Enabling Student Learning

Systems and Strategies

EDITED BY

GINA WISKER AND SALLY BROWN

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Preface

A fundamental concern within higher education today is to ensure that strategies are in place to provide systematic guidance and support for students in order to enable them to learn. With increasing numbers of students, a diverse student population coming from a wide variety of learning backgrounds and decreasing per capita funding, there are grave concerns that the student learning experience as a whole is being threatened.

This book explores a range of strategies, both institutional and individual which have been developed by academic and support staff to foster the kind of context, atmosphere, facilities and attitudes in relation to learning which support students who are learning in universities. Student services and central systems available to students under modular systems are particularly addressed here.

The contributors, many of whom participated in the Staff and Educational Development Association conference on Enabling Student Learning at Worthing in November 1994, examine in this book how best to enable all kinds of students to make the most of opportunities for learning available in higher education. The book includes references to computer-aided support systems as well as to the range of ways in which personal and peer tutoring systems can help to make the student experience rewarding and successful.

Students nowadays invest highly in their university education, both in terms of effort and of finance, often graduating with high levels of debt. In order to enable them to get the most from their experience in higher education, we need to ensure that they obtain the best possible support available. This book addresses how we can do this, within the limitations and constraints of our current working context.

Gina Wisker &
Sally Brown,
November 1995

SECTION ONE:
Systems and Structures
to Enable Student Learning

Chapter 1

Assuring the Quality of Guidance and Learner Support in Higher Education

Vivienne Rivis

INTRODUCTION

This chapter reviews recent developments in guidance and learner support in the UK higher education sector and describes an approach to quality assurance developed by the Higher Education Quality Council, based on a set of quality assurance guidelines. The chapter also considers the potential impact of guidance and learner support on the maintenance of academic standards. Some of the material in this chapter has already appeared in an article in the Employment Department's *Network News*, Edition 1, February 1995.

The HE sector in the UK has had an ambivalent attitude to guidance and learner support. On the one hand there has been a persistent view that students entering HE ought, by virtue of their academic abilities, to be able to make effective decisions about learning, to deal with academic and personal problems without recourse to specialist help and to operate more or less as autonomous learners. On the other hand, the tradition of personal tutoring established by the ancient universities and adopted subsequently by both old and new universities has implicitly acknowledged that HE students derive both academic and personal benefits from one-to-one academic guidance. Moreover, in recent years, the expansion of university counselling and careers advisory services in the

old universities, and of multi-specialist student services in the new universities, has demonstrated a recognition that HE students require a range of academic, personal and practical services to enable them to derive full benefit from their programmes of learning.

CHANGE AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

Recent innovations in the organization and delivery of guidance and learner support cannot be considered without a review of the context of educational change in which they are rooted. The steady expansion of HE from the mid-1960s was brought into sudden focus by the government-engineered rapid expansion of the late 1980s and early 1990s. This coincided with the reform of the entire post-school sector, severing the link between non-university institutions and the local authorities, and with the creation of new funding mechanisms for a unitary HE sector (HEFCE, 1994). However, rapid expansion was followed by abrupt 'consolidation' with the introduction of financial penalties for over-recruitment, and incentives through the Funding Councils to encourage universities to offer economically-valued subjects such as science and engineering.

Government policy was mirrored by significant changes in patterns of entry to HE. Although the expansion of participation in HE has led to a much higher proportion of young people undertaking university-level study, the apparent expansion has been amongst 'mature' students, particularly women, reflecting the success of the Access, educational guidance and the equal opportunities movements of the 1970s and 1980s (FEU, 1994; HEFCE, 1994). Increasing numbers of students study part-time, often while working, and there has been a corresponding expansion of continuing professional development programmes.

Changes in the numbers and characteristics of HE students have been accompanied by changes in the way their education is organized and delivered. The majority of universities and increasing numbers of colleges have moved towards more flexible, credit-based programmes, often linked to modularization of the curriculum and the replacement of the three traditional terms with two or more semesters (Robertson, 1994). Students are now more likely to be viewed as autonomous learners, and academic staff are expected to pay much greater attention to the quality of their teaching and the effectiveness of their students' learning (Imeson, 1995).

Students, faced with a very wide choice of learning options at the beginning of, and sometimes throughout, their learning programmes are seeking help from both academic and administrative staff in making decisions about their individual learning pathways. There is a widespread view that the expansion of student numbers has meant that personal tutor systems have been put under enormous strain and in many institutions have in fact collapsed.

Universities and colleges have been examining other models of support for students, including group and peer tutoring, or the use of programme advisers,

to compensate for the lack of one-to-one tutoring (HEQC, 1994b; Moore, 1995). The weakening of this individualized, personal link between tutor and student has other concomitants, notably a widespread view that students are adopting an increasingly consumerist attitude to their education, reflecting the influence of the market on institutions, their corporate customers, the employers, and the 'consumers' of education, the students. Students appear more likely to appeal against unsatisfactory assessments, or to complain about other issues regarding the quality of their learning experience. This increased consumerism is accompanied by changes which have rendered students, especially part-time students, the direct purchasers of their own learning services.

The increasingly difficult financial situation of many students and their families and the inability of most institutions to alleviate those difficulties has created further tensions. Retention rates are giving cause for concern in many institutions (Moore, 1995) especially where high dropout appears to be linked to financial hardship. This has been acknowledged by the funding bodies: the Chief Executive of the HEFCE has noted that students who cannot afford to study full-time often return to part-time HE where, incidentally, there are no sources of financial assistance (Davies, 1995).

One of the main criticisms of credit-based and modular programmes is their fragmentary nature – for both staff and students. Students, especially those studying part-time or off-campus at work or at home through distance learning or discontinuously, may feel themselves to be isolated and lacking in the peer group support available through the traditional three-year full-time single honours programme (Moore, 1995; HEQC, 1994b).

Equally, academic staff may regret the more limited opportunities to develop close rapport with a group of students over an extended period. Institutions have been actively addressing these issues, recognizing that expansion and diversity have created a different set of challenges about the organization of teaching and learning, and the quality of the students' experience, which are not simply related to the accommodation of greater numbers of students.

In fact, the HE sector has a strong track record in some aspects of innovative practice in guidance about learning. The Open University embedded the notion of academic counselling in its delivery structures from an early stage and went on to encourage and support the establishment of educational guidance services for adults (Butler, 1984). Other polytechnics and universities also contributed to the establishment of such services (Rivis, 1991). Professional associations emerged to service the interests of groups of specialist staff, such as the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS), the Association of Student Counsellors (ASC) and the Association of Managers of Student Services in Higher Education (AMOSSHE). However, as these groupings emerged there was a tendency for demarcations between specialists to increase (Watts, 1994) and for overall issues of guidance and learner support across the whole of an institution to be neglected.

In 1989, two bodies with an interest in both HE and educational guidance, the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA) and the Unit for the

Development of Adult Continuing Education (UDACE) devised a project to examine the provision of guidance and counselling to the UK HE sector, with a particular emphasis on the experience of non-traditional and mature students. The project, which ran from 1990 to 1992, found that HE institutions had extensive guidance and counselling provision, involving a wide range of academic and non-academic staff, but that few institutions had integrated systems or institution-wide policies and plans for guidance (Herrington and Rivis *et al.*, 1994).

The UDACE/CNAA project was funded by the then Employment Department which, since the late 1980s, has acknowledged the critical role played by guidance in education and training. The focus of much Employment Department-funded guidance activity has emphasized the relationship between guidance and economic roles. For example, the National Institute for Careers and Educational Counselling (NICEC) undertook a study of careers education and the curriculum in HE, as part of the Employment Department's evaluation of its Enterprise in Higher Education Programme (Watts and Hawthorn, 1992). More recently, the Department has focused on the relationship between guidance in HE and the development of learning autonomy by supporting development projects in seven HE institutions, where a major focus is the construction and implementation of institution-wide strategies for guidance and learner support. Institutions have thus been provided with some forums for debate and opportunities for development, mainly by government sponsorship. The professional associations have tended to argue from their specific perspectives, whether it be student counselling or careers guidance, rather than across the field as a whole. Other research and development projects have referred to student or educational guidance, but in a relatively partial or undifferentiated way. For example, the government-sponsored Credit Accumulation and Transfer Development Project managed by the HEQC focused on information systems and education guidance in support of credit-based learning, although making broad recommendations about the organization of guidance and learner support in a diverse, expanded system (Robertson, 1994).

Until recently, therefore, despite the increased interest in and activity around guidance and learner support issues, there was no over-arching framework wherein HE institutions could locate their provision and against which they could assure themselves of the quality of their services. It was this gap that the HEQC has sought to fill.

QUALITY ASSURANCE OF GUIDANCE AND LEARNER SUPPORT

The HEQC, established by statute in 1992 but owned by the HE sector itself, is charged with 'contributing to the maintenance and improvement of quality, at all levels, in institutions of Higher Education in the United Kingdom'. Furthermore, 'HEQC seeks to promote public confidence in the standing and quality of the universities and colleges and the programmes and awards they offer,

thereby protecting institutions' autonomy in setting and maintaining academic standards'.

Through its main functions of *quality assurance and quality enhancement,* HEQC acts with and on behalf of the universities and colleges. Thus HEQC carries out regular auditing of the ways institutions discharge their responsibilities for standards and quality and at the same time has undertaken a range of quality enhancement projects in collaboration with the institutions themselves. These projects complement the audit process by disseminating good practice through seminars, reports, discussion papers and guidelines. The *Guidelines on Quality Assurance* (HEQC, 1994a) offer an overall framework for quality assurance, based on previous CVCP and CNAA guidance. Forthcoming guidelines on credit rating will provide a more detailed framework for institutions working to enhance the quality of their credit-based learning programmes. Complementing both of these, and HEQC's *Notes for the Guidance of Auditors* (1995b) are the new Guidelines for *Guidance and Learner Support in Higher Education* (HEQC, 1995a).

The idea is not new. Professional associations and individual institutions have in recent years published a string of codes of practice, statements of entitlement and good practice checklists. The *Charters for Higher Education* (DfE, 1993), have in turn stimulated institutions to produce their own charters and statements of entitlement to the teaching, learning and support services deemed to be part of the HE experience. Students and prospective students are now more likely to be offered an explicit statement of what they can expect in terms of teaching and learning, and the support services available in the institution of their choice.

However, only limited attention has been paid to the full range of guidance and practical services which are needed to underpin and facilitate HE learning, particularly in an increasingly flexible credit-based, modularized system. During exploratory work on credit and access, HEQC was asked to provide more specific assistance to institutions grappling with these issues.

In response, in Autumn 1993 HEQC set up a quality assurance Network for Guidance and Learner Support, drawn from 15 different institutions, mainly in the North of England. This group, whose members included staff and student representatives with a diverse range of academic and learner support roles, began its work by addressing the findings of recent projects on guidance and learner support in HE. The Employment Department funded UDACE/CNAA project on Guidance and Counselling in Higher Education had found considerable diversity of practice across the sector. Although a significant proportion of academic, specialist and non-academic staff undertook guidance and support activities, these were largely unmonitored by the institutions. There was 'a lack of overall policy for guidance and learner support, so that co-ordination and quality assurance were problematic' (Herrington and Rivis *et al.,* 1994). There were no widely accepted standards of service in operation as part of overall quality assurance procedures, so that in most cases there were no mechanisms to assure impartiality or appropriate response to demand. Modularization and the expansion of CATS activities had been accompanied by growing diversity of the student population, but without corresponding improvements in internal

information and communication systems. However, the relationship between guidance and the quality of teaching and learning was beginning to be recognized, as was its important contribution to the development of systems for learner feedback.

Building in part upon this project, which recommended a development agenda broad enough to encompass the mission of all types of institution, a team from Sheffield Hallam University, supported by national advisers, concentrated on the guidance and learner support implications of an expanded, diverse, credit-based HE system, as part of the National CATS Development Project commissioned by HEQC (Robertson, 1994). One of the many recommendations of this project was that there should be a national code of practice for guidance and learner support.

From consideration of the work undertaken by these development projects, and in the context of the recently issued Student Charters, the Network identified a key priority: an expanded, more flexible, credit-based HE system must enhance the coverage, quality and standards of service delivery of its guidance and learner support arrangements.

HEQC's role, as the sector's own quality assurance body, was not to replicate project work planned by the Employment Department and other agencies, but to facilitate the development of a quality assurance and quality enhancement *framework* which any institution could use if required, and from which all could benefit if they so wished.

The Council's *Notes for the Guidance of Auditors* (HEQC, 1995b) and *Guidelines on Quality Assurance* (1994a) already offered a starting point, by drawing the attention of institutions to their arrangements for guidance and learner support which might stimulate lines of enquiry during the process of institutional quality audit. However, the *Learning from Audit* report (HEQC, 1994b) demonstrated that until recently the quality assurance of guidance and learner support arrangements has not been a major feature of audit. Institutions reported that they required a more detailed set of guidelines which were not mandatory, but which reflected the best of current and planned practice.

The development process

The challenge for the Network was to review current definitions and standards of good practice, agree a common set of underlying principles, and develop a format which was both easily understood *and* inclusive. Recent statements, reports and codifications of good practice in guidance and learner support were analysed, and from them were distilled dozens of activities and processes. These were then grouped into clusters which reflected the different *phases* of learning: pre-entry, entry and induction, on-programme and moving on. The Network was concerned that learning should not be characterized solely in terms of progression through a conventional course and so emphasized the continuity of many guidance and learner support activities throughout any piece or programme of learning, however short or discontinuous that learning might be.

Members of the Network then considered the range of guidance services and support activities as a series of *entitlements*, in different institutions and settings, and tried to match these with *responsibilities* which institutions might be expected to undertake. This provided the second organizing principle for the Guidelines. To ensure that the Guidelines could be used as a practical quality assurance and enhancement tool, the Network identified a wide range of evidence which institutions could use as an indication of whether and how well particular aspects of service delivery were being addressed.

As Sheila Cross has noted (1994), for many guidance practitioners the issue of ethical principles is even more critical than that of quality assurance mechanisms. Specialist guidance and learner support staff, such as careers advisers, managers of student services and counsellors, work to codes of practice developed by their own professional associations, and so must have regard both to the mission and policies of their institution *and* to the codes of ethics which govern their professional activity. In recent years these professional associations and other national bodies have explored common ground in a number of fora, and have set out principles on which there is broad agreement across professional groupings.

These principles provide the ethical framework for the practice of guidance and learner support. They are reflected in the Guidelines, but also in other relevant documentation, such as the Charter for Higher Education, the Guidelines for Quality Assurance, and the codes of practice of the professional bodies concerned with guidance and learner support. The principles include: learner centredness; confidentiality; impartiality; equal opportunities and accessibility. Although there are a number of other formulations, there is broad, widespread agreement about these five principles and their importance.

While many institutions would wish to subscribe to all of these principles, it is recognized that there may be conflicts of both interests and practice. For example, confidentiality is a cornerstone of the practice of counselling, financial advice and careers guidance. However, entitlements to APEL and other forms of recorded achievement may imply more open systems of transmitting information about learners. It is hoped that the Guidelines will encourage institutions to engage with these issues of principle to ensure that their practices are consistent with their stated mission and ethical stance. The network recognized the fundamental importance of institutional policies for guidance and learner support, and also included sections on policy, resources, quality and communication issues in the framework.

When the first draft of the Guidelines was complete, the document was piloted in ten institutions of different types across the country – three colleges of HE, four new universities and three older universities, including the Open University. In conducting the pilots, each institution drew together a group of staff with responsibilities for student support and guidance and considered both the principles underlying the practice of guidance and learner support, together with guidance practice in support of one or more phases of learning. This enabled institutions to achieve a variety of purposes, as well as testing the efficacy