UK in particular.

The extension of access by the University of London External Programme took place not only within the UK, but globally. The global extension primarily served the wandering British as they set up and served their Empire. However, by one of the paradoxes of distance education I shall return to, exemplified by the University of South Africa, also began to serve those few people native to the colonies who could rise to the formidable challenge of study in English of English curriculum. I have met later generations of those wonderfully able students. For example, one that I knew grew up and lived in Lesotho in Southern Africa and took her first class degree in English Literature in what was her third or even fourth language. Right up to the decolonisation movement of the 1960s and even beyond, the new elites of the former British colonies gained their higher education in many instances not only through coming to the UK but also by studying for University of London External Degrees wherever they lived and worked.

However, this University of London separation of place from study did not include student support. What students were offered was a curriculum outline of a fairly rudimentary kind, and the chance to sit examinations. Around this a range of commercial correspondence colleges created provision to fill the gap. Many were in the traditional correspondence business of offering qualifications that would provide miraculous new careers to those gullible enough to enrol and pay fees. They created the tradition of high recruitment/high drop out, and the poor reputation of distance education organised by unscrupulous people from which the field still to some extent attempts to escape. It cannot be said that the adoption of ICT and e-learning over the last decade has entirely escaped making the same impact.

On the other hand, many correspondence colleges did offer valuable support to students, classroom based local instruction and study systems at a distance, that helped prepare students for the University of London External Examinations. As we know from the valuable history by Anna de Salvo that goes into the background of the National Extension College, tutorial systems at a distance, residential schools and classroom based instruction all formed part of the repertoire of student support for University of

London External students from the late 1880s onwards. To summarise, between 1887 and 1931, 39,326 external students are recorded as passing University of London External examinations supported by the University Correspondence College alone, with some 10,000 gaining Bachelors or even Masters Degrees (De Salvo, 2002, p. 39). While the number of London External students in the UK has decreased due to the wider availability of opportunity to study, support for such students is still mounted from a small number of colleges.

Before coming to the OU UK, let me turn to my last exemplar from which we can learn, UNISA, or the University of South Africa. The story now moves on to 1946 in South Africa and the establishment of the world's first exclusively distance teaching university. UNISA, based in the country's capital Pretoria, recruited large numbers of students, and remarkably during the apartheid period remained a university not classified by the ethnic or racial group it was allowed to teach, as were almost all other Higher Education institutions. It was set up in order to meet a challenge for social justice, at least as understood by the Afrikaners. They felt substantially excluded from the nascent higher education system in South Africa by the British, not least by language. UNISA would offer university education to the Afrikaners at their farms across the country, the great majority of Boers being farmers. Sadly, but not unusually, that experience of oppression did little to educate that group about the oppression of others. Paradoxically, UNISA however offered opportunity to large numbers of black and so-called coloured students excluded from most educational opportunity as well as from political rights, along with whites for whom UNISA was originally intended. However, major weaknesses in the UNISA system identified after apartheid was ended included very importantly:

- low success in terms of completion and throughput rates
- the correspondence nature of programmes in comparison with well-functioning distance education
- inadequate learner support which is exacerbated by the lack of a co-ordinated regional network of learning centres. (SAIDE, as cited in Nonyongo, 2002, p. 128)

The student support available was simply the possibility to telephone headquarters in Pretoria between 9am and 1 pm, at which time the lecturers went home. You can imagine which students had the telephones in apartheid South Africa! While it is very difficult to isolate the variables in an educational system, and identify a simple causal relationship of learner support with student success, the UNISA example before reform provides the clearest case for the importance of learner support in a distance education institution. For many students, especially from the majority population who were excluded from the best universities in South Africa, the opportunity offered by distance education was not a real one. UNISA provides us with the best-documented case hitherto of the dangers of developing distance education without adequate student support.

As a step along the way in my elaboration of the argument, let me point out at this stage how these different approaches to student support reflect not only technology and pedagogy, but also the social and moral values in which these systems for teaching and learning were embedded.

The Open University UK: Part 1

I want to elaborate that argument further in the case of the OU UK. First of all why has this case been selected for attention? I suggest it is because as well as the radical new ideas that the OU UK brought in its first year of teaching to learning materials, (the integration of multi media – in those days print, TV, radio, face to face and the residential experience), there was also equally radical but much less talked about innovation in student support. It is worth reminding ourselves how radical the new institution was. In the UK we had in the late 1960s some 6 % participation in Higher Education, and that small proportion was heavily skewed by social class. We had a legacy of social exclusion that was beginning to be as economically damaging as it was morally repugnant. The OU was set up to serve an audience of adults only - not as an add-on to school leavers but to the exclusion of school leavers (at that time admission to the OU UK was not permitted until the age of 21). And it was set up with the truly revolutionary notion that there would be no entry qualification to its undergraduate programme: this remains the one unique characteristic above all others in UK Higher Education today. Students choose the OU, and not the other way round. It is worth reflecting on how that changes the balance of power in an educational institution: an issue I want to come back to.

Student support became in this new university not an add-on, not a separate activity, but an integrated activity, and indeed *the* interactive and integrative activity for learning materials and the student.

The key concepts in the founding vision for student support were that it should be:

- personal and individual;
- local;
- provide in study centres the opportunity for social learning;
- include a residential element in the form of a one week summer school that enhanced 'solidarity';
- embed the teaching and support role in continuous assessment with the tutor;
- provide 'continuity of concern' throughout a student's career.

While many colleagues made the vision work, the key names in the design of this new learner support system were Robert Beevers and David Sewart, the former the founding director of a division called Regional Tutorial Services that oversaw the work of the OU regions with their study centres, regional centres, academic staff within Faculties as well as independent of Faculties, their student counsellors and advisors and their student support administrators. Beevers, who published very little, was an Oxford educated former Inspector of Schools (I mention Oxford for reasons that will become clear), who was also familiar with the English adult education tradition and had been influenced by it.

The Oxford element of experience can be seen in Beever's vision of the importance of individual and personal support to students (the tutor or student supervisor idea was and is above all an Oxbridge contribution to teaching); the importance of continuity of support through study, with the pastoral dimensions of a moral tutor along with an academic tutor; and the relative importance or even unimportance in some subjects of lectures or content. Many people prided themselves on having studied at Oxford or Cambridge and hardly having been to a lecture. To show that this is not just the attitude

of the irresponsible golden youth of those former finishing schools for the upper middle classes, let me cite Hobsbawm, a refugee from Berlin in 1935 or so, who fled to London, and became one of our most eminent historians. He wrote of his study as an undergraduate at Cambridge:

Good students soon discovered that they could get more out of an hour reading than an hour listening to undemanding public speech. (Hobsbawm, 2002, p. 110)

It would hardly surprise anyone if that attitude had influenced Beevers, who was a contemporary of Hobsbawm, and might explain why the new teaching and learning strategies for the OU were so attractive to him. We can speculate that the educational counselling system that Beevers designed with close colleagues like David Grugeon were intended to build around the courses, with the learner in central place. Beevers was surely reminded of the personal tutorials in Oxford and Cambridge that were based, ideally at least, on the Socratic method of conversation, which had already influenced other thinkers in distance education such as Börje Holmberg, with his notion of 'didactic conversation' (Holmberg, 1983).

The OU mission to recruit and support unqualified or underqualified adult students in its attempt to remedy the educational exclusion of the previous 100 years or more found institutional form in the tutor role. The tutor was employed part time by the university to 'teach by correspondence', that is to teach, assess and grade the 50% or so of the assessment that was necessary for the student to complete during the course, complemented by an end of course examination. This personal feedback on written work makes up the most central contribution to the student's intellectual development, centred as it is in the need to support the student's emotional confidence and her or his progress to successful course completion. The tutor was local, or as local as could be managed, across the 260 or so study centres in the UK at the time, offered face to face tutorials, and was available on the telephone. This tutor role has not changed substantially to this day in terms of functions (although, of course, media have changed) and has been influential all around the world. We can see from the tutor link with assessment how it was integrated into the student's learning.

Educational counselling was also offered to all undergraduates on a local basis. The counselling support was predicated on:

- the need to have activity in support of the learning that grew from the student as well as from the subject or course;
- the need to acknowledge the vulnerability of adult students in terms of support of study skills, (at that time, a very new notion that students might not arrive at university knowing how to write academic essays or solve mathematical problems), and to boost and sustain confidence, in other words to recognise the affective dimension of study;
- the need to provide personal individual support in order to do all this;
- and finally the need to offer this not only on a course by course basis but throughout the student's career, the so called 'continuity of concern' that was given institutional form by one person with the counselling role throughout the student's time with the university.

Thus in the tutor and the tutor-counsellor (the person in whom the counselling role was embodied) there is the mitigation of:

- geographical distance;
- impersonality;
- vulnerability of adult learners in educational settings with which they are unfamiliar.

All this is in the interest of retention and student progress, but is also embedded in the moral and ethical implications of recruiting and teaching students in a distance learning context. While the OU UK concept of student support was intended to be active within the cognitive, affective and systemic domains (Tait, 2000, p. 89), it was framed more broadly within a shared understanding of a social and moral responsibility for adults in a learning setting. This moral engagement within a teaching and learning strategy challenged the hierarchy of teacher and student with its emphasis on the adult status of its students (in other words rejecting the parental model of responsibility), but it continued three other strands of social and moral concern from within the English tradition of public service in general and higher education in particular, albeit in an attenuated form. These were as follows:

- the Judaeo-Christian tradition of pastoral care, drawing on the metaphor of the shepherd caring for the flock, especially the weak;
- the social democratic tradition of caring for the vulnerable who are pushed aside in capitalist society;
- the patrician tradition of care for disadvantaged social inferiors.

All of these played a part in higher education in the UK, and indeed they can be linked, especially the first two. It was a Labour Prime Minister Harold Wilson, the politician who first took up the torch for the OU UK, who said he was more Methodist than Marxist. The tradition of pastoral care drawing on these strands represents one of the differences in approach between the Anglo-Saxon and continental European models of education.

I want to add at this stage a further model of student support, namely that associated with self-help, or peer support. This has always been present in the OU UK, organised by students themselves, with a greater or lesser degree of success and effectiveness. When it works well it can, according to students, be as effective as anything that the OU itself provides (Simpson, 2002, p. 125), and complements other resources that students themselves have access to, such as family and friends (Asbee & Simpson, 1998). So we should add to the traditions of care for students, an independent activity of community self-help.

Before moving on to the changes in the OU UK learner support system post 1998 or so, let me rehearse my view that just like the OU UK which came after them, the commercial correspondence colleges, the tutorial colleges for the support of London External students, and indeed UNISA in apartheid South Africa, embodied in their practice their own moral and social values. The very contrast between them makes my point about the embedded and implicit moral and social values in student support systems in distance and e-learning.

The Open University UK: Part 2

I should return briefly to the second architect of student support in the OU UK, namely David Sewart. His contribution during the 1970s and 1980s was to direct the practice of continuity of concern, and to identify the non-industrialised nature of student support in comparison with the industrialised nature of learning materials production, following the work of Otto Peters (Sewart, 1993; Peters, 1989). It was Sewart who identified the critical contribution that student support made to the quality of the student experience, at a time when competition for the adult student market was becoming stronger.

However since 1998 or so the practice of student support at the OU UK has changed with rapidity and is still doing so. I suggest there are a number of reasons why this has been so:

- scale;
- complexity;
- expertise with regard to management of information and its relationship with quality;
- Information and Communications Technologies (ICT);
- the commoditisation of relationships with students, and the rise of the notion of the customer.

I will say more about each of these headings.

The OU UK grew from the early 1990s from some 70,000 to its present figure of some 180,000 registered students. At the same time in terms of complexity, the OU has over its 30 year or so period moved from one award, the Bachelor of Arts with or without Honours, to more than 100 awards presently available. This combination of scale and complexity has created strain on the delivery of quality of service to students.

The quality of service to students had until 1995 or so been based on that service being as physically near to students as possible; and this nearness was the core contributor to quality of experience: geographical nearness was culturally how we understood advice as being personal rather than impersonal. The speed of social interaction was either managed in a face to face setting, by phone or by post. In parenthesis, it is hard for anyone under the age of 40 to remember the speed of organisational communications through the post: the writing of the letter by hand; its typing up; its being posted and one or two days its being delivered; its being opened by a secretary and put in the in-tray, and lying there waiting to be read. A reply then being written by hand; being typed; being posted and being delivered the next day or the day after that; being opened by a secretary and put in the in-tray, and waiting to be read. That simple exchange represented probably more than a week, and was the norm until the early 1990s in many organisations.

The mixture of social practice and technology represented in such an exchange created cultural expectations that were met in the 1970s through the local educational counsellors for OU students, supported by a Regional Centre. However in the new world that I have described of scale and complexity, the local generalist was having real problems in dealing with the information she or he was expected to master. Further student habits about travelling to gain information were changing. New models elsewhere of serving customers had begun to appear. We have only to think in the UK, one of the more liberalised countries in Europe it is conceded, of how banks have changed their practices:

most banking for personal customers is now done by phone or through the internet. The credit card has had an extraordinary impact on the social practices of managing purchases and cash. The purchase of books and music through Amazon, and their trading through E bay, represent well the ways in which social habits have changed.

The impact of all this on the ways in which the OU UK now organises its student support has been profound. The OU UK has dropped the generalist educational counsellor for students available on a local basis, and has dropped the notion that geography should be the primary paradigm for the delivery of services to students through the 13 regional centres. The OU UK has introduced Call Centres, where time constraints are diminished: they open for longer hours than most Regional Centres used to, and you can depend on availability of service to a greater extent than the local part time counsellor who might or might not be at home when you telephone.

The Call Centres have greater expertise with a specialisation of function supported by the management of databases that ICT makes easily updateable and distributable. The service is delivered anonymously: you do not develop a relationship with a Call Centre worker. Lastly a Customer Relationship Management System is being installed which, as in the commercial world, will use the data on our 'customers' – see how the vocabulary has changed – to stimulate telephone intervention. For example, will it be long before the following telephone calls are received by OU students? 'Good morning, my name is Roger, I am ringing from the Open University and I am your customer service advisor for today. I notice that you haven't sent in your first assignment. I wonder if I can help?' Or 'Good afternoon, my name is Judith. I am ringing from the Open University where I am your customer service advisor for today. Have you thought about registering for your next course? We have some very good offers this week, and I am able to give you a discount if you register today'. And so on. You can see how the information collected through a CRM can be evaluated. Has Roger increased student completion, to the benefit of the OU's retention statistics and indeed income (with a proportion of government grant coming as a result of student completion as well as recruitment)? And has Judith increased sales for the next presentation of courses?

In summary, the OU UK is engaged in adopting a fifth model to add to my earlier four (the Judaeo-Christian, the social democratic, the patrician, and the community self-help), namely:

- the business model, based on delivery of customer services at a price and to standards that can be defined (Tait, 2003).

There are a number of significant factors to identify here. Firstly we see how relationships with students have become commoditised: all undergraduates in the OU now pay over 60% of the real cost of their courses as opposed to less than 30% some 30 years ago. The neo-liberal approaches to policy at governmental level over the last 20 years have necessarily changed the ways in which students think of themselves. They now express wishes and demands as customers, as much if not more so than needs as students. There will be those who find this to be a more appropriate basis for human relationships in this field – less patronising for example - and others who find it a diminution of more demanding, more complex, potentially richer relationships. Mason has written of the ways in which higher education used to demand only 30 years ago that students come in by certain times of night, and had to have permission to travel during term time, and

suggests that change in student service away from the parental model of care is paradoxically coming late to distance learning as embodied in the OU UK (Mason, 2003).

It is certainly true that students think of their rights to customer service in ways that have destroyed the third model of care identified earlier: patrician care for your social inferior, which was still influential in some currents of social reform in the UK in the 1970s. At issue is whether the new business model of customer service will complement the Judaeo-Christian and the social democratic notions of care, or destroy them; I have my doubts whether fully human relationships such as we have aspired to in educational settings can be sustained by such a narrow set of concepts as those of customer service. It may on the other hand be one of the spurs that creates greater interest in the community self-help mode of activity. However, this is not to say that the business model of customer service should not make up one element of any system that supports students. But customer care may change the relationships within education in the same ways that mean, for example, we now no longer know our bankers, our bookshops assistants, our checkout assistants etc. That may be inevitable, and it may be that the benefits will outweigh the disadvantages: who after all would want to go back to systems for the management of cash pre 1980? But the issue deserves reflection.

I want to say something briefly about the impact of these changes on the tutorial role. While the role has been in its essence unchanged over the period of the OU UK's history, the impact of ICT has nonetheless been considerable. ICT has made possible social and collaborative learning supported by the tutor through e-conferencing. The impact on student activity is best explained through Paulsen's theory of 'co-operative freedom' - free to participate at any time through asynchronicity, free to co-operate at a distance, and free to fully balance individual and social dimensions of study for the first time in distance education settings (Paulsen, 1992). We should also note the enormous growth in what I termed 'the 'community self-help' model of student support, with the development of e-conferencing. The OU Students Association has many hundreds of e-conferences based around courses, study, affiliations, and extra-curricular interests, all supported through the OUSA website (OUSA, 2004). The community dimension of life as an OU student, for those who find on-line life engaging, has never been as real.

We know that on-line learning can be very effective, providing access and the chance to interact for many students for the first time. It can also be very ineffective, and there are as many empty or vacuous e-conferences as there were poorly attended and inconsequential tutorials in the past. But does it change the concepts with which the OU UK has worked? Does it, for example, change one of the longest standing but most effective explanatory frameworks, namely Moore's theory of transactional distance (Moore, 1993)? My own view is that the core hypothesis that the space between the learner and the structure of teaching must be mediated by dialogue, offering the learner the opportunity to be an active participant - remains valid. However, the sharp distinction between learning materials and learner support is elided in some web-based teaching, where more exploratory tutor and peer supported approaches to learning take place, as has been noted by Thorpe (2002). We should also note that student support is enabled to move more into an industrialised mode than ever before, thus also breaking ties with some of Sewart's (1993) earlier writing, as moderation replaces tutoring, as frequently answered questions on the web complement enquiry workers, and as Call Centres replace local offices. There is an industrialised scalability to student support in

third generation distance education over and above what has been possible hitherto. (Cf. Guri-Rosenblit in this volume for a discussion of the contradictions between the industrial model of distance education and the new models required by the introduction of ICT.)

Conclusion

In the OU UK we have elements of the old world of second generation distance education alongside, sometimes uneasily, elements of the new world. We have a plurality of students and programmes of study which make it impossible in my view, should we want to do it, to move into an entirely on-line mode of interaction in less than the next decade. But I suggest that we are moving toward the following characteristics in the ways in which we support our students:

- relationships that are further anonymised and distanced;
- modes of response that are speedy and offer instant enquirer reward;
- advice that is accurate and expert;
- relationships that last only as long as the interaction.

We are moving towards 'lite' relationships that carry less emotional weight.

While all this is discussed, as it must be discussed, in terms of market share, customer retention, cost efficiency ratios, and management structures, it is also clear that the fundamental bases for our behaviours with students have changed. What has been generally overlooked in discussion, and what I want to highlight in conclusion, are the social and moral values that are inherent in the student support systems that we invent. Where we do not make them explicit, they will conceal the ways in which we conceive our relationships with other human beings in the distance and e-learning context. That these social and moral values may change over time is evident, but it is dangerous to ignore the fact that they have a powerful life. It is dangerous to overlook them because they will remain implicit and unexamined, and therefore we will not know in the full sense what we are doing. I would like to suggest that this is an issue that all of us working in this field with our different approaches to student services can reflect on. This can be illustrated with a simple example. Have we yet adequately thought through what the differences are in terms of social and moral values between saying 'I want to support this student to learn successfully in her or his own terms', and 'I want this customer to feel satisfied and to purchase again', and whether there are any tensions in wanting both?

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