



Diversity and Achievement: An Evaluation of Support for Learning

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‘Seeing Ourselves Through Our Students’ Eyes – Of all the pedagogic tasks teachers face, getting inside students’ heads is one of the trickiest. It is also one of the most crucial. When we start to see ourselves through our students’ eyes, we become aware of what Perry (1988) calls the “**different worlds**” in the same classroom”. We learn that students perceive the same activities in vastly different ways.’

(Brookfield, S.D., p. 92, 1995)

1.0 Aims and Objectives

The **aim** of the research project is to provide information on the experience of first year undergraduate students on the Applied Social Studies Programme (BA Applied Social Studies and BA Youth and Community Work and BA Social Work professional training courses).

The **objective** is to gain an understanding of factors that contribute to the support, development of learning, progression and retention of a diverse range of non-traditional entry first year students in order to be able to create appropriate and meaningful changes to our learning and teaching and support for learning strategies.

An in depth evaluation of the Support for Learning system that forms part of the Learning and Teaching Strategy on the Applied Social Studies/Social and Community Studies Programme of courses was provided as was significant information on ways in which students access, use and value resources both within and outside the University. The research also revealed much about students’ independence, motivation, resilience and drive. Important issues about the circumstances of diverse groups of students as they progress through Higher Education were revealed.

‘ in order to ‘understand how our students perceive their learning experience and the subject matter.....(the) research attitude demands that we consider the role of teaching to be one of listening as much as one of speaking: that teaching is a two way process of communication, and that what students have to say about their learning is always most significant. Such an approach is to be contrasted with the normal student feedback questionnaires that have now become an integral part of the quality control machinery’.

(Rowland, S., p. 32, 2000)

The following questions were considered in planning and designing the project:

- How do we gain meaningful feedback from a diverse body of students- what is required in order to ensure that attention is paid to ‘minority’ voices?
- Can the pedagogical principles that underpin our learning and teaching practices be reflected in researching the student experience?

The project involved an evaluation exercise carried out at the end of the academic year in June/July 2003. A questionnaire survey was followed up by Focus group interviews. Student involvement in the project has been impressive and an account of the process of engaging students in the project and more detail on the research methodology is contained in the section on methods below. The findings from the Focus Groups were collated and analysed and students participated in the presentation and discussion of a summary of the research findings at an open Forum that was held at the University in late January 2004

As the initial information from the collated questionnaires was available for the Annual Staff Review of the Programme in July 2003 some steps have already been taken to address issues raised and these are highlighted in Table E. Additional recommendations for change will be considered in the 2004 Annual Review.

2.0 Background Information

The research was carried out with First Year students on all three routes, namely BA (Hons) Social Work, BA (Hons) Applied Social Studies and BA (Hons) Youth and Community Work, on the Applied Social Studies Programme.

A strategy for the Support of Learning is in place on the Programme and this has been developed over the years in response to student feedback and staff review. The aim of the system is to support the transition to Higher Education, the development of learning in the first year and progression to Level Two. It is important to note that the strategy is designed to enable students to become independent and self-confident adult learners. Support for learning is universal rather than remedial- it is offered to all students. The Learning and Teaching and Support for Learning Strategy on the Programme is based on a recognition that students bring diverse *resources* as well as needs to the classroom. Support for Learning includes attention to the curriculum

– is it appropriate and meaningful to a diverse student body? Other features of the strategy are that it is:

- Inclusive
- Student centred
- Experiential and participative
- Dialogical
- Designed to enable students to become reflective and reflexive learners

The philosophy of the strategy reflects the values and principles that underpin professional practice in Social Work and Youth and Community Work, namely, the desire to promote inclusive and equitable opportunities for adults from a diverse range of backgrounds, cultures and communities. It is designed to meet the requirements of a diverse student body including the requirements of disabled and dyslexic students, those for whom English is not the first language and mature students returning to learning.

A detailed Action Plan for support for learning was devised as a requirement for the quinquennial review of the Programme in 2002. The elements of the strategy track the student life cycle from pre-course preparation through to end of year Portfolio development and include:

- Pre-course information and Induction
- A tutorial system and 'drop in' rota for tutor availability
- A tracking system to monitor progress
- A course unit Approaches to Learning
- Induction to Library and ITC for learning
- A Peer mentoring scheme
- An emphasis on small group work and student led collaborative learning

- Online learning to support course material and assignment construction
- Assignment briefing and feedback
- Specific Learning Support where required
- Provision of Learning Plans to meet requirements of disabled and dyslexic students when required
- A Portfolio of Learning

A key feature of the system is that it is *integrated* into the design and delivery of the curriculum

i.e. it is an integral aspect of the learning and teaching strategy and the various elements of 'support' for learning are interconnected rather than free standing. There is a carefully managed and co-ordinated approach to ensure connections between the different elements listed above. It is important to emphasise that successful implementation of the system relies on a whole team approach. This 'holistic' and integrated approach to the support and development of learning has been well documented (Kirk, 2002, Kirk, 2004). The following summary exemplifies the holistic and integrated approach.

The Tutorial system, the construction of the Portfolio of Learning and the weekly Professional Development Group are key features of the system. These are synchronised with a core unit, *Approaches to Learning*, that is delivered throughout the Autumn term to first year undergraduates. The curriculum of this unit is closely linked to the Assessment Scheme. The latter is designed to enable students to incrementally build on developing knowledge and key skills and contains creative diagnostic and formative assessment procedures. Reflective learning theories and an Emphasis on a critical and analytical approach to the use of evidence and sources in the *Approaches to Learning* unit support the construction of assignments. Direct links are made to the content of other core curriculum units delivered in the Autumn Term. Exercises and tasks are designated to students in each of the core units to encourage peer learning with an emphasis on a Peer Mentoring scheme and small group work. The outcome of these tasks feed directly into formative assessment processes and the construction of a Portfolio of Learning as a basis for Personal Development Planning. Library and C&IT induction are also an important feature of Induction and the *Approaches to Learning* unit. Web CT online learning courses containing the *Communication: Theory and Practice* and *Approaches to Learning* curricula, plus additional material and experiential exercises and task to support learning and the construction of assignments, are available throughout the first and second year.

The support for learning system described above has become a model of good practice in the University.

3.0 Methodology.

Background to Research Methodology

It is customary for students to provide evaluation and feedback on the course at the end of the academic year. In addition, interim evaluation occurs at the end of the first term and each course unit is evaluated at the end of delivery. Student evaluation exercises are designed to require students not only to provide feedback on course provision, but also to provide examples of evidence of learning. The method chosen for this project, in order to provide a more in-depth evaluation, was to use an adapted version of the end of year questionnaire and to follow this with a series of semi-structured group interviews. The rationale for this was that it was a priority to ensure that the process of gathering information was as inclusive as possible, it was important to gain a good return on the questionnaire, and it was inappropriate to duplicate the end of year evaluation and feedback exercise. Each stage involved the participation of students and this is discussed below.

Introducing the research to students.

All students in the cohort were invited, by letter, to voluntarily attend two sessions to receive information on the evaluation project and to clarify the purpose of the evaluation exercise. Over 30% of the student group attended both of these. The purpose of the research was explained and there was a discussion of the notion of 'non-traditional entry' and student identities. Care was taken to discuss the

role of the researcher, the relationship between researcher and participant and the distinction between this and the tutor/ student relationship. Ethical considerations were discussed and students participated in drawing up a statement of ethics for the project.

The Questionnaire

Students received a copy of a draft based on the end of year evaluation questionnaire and provided comments and feedback on this. Consequently, it was adapted in response to feedback and circulated for approval. It was agreed that the questionnaire would be completed anonymously but students would be asked to identify their route of study.

The Focus Groups

The purpose of the focus group interviews, as a mechanism for providing an illuminative and expanded study of key issues arising from the questionnaire, was discussed. Students made decisions regarding the composition of these. For example, there were discussions as to whether or not there should be particular focus groups e.g. for dyslexic students. It was agreed that the groups would be mixed and that students would provide information on aspects of their identity that they agreed was important to them. Students participated in drawing up proformas that enabled the gathering of information on identity to be achieved. It was agreed that the interviews would be taped and that students would have access to transcripts. A contract, or 'working agreement', was facilitated at the start of each group. Students were free to choose which focus group they attended and six groups were formed.

4.0 Carrying out the research

The questionnaire was delivered following an opportunity for students to reflect on ways in which their learning had developed and been supported during the first year. Attendance was good with 63 students completing the questionnaire out of a cohort of 90 (70%) Students who did not attend were sent the questionnaire and two were returned so a total of 65 were completed.

The questionnaire asked students to do four things:

- firstly to score each of the elements on the course and/or within the University provided to support and develop learning,
- secondly to identify which were the three most important sources of support from the list,
- thirdly, to provide a list of other things that had supported their learning in year one from outside University provision and
- fourthly to identify three things from both their list and the list of University provision that had made the most contribution to learning. The results are published in the tables below.

The purpose of the focus groups was to illuminate and expand on information gained in the questionnaire. Students agreed that the findings of the questionnaire would be analysed and the questions chosen for the focus groups were derived from this process. A rationale for the choice of questions for the focus groups was circulated and participants gave their consent. The ethical statement was circulated and participants invited to comment and approve.

Each focus group set ground rules or a contract/agreement concerning how the session would be conducted. This covered issues of confidentiality, equal participation and listening etc.

Six focus group interviews took place. Twenty- four (25% of cohort) students participated in these.

The composition of the focus groups was representative of the student body.

5.0 Research Findings

Results from the questionnaire are contained in Tables A-D below. It is immediately apparent which elements of support for learning provided on the course and by the University are most valued by students and what is remarkable is, that while there were a number of varied responses and some significant qualifying comments, none were rated to be of little or no value overall.

Table A Questionnaire Results Valued Elements	Table B Top 10- Student's choice
Score: over 90% Highly valued	
1. Lectures (+ OHPs and PP)	1. Online Learning
2. Online Learning	2. Lectures
3. Use of Internet 3. Approaches to Learning Unit	3. Library
4. Induction	4. Use of Internet
5. Seminars and small groups	5. Assignment Briefings
6. Library	6. Approaches to Learning Unit 6. Assignment Feedback 6. Tutorials
Score: over 60% Highly Valued -more	
7. Assignment Briefings 8. Pre Course Information 9. Student led presentations	7. Mentors
10. Drop ins 11. Learning Environment 12. Assignment Feedback 13. Tutorials	8. Seminars and small groups
14. Professional Development Groups (PDGs)	9. Drop ins
15. Mentors 16. Portfolio	10. Professional Development Groups (PDGs)

Table C Anything else that has supported your learning in the first year?
Family/family member/partner
Friends
Local library
Work colleague/job Other students
Internet/web
Media Local agencies/organisations
Myself Learning to be independent
Church

Table D Please name three of the most important sources of support for your studies
Family/ family member/partner
Online Learning
Other students
Libraries
Lectures
Internet
Friends
Mentor
Approaches to Learning Unit
Tutorials Professional Development Group (PDG)
Assignment Briefings
Seminars Drop ins
Myself Learning Support (equipment)
Church Assignment feedback
Foster care training Neil in the office The Media Private reading

Information on the Programme team's response to issues arising from the questionnaire is evident in Table E below as the findings were analysed for the Annual Evaluation and Review of the Programme in July 2003. Consequently, some changes were implemented for the new cohort of students who commenced their studies in September 2003.

Varied Responses

- Some elements of support gained varied responses and, **although at least 50% of students placed high value on these.** These included:
 - Peer Support: Peer Mentoring, peer learning, small groups (including Professional Development Groups), student led presentations
 - The Portfolio
 - Tutorials
 - Support for Particular Learning Requirements (Disabled, dyslexic and English as not first language).

Focus Groups Questions.

Four main aspects of the initial findings from the questionnaire influenced formulation of the questions for the focus groups:

- Evaluation of certain elements is spread more evenly across the range from Highly Valued to No Value, i.e. there are **varied** responses in relation to these elements i.e. Peer Learning, Mentoring, Portfolio and Tutorials.

- There are instances where elements are valued but there are also a significant number of qualifying statements provided. In some cases it is necessary to clarify e.g. assignment feedback, while in others it is self-explanatory, e.g. learning environment .
- Need to further explore support resources for particular learning requirements e.g. of disabled, dyslexic students and those with English as a second language.

The Focus Groups therefore provided further detail on the following:

- Pre-course expectations and pre-course preparation.
- Induction.
- Peer Support: Peer Mentoring, peer learning, small groups (including Professional Development Groups), student led presentations
- The Portfolio
- Tutorials
- Support for Particular Learning Requirements (Disabled, dyslexic and English as not first language)

In addition to providing recommendations for action on the above, the ‘highly valued’ elements of provision have also been included in Table E with comments to reflect student feedback and recommendations for ways that these can continue to be enhanced and developed.

Table E Recommendations and Action

The Programme team will discuss recommendations from the findings of this project at the annual evaluation and review event in June 2004 although certain developments have already taken place as identified in column 3 of Table E.

TABLE E Provision	Student Feedback	Action taken 03/04	Recommendations for July 04
Highly valued			
Lectures	Use of overheads and Power point also valued. Important responses from disabled and dyslexic students require further attention	Increased demand for database of student requirements for academic staff. All staff to adhere to best practice requirements for working with disabled, dyslexic and students for whom English is not first language.	Continue in 04/05.
Online Learning	Some students still disadvantaged through lack of internet at home, some do not like reading from screen.	Increased timetabled sessions and booked extra sessions in computer suite.	Monitor and continue to provide timetabled sessions and workbooks.
Use of Internet	As above	As above	Monitor and continue to provide timetabled sessions

Approaches to Learning	Positive aspects: linked to curriculum, assignments and Portfolio building	Further developed links to Portfolio building and to Professional Development Group agendas. Integrated work from TIPS project for support for learning, Library induction.	Review curriculum and develop links to PDG agenda for forthcoming year. Involve support services and library in delivery e.g. TIPS and Info-skills.
Induction	Welcome but overwhelming		To review content and pacing of Induction programme
Pre-course Information	Welcome but needs to go out earlier		To action dissemination earlier and to provide for late entrants (e.g. through clearing)
Library	Very positive feedback	Involvement of Library colleagues in induction to use of Library.	Continue and introduce Library Info Skills project to students
Seminars and small groups	Welcome especially by disabled, dyslexic and students for whom English is not first language	Continued to ensure opportunities integrated into learning and teaching strategy	Continued to ensure opportunities integrated into learning and teaching strategy

Valued but more variation in responses			
Student Presentation Groups	Preference expressed for self-selected groups		Consider management of student presentation groups
Professional Development Groups	Variation in purpose, need detailed agendas	Appointed coordinator for each route, managed agenda and synchronised more with Approaches to Learning	Continue to coordinate and to monitor.
Assignment Briefing	Too many versions of what is required	Unit Leader only to provide briefing	Continue and monitor
Assignment Feedback	Good but illegible particularly disconcerting for disabled, dyslexic and students for whom English is not first language	Pilot for computerised comments scheme underway	Monitor and evaluate and if successful implement for all units

Tutorials	Varied due to staffing crisis for some	Appointed full-time member of team to communicate with and support and coordinate part-time colleagues	
Tutor Drop-ins	Appreciated and well used	Continue to provide	Continue to provide
Peer Mentor Scheme	Range from excellent to 'did not use', want this to be managed differently, introduced too early, some students prefer selfselected pairs or small study circles.	Involved previous students in making input on this in Approaches to Learning	Review timing and Whether or not to offer as part of a range of options
Portfolio	Ranged from excellent to an unwelcome chore, want more guidance.	Developed exercises and activities for Portfolio construction in course units, previous year students made input to Approaches to Learning and Portfolio Construction included formative assessment tasks	Continue and monitor.
University Provision for Disabled Students	Ranged from a 'lifeline' to difficult to access and a long wait	Greater liaison and communication with University provision, increase pressure for data bases vital for teaching disabled and dyslexic students and those for whom English is not the first language.	Continue to liase with University provision, increase pressure for data bases vital for teaching disabled and dyslexic students and those for whom English is not the first language.
University Provision for Dyslexic Students	as above	as above	as above
University Provision for students for whom English is not first language	as above	as above	as above
Learning Environment	Positive re the location of campus but absence of facilities especially for mature students with little time. Poor quality of Assembly Hall as teaching room.	Stopped using Assembly Hall, Increased awareness at Programme Committee, encouraged students to use students Union to campaign.	Continue activities.

6.0 External Support for Learning- Students' Resources.

The second part of the questionnaire exercise was to determine other sources of support that students accessed and made use of. This information was gained in the questionnaire by asking students to identify anything outside of University provision that had contributed to their learning during the first year. Tables C and D show the results.

The Focus group discussions also revealed further information on:

- Support provided by family, friends, other students and work colleagues
- Student expectations of levels of support for learning in HE
- Independent approaches to learning

Family, friends, including other students and work colleagues.

As Tables C and D show there was strong identification of external support from family, friends and work colleagues and it was agreed that it would be interesting to include a question on this in the focus groups to identify whether support is personal, or work focussed, or both. 'Other students' also featured high on students' lists and exploration of this provided a further indicator of student autonomy. For example, in discussing the Peer Mentoring Scheme, students indicated that they had also, independently, set up small, self-selected, supportive study groups. These groups extended beyond friendship groups as students spoke about sharing materials and resources and creating opportunities to clarify and discuss aspects of the curriculum, assessment and the construction of their Portfolios.

Work colleagues also provided both moral and practical support and some students had good 'mentoring' relationships with work colleagues, some of whom were already qualified practitioners.

Students made the distinction between 'moral' support and practical help with their work from family members, and while some students had both, most felt that the family provided moral or material support. Consideration was also given to the fact that some students do not have family support so this area was treated with sensitivity. This is a good example of 'attention to 'minority voice'- even though it was deemed to be the most popular source of external support we must not assume that it applies to all students. A small number of students identified themselves as 'care leavers' having been fostered or 'looked after' in other ways. They emphasised their own self-determination and autonomy in terms of their success in gaining entry to, and succeeding in the first year of HE.

Examples of ways in which partners and children supported students were provided. Some students said that their own children were supportive in that they understood and helped in the house when 'mum has to do her homework too' and some spoke of the fact that their children were encouraged to work harder themselves as they had a positive role model. However, several students also discussed the negative effects that their entry to HE had on partners who had begun to feel insecure or afraid they were 'being left behind' as students gained new knowledge and levels of awareness. Several mature women students spoke of the negative attitudes of partners and/or inlaws who felt that they were neglecting their family duties as they had 'abandoned' the traditional mothering role- they were deemed to be 'selfish' and 'uncaring'. There are evidently significant issues here and a follow-up (longitudinal) study has commenced in order to gain further insight into the experiences of non-traditional entry students as they proceed through the second and third years of their degree.

Expectations of Support for learning in HE

In order to evaluate provision for pre course preparation and induction the discussion in the focus groups started by asking students what their expectations of support for learning were prior to entry to HE. In addition to providing important feedback on our provision this discussion revealed much about students' desire to be prepared and ready for study- it contradicts notions that non-traditional entry students are reluctant to take control and responsibility for their learning. Strong desire for pre-course reading lists, taster days and information on assessment was expressed.

Independent approaches to learning

Feedback both from the questionnaire and the focus groups also showed that students accessed public libraries and external agencies for resources. They either did this autonomously, having identified for themselves these important resources for advice and information, or they had, done so for independent study projects set by the course. High value placed on E Learning and use of the Internet was also confirmed as an important aspect of independent study. However, students also reiterated that they also value collaborative work, e.g. student-led presentation groups, and seminars and small group work particularly for follow-up discussions on lectures. These were especially identified as important for dyslexic students, some disabled students and those for whom English is not the first language.

A picture began to emerge of students who had increased in confidence and who want to play an active part in managing their learning. This is reinforced by the strong desire to be prepared for Year Two. The focus groups rounded up with the question 'Has the provision made to support your learning in Year One prepared you for Year Two'?

The quotes below exemplify the responses:

- 'Provision was a happy medium- less support than at college, but this is a good thing as we will need to be independent when we go out to work.'
- 'It makes me be mature, you're not followed around, you gradually learn to manage your own time, I enjoy that'.
- 'I appreciate not being mollycoddled'!
- 'My confidence has grown'.
- 'I can see how I have developed- I used to get angry when I didn't agree with someone, now I ask questions, say can you explain'?

In addition students expressed a strong desire for more information on Year 2 including assessment criteria- 'stepping up a level', and reading lists- 'so as we can buy books and read before the children finish school for the summer',

- 'Everyone wants to better themselves, to prepare for year two'.

And when students were asked if they were more independent than when they started Year One agreement was mixed with indignation:

- I have always been independent- you have to be with children and a job to manage, as well as your studies!
- I left my family overseas to come here, so I have always been independent!

7.0 Future Plans – the Second Phase- 'work in progress'.

The objective the second Phase of the research project is to provide an expanded, detailed account of factors that contribute to the support and development of learning, retention and success of diverse non-traditional entry students in Higher Education. Issues that emerged from Phase One, some of which have been touched on above, will be further explored in the longitudinal study. This has started and is following a representative sample group of individual students (+/- 20) as they progress through the second and third year of undergraduate study to graduation. In addition three targeted focus groups have been identified, Black and Minority Ethnic Students (e.g. a partnership has been formed with the Carioccca Educational Trust that works with African-Caribbean students.), Students who are the First in the Family in Higher Education and Students who are 'Care Leavers'. Insight will be gained into the complex processes that are involved as they pursue academic achievement.

The research project involves students in the production, for publication of 'case studies' of their experiences in Higher Education. Information will include details of diverse pathways into Higher Education and will show how students manage their learning in order to succeed. The material is intended to raise the profile of non-traditional entry students, provide positive role models for future students and influence inclusive policies and practices in widening participation and access.

Outcomes will include the development of focussed and targeted learning and teaching strategies to support the development of learning of non-traditional entry students, the development of materials for publicity, pre-course provision, student induction, support for learning and assessment.

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