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TUITION AND COUNSELLING

Supporting the teachers for competitive advantage

David Sewart

The tasks which the United Kingdom Open University (OU) requires of those engaged in the tuition and counselling of its students are unique in UK higher education. As the OU's support services to students have evolved, it has had to create and continuously amend a staff development programme which not only defines the necessary competencies but also develops these competencies at a distance. Over the years, this has led to major changes in the roles of approximately 9,000 part-time tutorial and counselling staff, and these role changes have resulted in a body of staff who originally operated on an annual contract basis now being integrated into the institution's overall human resource strategy.

The early years

Although there exists within the UK an accepted Tradition of certification for those teaching at primary and secondary level, the reverse is true at tertiary level. Here, the academic staff are hired to engage in both teaching and research, and whereas it might be said that there exists an apprenticeship for the latter in terms of research degrees and a lifelong updating and cross-fertilisation through subject related conferences, seminars, journals and, on a day-to-day basis, interaction with departmental colleagues, there is no comparable range of support activities in regard to teaching. Teaching competence is something which is assumed, a private matter in which the individual academic relates to a large or a small group of students, without any peer judgement of the efficacy or otherwise of the interaction.

It was against such a background that the OU began to teach its students in 1971. But the OU was not part of the long Tradition of higher education; it was attempting something new - namely, distance education - and on an unprecedented scale. I have argued elsewhere (Sewart 1993) that UK higher education had been moving throughout the last sixty years of the twentieth century towards a more industrialised model. But this had been a gradual movement, hardly noticeable in such a time-scale. The OU, by contrast, was posited from the start on structures and concepts associated with mass production and industrialisation, not least in a rigid division of labour which allowed a rationalisation of the elements of the teaching process, and introduced technology to ensure a product of constant quality in volumes which were theoretically unlimited (Peters 1973).

This was a significant step forward and, in more than twenty-five years, the pattern established at the launch of the OU has hardly changed. Course teams, working under the umbrella of particular faculties or schools, and supported by specialists in various elements of production (designers, editors, TV and radio producers and so on), produce courses which are suited to distance learning, lead to recognised qualifications, and are set within a properly designed and

modular curriculum. This element is commonly and loosely referred to as 'course production'. Course presentation takes place through the agency of thirteen Regional Centres distributed throughout the UK. The role of these Centres is to ensure support for the students, by selecting, training and monitoring locally hired, part-time tutors and tutor counsellors and by these staff providing advice and guidance to help students pursue their studies successfully. These two functions are not discrete. Underpinning both course production and course presentation is another set of functions which might be classified as administrative.

It was in the area of course presentation that the OU faced the greatest change. New teaching media had been entering teaching for some time and the OU's course production was but a further step, albeit a significant one, along a developmental continuum with precedents in Australia and South Africa. But what was planned in course presentation was very different. The courses were to be tutored and assessed by people who had not been involved in any aspect of their production. Further, this was not to be done by full-time staff but by a large number of part-time staff organised through the Regional Centres throughout the UK. The students' main source of teaching reinforcement might be these tutors but they would only meet them from time to time - the core relationship was through correspondence tuition, marking and commenting on written assignments. The part-time tutorial staff would be largely recruited from traditional higher and further education, but their role was to be entirely different from that of tutors in the more conventional institutions. The basic academic content would be transmitted to the students via print, radio and television and the tutors were to focus on support for students and interpretation of the curriculum. Alongside this narrow academic support would be developed the broader academic support which the university called counselling. This was not envisaged as subject-based but more concerned with the student as an independent learner. This function too would be carried out by part-time staff. Launching all of these changes into a Tradition of higher and further education wholly lacking any elements of training for teaching, the OU introduced in 1971 the rudiments of what was then known as a 'briefing and training' programme. The fact that it was allowed to do so at all is probably a Testament to, and acknowledgement of, the very special and unprecedented roles which the OU had conceived for those engaged in its course presentation.

A reassessment of roles

The early years witnessed considerable reassessment of these part-time staff roles. In its first year, the OU established three functions, often, indeed normally, carried out by separate individuals. The 'correspondence tutor' commented on and evaluated the students' written work and, since this function could be carried out at a distance, might be anywhere in the country; the 'course tutor' offered face-to-face tutorials specific to the course being studied at local Study Centres; and 'the counsellor' offered broad educational guidance on how to study, again at a local Study Centre. It was soon found that there were problems with this model. It was difficult to differentiate between the roles in terms of the briefing and training programme and, more importantly, the students did not understand the division of labour and were confused over who to ask for advice.

By the start of the second year, the OU had amalgamated the correspondence and course-tutor roles. The students now had access to two forms of support, one strictly academic, relating to the particular course being studied, the other more broadly supportive. This was more easily

focused in the briefing and training programme but the roles had still not been properly thought through. In the first year or so, approximately 25,000 students had taken one of four foundation courses. This had translated on the ground into support through most of the university's 250 Study Centres, effectively providing a local service of face, to-face contact right across the UK for any students willing to travel a relatively small distance. However, as the university's range of courses expanded, this 'course population' rapidly diminished. Tuition had to change from local weekday evening provision to sub-regional 'Saturday school' provision as students moved from the high-population foundation courses and dispersed among a far greater number of post-foundation courses. For these, the average populations were about 500.

In addition to amalgamating the correspondence tutors and face-to-face tutors, the OU now gave the counsellors a defined role. Instead of being responsible for a range of students across a range of courses at a local Study Centre, the counsellors were now linked to various foundation courses and involved in study skills related to particular subject areas as well as the broader aspects of distance learning. But these new roles proved equally confusing for the part-time staff and students. While the briefing documentation might have been able to draw distinction between the various roles, in reality, student needs caused the tutors and counsellors to encroach on each other's preserves, and job descriptions supported by briefing and training programmes were set aside in everyday practice. It was from this experience and observation of failures that the university moved in 1976 to establish the support service which carried it through the next two decades.

The roles of foundation course tutor and local counsellor were now combined. When students began their studies on one of the foundation courses, they were assigned to a local tutor counsellor in their local Study Centre. This tutor counsellor was responsible for all first-year tuition and counselling and was available on a regular basis at the local Study Centre to help with the academic aspects of the course as well as the broader educational needs of the student. As a supplement, or a substitution where the students chose not to attend that Study Centre, student-tutor counsellor contact was achieved by other means, principally by correspondence and Telephone. The tutor counsellors were also responsible for assessing and commenting on the assignments on the particular first-year course. Even more significant in the new tutor counsellor role was the development of a philosophy of 'continuity of concern'. When students progressed from their first-year foundation courses, correspondence and face-to-face tutorial support became the province of the specialist tutor. However, the tutor counsellor continued to provide an element of stability and continuity in the life of the students since the broad role of student adviser was retained for the whole of their time with the OU.

It was this dimension to the role of the tutor counsellor that began to expand. The tutor counsellors became 'the face of the university', a resource the OU could depend on, the person(s) to whom the students addressed all manner of questions about their studies and progress. Where the tutor counsellors could not provide immediate answers to the student, they could find the answers through the specialist advice at the Regional Centres. As far as the student was concerned, the tutor counsellor was the omniscient support service provider. And it was through this tutor-counsellor role, which had emerged over the university's faltering initial five years of experience, that the OU finally settled on the basis for its student support services and course presentation for new students. The notion of counsellor had its origins in the concept of moral tutor and student adviser in the traditional university. But the concept of tutor counsellor was unique. Such staff were not merely advisers, not simply

supportive teachers and evaluators, but from the student point of view, the academic and administrative face of the university.

Staff development and the human resource strategy

As the tutor-counsellor role evolved, it became clear that the original briefing training programme, which had seemed so far ahead of its time in 1971, was insufficient. A comprehensive staff development Programme was seen to be needed to help the university's 2,000 tutor counsellors in their complex academic role. A draft training document, 'The roles of the part-time staff in the Open University', introduced in 1976 and revised for 1977, provided the university's educational rationale, policies and guidelines for its part-time staff. Far more radical, however, was the Handbook for Tutorial and Counselling Staff, which set out to provide a comprehensive analysis of student progress, identify an extensive list of student questions based upon the university's study requirements and provide guidance and answers to these questions as well as to the possible inter-relationship of these various queries. Not surprisingly, a perfect and comprehensive handbook to support all tutor counsellors in all eventualities proved to be a goal to be continuously pursued rather than instantly attained, but this initiative was central to the new briefing and training programme which, within a few years, was renamed 'staff development'. This handbook came to be copied by distance providers throughout the world, even though its contents were largely unique to the OU and the conditions which had necessitated its creation.

The popular concept of distance education is of a system dominated by a highly structured package. If this were the sole or major success factor in educating distance students, we would be witnessing a global victory for distance education over traditional provision. But this is not the case, largely because the rush into open and distance education and technological determinism all too often ignores the individual needs of the student, learning alone and at a distance. When the OU began its operations in 1971, it did so in an environment almost wholly lacking in competition. Not only was the OU unique in offering distance education, it was unique in concentrating on part-time adults. Its success identified a market, and within a decade competitors emerged, not so much from among the traditional universities but from the (then) polytechnics.

During the 1980s, none of these competitors came anywhere near the OU in size, but together they began to offer meaningful competition in many conurbations. Social, economic and political factors gave rise to enormous increases in demand for part-time higher education, and the government was favourably inclined to expanding higher education. However, the OU still maintained its dominance in the new market through its unique funding arrangements. All of this changed in the early 1990s when the government abandoned the binary system of universities and polytechnics and created what amounted to a competitive bidding situation among all higher education institutions for full- and part-time students. Now the competition was local. Almost every university was offering a range of part-time courses in its catchment area. Developments in new technology - and particularly desktop publishing - had removed the competitive advantage which the OU had initially held through its course Materials Now the OU's competitive edge - indeed its only sustainable competitive advantage - was the local support service which it offered to its students through what it now calls Associate Lecturers. As a consequence, the OU is now more than ever before reliant upon this support service and this body of staff.

Staff development is therefore critical in ensuring quality of performance and outcomes and it is vital that this body of staff is well integrated into the institution's overall operations. This represents a change from traditional 'personnel management' to a more comprehensive 'human resource strategy'. In employment terms, it is apparent in the move away from short-term and annual contracts which began in response to Legislation in the late 1970s. But the OU has gone far in advance of the purely legislative requirements. It has now completed an agreement with the relevant union which offers continuity of employment for all tutorial and counselling staff for as long as their course is being offered, provides maternity, annual and sick leave, and integrates them into the institution's overall human resource strategy.

Another major element in this strategy is the institution of a process of 'organisational entry' which embraces recruitment, selection and induction. Recruitment is geared to attracting candidates with the required experience and Attributes and is carried out through press advertisements and booklets describing the job and competency requirements. Selection is a comprehensive process which in all cases involves interviews conducted by at least two full-time staff and the taking up of references. A manual details the rationale and conduct of this process, which accords with the university's equal opportunities and fair selection policies. Induction is provided through mandatory staff development sessions over the first two years of service, supported by mentoring relevant to the particular role. Appointees are also given a booklet offering a welcome and an introduction to the work and a Reader containing a collection of articles about key concepts and skills relevant to teaching, supporting and counselling open learners. All of these articles derive from the team of Associate Lecturers and full-time regional staff and the accent is on the experience of open learning practitioners. Hence they cover intensely practical aspects: for example, the correspondence tuition element includes the creation of a dialogue, commenting and assessment, with examples of good and bad practice.

This package of materials leads directly into locally 'provided, face-to-face briefing sessions which concentrate on both the role and the actual course being taught. The former is generic while the latter is specific and may involve explanations and guidance from those involved in the writing of the course materials. Participation in these sessions is a mandatory part of the contract and covered by payments for attendance and travel. Further documentary support is provided through a Reference File (the development of the original Handbook) and a variety of Toolkits which cover broad areas such as 'Effective Tutorials' and 'Revision and Examinations' as well as specialist areas such as 'Students with Disabilities'.

All new staff are assigned to a mentor. The mentor is an experienced member of the Associate Lecturer staff who is paid to provide informal peer support during the first year of service and maintains a supportive contact, both pro-active and re-active, throughout that period. Mentors will have long experience of a specific role and within the same or a cognate subject area. They will also be 'local' to the new member of staff and may meet on a face-to-face basis if this is felt to be appropriate.

Performance management is another part of this human resource development strategy. The staff development materials and mandatory sessions set the standards for good practice in each role. The evaluative role of tutors is monitored through such elements as Kosmat analysis, which reviews their written comments on students' assignments and provides staff with feedback on their performance compared with their peers. Broader performance management is achieved through these tutors' contacts with full-time staff in the Regional Centres who are responsible for appointing and managing these part-timers. The staff development materials

are also a resource to which part-time staff can be referred if there is any need for realignment of individual standards. One element which is not in place at the moment but exists in the institution's human resource strategy for its full-time staff is an appraisal scheme. Discussions have begun as to how this might also be applied in the context of these particular part-time roles.

Another major element of the human resource strategy concerns redundancy and retirement. The employment of these tutorial staff is dependent firstly on the courses which the university offers at any given time and the numbers of students enrolled throughout the UK. Continuity of employment cannot therefore be guaranteed, but the university has moved from annual contracts as an earnest indication of its intentions. Having made considerable investments in human capital, it will always seek to redeploy staff wherever possible and, because of its range of operations, will normally expect to do so. However, the possibility of redundancy always remains and, where necessary, this is actioned through a policy which is public and seen to operate fairly and without discrimination or bias.

Future directions

It is in the context of such a staff development programme, now fully integrated into the overall human resource strategy for the institution, that the university looks to its position in UK higher education. This position will be determined by changes in the university's internal environment - its culture, personnel and structure - and in the external environment in which the major drivers will be competition and social, employment, financial and legislative factors. These external factors will have an impact on the institution as a whole, and it may be useful to highlight those of particular significance:

- efficiency gains will remain a factor throughout the next five years;
- competition will continue to increase;
- the market will increase as part-time employment becomes more common and changes in skill and competency requirements make the theoretical concept of lifelong learning a practical reality;
- the so-called 'Social Contract' will effectively abolish the traditional distinction between full- and part-time employment;
- there will be a major impact from developments in new technology which are robust enough to be part of standard services and operations.

We may surmise that by the end of the millennium the university will have a staff of about 12,000 and that more than 70 per cent of these staff will be employed in and from Regional Centres as Associate Lecturers. The traditional divisions between the terms and conditions of full- and part-time staff which were enshrined in the Legislation of the 1950s and 1960s will have disappeared. The legislative reform which began in the UK in the late 1970s with the so-called 'Employment Protection' Legislation and is now, in the mid-1990s, popularly referred to as the 'Social Contract', will establish a continuum of employment which includes all aspects of what we now know as full- and part-time work within a single set of employer/employee rights and obligations. The OU will have similar obligations to all of its staff and, perhaps more importantly for the university, this new and sizeable body of staff will owe a basic

allegiance, both morally and legally, to the university as its employer. On current trends, the university will be the sole or major employer for some 75 per cent of these staff.

In a few years' time, the university will possess an information system which embraces its students, staff, curriculum and regulatory framework and which will be unparalleled in UK further and higher education. This information will, as now, not be circumscribed by the confines of the university's offices. There will be robust 'home-based' links, and the expanded staff will have immediate access from wherever they live, through a PC and modem, to a range of databases. Expert systems will mean that this wide range of staff can be empowered to deal with issues which have so far been the provenance of specialists; for example, credit transfer, vocational guidance and complex decision-making on course choice across a rapidly increasing range of qualifications.

The OU, with its guidance and support for all aspects of teaching and administration, will reside wherever it has a staff representative. It will no longer be what it now is for most of its students - the most distant higher education institution in the UK; it will be the most local university and the one which, through the modularity of its curriculum, provides the greatest versatility in terms of study and qualifications of any higher education institution in the UK. Its human resource strategy and localised service, made possible through new technology, appropriate forms of initial and in-service staff development and good management, will ensure competitive advantage.

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