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Learning Support: Student Perceptions and Preferences

Julia Peck, Lloyd Chilvers and Yvonne Lincoln *Roehampton University*

Abstract

This research draws on a small focus group discussion using third year undergraduates. Students shared perceptions of learning support and were encouraged to identify and rank their preferences for learning support. A number of important themes emerged, including students' lack of awareness of some existing avenues of support, a request for parity of access to Academic Learning Support Assistants and the need for academic tutors to be supportive. Support from academic tutors that manages the process from dependence to independent learning whilst providing advice that moves from the general to the specific was requested.

Key words: Learning support, widening participation, student preferences and perceptions

Introduction

Learning and teaching for students is a critical element in the student experience of higher education (Thomas 2005: 99). Learning support, including key skills and study skills provision, is becoming increasingly important to the student experience, especially for students from non-traditional backgrounds (Thomas 2005: 105).

What constitutes 'learning support' is contested (Burns *et al*. 2004: 10), but in the context of this article, learning support is considered to be any activity or social exchange that supports the students in their academic studies. The focus here is therefore on academic support, including support from academic tutors, key skills and study skills sessions, language and disability support, activities that make the pedagogies of academia transparent (sessions, for example, that demonstrate differences between lectures, seminars and tutorials) and group work where student learning is shared and social. We recognise that learning is an emotional experience and sometimes life changing (Burns 2004: 11-12), and that other types of support (such as Money Doctors and counselling,

for example) support the student through their studies, but these support services are not the focus of this article.

The demands made upon the various support services, together with the expansion of higher education provision in the UK, in particular the impact of Widening Participation initiatives, require that providers consider tailoring their support to accommodate changing needs (Watts *et al.* 2008: 3). There is debate about which types of support are most valuable to students, how student take-up can be optimised, and whether services should be targeted at those students deemed most in need of them or whether teaching and learning strategies should change to accommodate the greatest possible diversity of learners and their needs (Burns *et al.* 2004: 11-12; Earwaker 1992: 95-98).

Whilst there has been a sustained move in higher education research to promote embedding learning support into core teaching, such a move is problematized by a lack of staff development opportunities, academics' perception of their role as subject expert and the enduring culture of academics resisting the changing needs of the student population (Thomas 2005: 100). Indeed, research has shown that some academic staff and university structures tacitly accept a 'deficit model' of their students' needs in relation to student support (Thomas 2005: 100-101). Further problematising this cultural shift are the students' own perceptions of learning support and key skills. Some students are unsure of the skills necessary to succeed in Higher Education and they can therefore find it difficult to identify their needs and articulate what they are, which in turn makes it difficult to seek appropriate support (Earwaker 1992: 96-97). While many students may benefit from learning support embedded into their programmes, students' engagement with the provision of academic support can be hampered by the perception that it will be easy to acquire the skills at a later stage; this raises issues about the timeliness of the delivery of key skills training and the transparency of purpose of the skills in question (Allan 2007: 72-73).

In this research study, students identified the need for improved and effective advertising of learning support services and parity of access to Academic Learning Support

Assistants. Support from academic tutors was also significant in student discussion and in their final list of preferences: students requested support from tutors that manages the process from dependence to independent learning whilst providing advice that moves from the general to the specific. The students' preferences highlight the need for academic tutors to recognise and cater for the increasing diversity of student needs in the Higher Education sector.

Widening Participation

Widening Participation (WP) has been subject to policy initiatives and debate over several decades (Stuart 2002) and involves questions of social justice and the formation of workplace-ready employees. The White Paper *The Future of Higher Education* (2003) made explicit challenges to the HE sector through application and admissions guidelines aiming to change elite sector education to mass education (defined as 50% of 18-30 year olds taking up a place at university). The increase in student numbers has brought about a significant change in the composition of the student population (Burns *et al.* 2004: 2-6). Although the White Paper proposes that the majority of students undertaking higher level study will take 'work focused foundation degrees' provided by FE institutions (2003: 57), a subsequent White Paper, *Widening Participation in Higher Education* (2006), has outlined the challenges universities need to meet in the fulfilling of the WP policy, including admissions procedures, targeting appropriate students and reaching out to students where necessary. Indeed, many WP students are electing to take traditional full time three year degrees at university. The nature of HEIs [Higher Education Institutions] is changing, with policy initiatives demanding a move away from a model founded upon the development of a critical engagement with the world (liberal-based policies) (Barnett 2003: 2) to a vocational, instrumental and increasingly commodified form of education (Watts *et al* 2008: 5) that is informed by competing ideologies such as 'competition, entrepreneurism, quality, managerialism and research' (Barnett 2003: 1).

Widening Participation students are defined as those who come from diverse backgrounds, yet there is no single nation-wide definition of a 'Widening Participation

student'. The emphasis in HEFCE's report, and in Roehampton's policies for encouraging WP, seems to be very much on encouraging students from backgrounds that are 'under represented' at university in order to make the student population increasingly diverse (HEFCE 2001); this can include mature students, students who have parental responsibilities, students with disabilities, students from low-income backgrounds and students from diverse ethnic backgrounds. In the DfES proposal document *Widening Participation in Higher Education*, 'under represented groups' in Widening Participation was not defined but the document made explicit the desire to include 'everyone who has the ability to participate' in Higher Education (DfES 2003: 5 & 24).

Widening Participation students currently entering HE are frequently perceived to be less equipped for the nature of their educational experience and less able in comparison with traditional entrants (Allen 2005: 116; Watts 2008: 5). In addition, WP students are sometimes less confident and are beset by anxieties and insecurities concerning their academic ability (Burke 2002: 77; Watts 2008: 4) yet they encounter an institution which expects them to thrive as independent learners. Of particular concern are the students who do not complete their education at university and those who fail to experience HE as transformative, experiencing 'less secure and lower status futures' instead of more privileged futures (Dearing 1997: 106 in Watts 2008: 6). Addressing learning and teaching is a key aspect to enable WP students to experience HE as transformative, providing increased control over life, career and economic and social prosperity. However, many non-traditional students experience 'interlocking and cumulative struggles' (Burns *et al.* 2004: 9) which potentially damage academic performance and opportunities for well-paid employment.

Underpinning the learning and teaching/WP debate are issues of resources, training for academic staff and questions of academic pedagogy (Watts 2008). Indeed, one of the implications of WP identified by Liz Allen (2005) is that HE is likely to be transformed by the new students entering education, as well as the students being transformed by their educational experience. However, the non-traditional student is typically pathologized and denigrated (Burns *et al* 2005; Lillis 2001; Burke 2002) and strategies for retention

and basic academic achievement focus on expecting the student to change and acquire new skills. Key skills have been targeted as a means of facilitating non-traditional students to adjust to the expectations of the academy (Crosling 2002; Burns 2004: 10; Bowl 2001). Focusing on key skills for non-traditional learners maintains a 'deficit model' approach to WP rather than promoting more radical learning and teaching models, but key skills strategies are relatively inexpensive to resource and implement and do not require fundamental changes to academic pedagogy.

Changes in pedagogies do need to be addressed by universities and teaching teams but learning support initiatives can help WP students adjust to the university whilst the university adjusts to the needs of its students. Burns *et al* (2005) argue that key skills programmes allow a greater number of students to achieve in the HE context. There are different models of implementation (Burns 2002; Thomas 2005: 105) and integrated models are generally favoured because they do not pathologize or stigmatize specific students and, in addition, they benefit the broader student population. Yet, as research on integrating key skills into academic curricula shows, students' willingness to engage with learning support is dependent upon their perceived need of those skills and how timely their delivery is within the programme (Allan 2007: 72-73). In addition to these concerns, research indicates that the role of the academic tutor is more significant for WP students. Marion Bowl's research (2001), for example, demonstrated that non-traditional entrants to HE looked to teachers and tutors for support and frequently expressed disappointment when it was not forthcoming (156-7). Bowl felt the expectations for support from tutors could be mitigated by managing the expectations of learners and making the pedagogies of HE transparent (157), but she also argues for a reciprocal and non-hierarchical relationship between students and tutors (158). Indeed it seems that while specialist learning support can be significant for students, the academic tutor has a role to play in directing students' progress, supporting students and ensuring specialist support happens.

Learning Support at Roehampton University

At Roehampton University there are a number of support services available to students. The English Language Unit provides Academic English courses and tutorials (open to all students at Roehampton University) and English language courses and tutorials for non-English speaking students. All students are assigned a personal tutor and, in many instances, students can seek one-to-one and group tutorial academic support from their module tutor. Students with disabilities receive varying packages of support in response to their specific needs and many programmes at Roehampton University run Peer Assistant Learning schemes for their first year students. Other forms of support are available in the form of software training, mathematics support, advice and guidance provided by the Library staff and the provision of an electronic learning environment (Moodle). Subjects with a practice element, such as Film and Photography, also employ tutor technicians who provide a variety of technical and practical support to students.

In addition, an Academic Learning Support Assistant (ALSA) provides learning support for students on the Media & Culture and Journalism & News Media programmes. The ALSA aims to provide assistance with essay and dissertation writing on a one-to-one basis (providing feedback and guidance on structure, development of academic argument, writing to academic conventions as well as attending to grammar, punctuation and referencing). Further, the ALSA has some subject expertise and has a clear understanding of the nature of essays specific to these academic disciplines as well as insight into the kinds of critical demands and use and understanding of theories expected of students. Student feedback on ALSA support is positive but there are concerns from academic staff about the parity of access; not all students have access to an ALSA.

Broader emotional, financial and careers support is also available through the university, but the focus of this article is on the forms of support that underpin academic activity; considerations of broader social support are therefore excluded from this study.

The Research Project and Methodology

What are the students' preferences for learning support? This research project aimed to ascertain from a diverse population of students their preferences for particular types of learning support and, at the same time, gain insight into their perceptions of learning support. A small focused study was undertaken within the Film and Media Subject Area at Roehampton University which includes four programmes of study at undergraduate level: Film, Media & Culture, Photography and Journalism & News Media.

A focus group was chosen as a method for enabling students to share experiences and express preferences. Students were asked to rank their preferences through discussion, thus actively negotiating and selecting their priorities for themselves. For these reasons the Delphi model was chosen; this method provided the means to collect data with both a broad and then increasingly narrow focus. The Delphi model enabled the research team to treat the students as the experts, as the ones with the first hand experience and who had the information that we wanted to retrieve. This method was originally developed by Norman Dalkey in the 1950s to 'solicit expert opinion'; this has evolved and is now used as a way to identify and validate information received from those 'who know' (Skulmoski *et al.* 2007: 2).

The Delphi model gave us a structure to use with the students. They were asked to discuss the usefulness of existing services, generate new ideas for learning support and, finally, to rank their preferences in response to their own needs, and in response to other members of the group. This model enabled the research team to encourage and acknowledge the importance of student responses as well as securing qualitative data on student perceptions and preferences. Although the members of the focus group were not anonymous to the researchers, the research has been anonymized in all discussions. The session was recorded on video for later analysis.

Different groups of students were invited to the focus group: those who had attended a session with the ALSA in the Subject Area, those who had access to an ALSA but who had not attended a session with the ALSA and, finally, students who did not have access to an ALSA but who attended programmes in the Subject Area were invited to the focus

group. However, students fell broadly into two categories: those who had access to an ALSA and those who did not have access to an ALSA.

The focus group discussion was divided into discrete parts (with steps 1-4 being mainly in small group discussions):

1. The focus group commenced with an explanation of the purpose of the session; students were then asked to list the learning support services available to them within the School and the University. This knowledge was then shared with the larger group.
2. The students were asked to identify the types of support they had used and were asked to rank them in order of the appropriateness to their needs.
3. Students were asked to generate their own ideas on what the university could do to increase or improve learning support for students. These ideas were shared and discussed with the larger group.
4. For the following ten minutes the students discussed their preferred choices of academic support and produced a list of ranked preferences.
5. The students' ideas were gathered and discussed in a plenary session. The rankings were compared across groups, observations were made by the students and the research team made further requests for explanation.
6. A final list of ranked preferences was produced from a full group discussion; this last discussion revealed marked differences in terms of student needs and provided rich material for analysis.

Findings

The focus group revealed the students' views on the strengths and weaknesses of current support provision and ideas for improvement to provision. Table 1, below, lists the suggestions made by students, some of which engendered widespread support and others less so. As is clear from the table, some of the suggestions fall outside what might be

considered learning support, but they are included to reflect the breadth of student concerns and issues.

Table 1: Students' Ideas for Learning Support

Improved publicity for services

Six-week training programme introducing support services

Example essays, with analysis, to be provided by academic tutors

More Academic Learning Support Assistants

Academic tutors to be 'trained like teachers'

Refresher sessions on grammar and other generic skills

Improved student networking

More books

Better relationship between student and tutor

Explanations of terminology

Tutors to understand typical student weaknesses

Library to update records

Facilitation of transition from dependency to independence

Editing groups

Consistent feedback from staff

Teaching 'what is an academic argument?' and 'academic writing style'

Students brought their individual experiences and particular needs to the discussions and, as such, there was disagreement between participants about priorities and practices. Indeed, on some matters of implementation opinion was polarized, most notably in regard to the desirability of embedding study skills training within modules. Nevertheless, using Delphi methods the focus group was drawn towards its conclusion by encouraging students to arrive at some broad consensus regarding the ranking of preferences. The top five preferences are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Ranked Preferences for Learning Support	
1	Improved publicity for services/support available
2	Academic support that progresses from the general to the specific; support should be programme and tutor specific
3	More ALSAs, equal access to ALSAs and an induction which, among other things, facilitates students to meet ALSAs.
4	Guidance on the journey from dependency to independence – managing the transition from school to university
5=	More and better student networking associated with subject
5=	More effective and timely updating of library records

One suggestion emerging from the focus group was that rather than students encountering the various elements of the learning support portfolio on a piecemeal basis, there should instead be a formal and integrated induction programme. This would serve to introduce first year students to the entire range of learning support opportunities, initiatives and personnel that may be accessed by them over the course of their studies. There could thus be a learning support induction programme spanning a period of around six weeks (half of the first term) and taking up, say, one hour each week. This would not be credit-bearing but given a strong element of compulsion. The programme would embrace the various specialist services, such as English language support for international students and dyslexia support for those with this learning disability, as well as the services open to all. The merits of such an approach to familiarising students with what is available is that, even if reminders are deemed appropriate at a later date, they begin their first year armed with the knowledge of what is available. As one of the students in the focus group noted, the induction programme approach means that 'everyone's given the knowledge…what they choose to do with it is up to them'. But providing students with this knowledge of support services in such a structured way was not universally favoured by participants. One expressed the view, for example, that tutors should communicate what support is available as part of the introduction to their modules. This, of course, runs the very real risk of unnecessary duplication of time and effort, with the same

information being imparted at the beginning of every module, especially as students are taking two or three modules at the same time.

A theme to which the focus group discussion returned a number of times was the centrality of the role of the academic staff, and in particular that of the tutors teaching the various modules. At one level, this was about continuity – module tutors were already a primary point of contact for students – but wrapped up in this was the view of some students that the only person who could provide the most appropriate advice was the academic tutor of the module, almost regardless of the nature of the advice that was being sought. This was described by one student in terms of 'security': it was believed that to seek advice from the module tutor who would subsequently mark the student's work was the most secure path to take to attain the best possible mark.

Because many in the focus group were keen to emphasize the critical importance of academic staff in supporting their work away from the classroom and the lecture, there was considerable commentary about the module tutors. Accessibility and availability was one issue, with specific comments about response times to emails, length of office hours and one observation that tutors seemed keen to 'send you somewhere else' to resolve your problems. There was also a suggestion that while tutors were evidently knowledgeable about their subject, this did not mean that they necessarily possessed the skills that made them good teachers. Tutors, one student ventured, 'should be trained more like teachers'.

Students offered an interesting suggestion for a form of support which would come not from the institution but from among themselves. The idea of editing groups was brought up by one student and was given a generally favourable reception by a number of others. This idea can be seen, in a sense, as a particular form of student networking, which was mentioned by other participants in a more general way. The consensus seemed to be that such groups would almost certainly have to be subject-specific because of the different approaches taken to written assessments across disciplinary boundaries. But what sets the idea of such groups apart from the other forms of support that tended to be favoured

by students was that they would provide, as one student ventured, 'input from someone at your level'. One student described the attraction of this in terms of putting something before one's peers as being less 'risky' than taking a piece of work immediately to a tutor.

Student awareness of the various elements of learning support remains at best patchy. In the focus group discussions, awareness was demonstrated of very nearly all the different forms of support available, but few, if any, students claimed awareness of all support services. If that was disappointing, then there was encouragement to be drawn from the very clear enthusiasm demonstrated by many participants for the various services that were available. Indeed, it was not the range, availability or effectiveness of the portfolio of support services, nor the desire for any particular additional service, that topped the students' ranking of suggestions but the overarching wish for better publicity for those services which were already in place.

The role of academic support in smoothing the difficult transition from school to HE greatly occupied some participants. One, looking back to her arrival at university more than two years earlier, stated that academic staff had made assumptions about the skills possessed by students in relation to academic writing, studying independently and more fundamental, generic skills around correct usage of English. The jump from A-Level to undergraduate student was far easier for some than others, she added, depending on school and college experiences and success and wider issues around background. It was felt that some students required more access to basic academic support than others, at least at the outset of their university studies. There was, for example, a suggestion that there should in the first year be refresher sessions dealing with basic writing skills such as correct usage of punctuation and grammar. While this type of remedial support was felt by many to be something the university might offer, there was very strong opposition from some participants to any hint that it might use up module teaching time. A connected area of debate, and disagreement, was the extent to which support in the form of study skills should be embedded within academic programmes, if at all.

A one-off initiative organized by the University, the *How's it Going Week*, was held towards the end of the first term of the academic year and focused on providing academic support to third year students. The student discussion surrounding this event was revealing in that it brought into close focus the difficulties encountered when support is organized and provided at the institutional level; some students were unable to attend for purely practical reasons but more importantly, perhaps, a student who had attended a session concerned with essay writing skills found it to be of limited usefulness because, she said, 'it was not specific enough'. Expanding on this, the student said that some of the advice about the requirements of essay writing was not in keeping with advice she had been earlier given by module tutors in her discipline and, in fact, there was occasionally directly contradictory advice.

A number of issues were raised in relation to ALSAs. Most critically there was a strong agreement between groups that there should be equality of access to this support. Those students on the programmes without an ALSA attached were not previously aware that others within the subject area had the opportunity to access such a service but were keen to hear from others about their experiences of using it and what it comprised. The suggestion was made that students should have the opportunity to meet their programme's ALSA in the induction period, whatever form the induction was to take, on the basis that an introductory meeting, even as a group, would make subsequent approaches to the ALSA easier and encourage take-up (in fact, this has been partially implemented, with the ALSA attending the programme induction sessions for first year students on the relevant programmes). One student thought that ALSAs from across the school, and perhaps institution, should be grouped together and located in a single area so that their location would be known to all and they might easily be found.

Analysis

One of the more unexpected findings was the students' apparent lack of awareness of the support services available and the importance attached by them to improving publicity for what is available. There is considerable investment by the institution in seeking to make

students aware of support services, the ways in which they may prove helpful and how to access them. Efforts to create awareness are made at the institutional, school, programme and module levels. Yet, despite these efforts, student awareness remains at best patchy.

However, for students who have little knowledge of what to expect at university it is clear that significant effort has to be invested in orientation and becoming accustomed to the new social environment – indeed, all students are bombarded with a broad array of information upon arrival. Moreover, WP students are less likely to live on campus and spend less time at university (Thomas 2005: 99). Their exposure to information in the form of posters and flyers together with opportunities for engagement with students and tutors is therefore more limited than for students who spend more time on campus. Although efforts are made to consolidate information into packs or handbooks they contain so much information they are hard to digest and are put to one side as other reading material or other forms of study (such as practical production activities) call for attention. In addition, as acknowledged earlier in this article, students may not know when to ask for support, or be able to define what they need. A formal 'how to study programme' or integrated learning support would make advertising/delivering the diversity of services and types of support more effective and could be provided in such a way that makes the most of timeliness and relevance of skills. If timeliness is effective, students may become aware of their needs and take steps to remedy the situation as relevant issues become pressing.

Although students commented on problems of accessibility, the central role of academic staff in providing support for students was an issue that surfaced several times. Students, it seems, are typically reluctant to allow that support can be satisfactorily provided by others within the institution and that in some instances there may be benefits from seeing a specialist. Of course, what lies at the heart of this is the fact that it is the academic subject tutors who are the final arbiters of the student's work, the markers of the essay or other assessment, those who adjudge the level of success attained by the student. It is in this sense entirely understandable that students should value this link above all others, especially if they have perceived the power relations in play in the University

environment. However, it is frequently impossible for academic staff to provide one-to-one support for all those students who require it or who would like it. The students' emphasis on the module tutor also denies the possibility that others may have a contribution to make that is incremental to that which academic tutors might reasonably be expected to make. Embedding support or learning and teaching initiatives that enable WP students to gain confidence and practice their skills would provide them with support at the immediate point of contact with the module tutor and provide a fairer environment in which a diversity of learners can achieve or make considerable progress in their studies. In addition, programmes could be structured to facilitate progression to independent learning.

One of the principal merits of embedding learning support in programmes is that it is far less likely that students will slip through the net, less able to claim that they were unaware of this or that service. In addition, interest from the module tutor in the success of all students through an investment in fairness and transparency could send positive signals to those students who are finding HE overly challenging and unsupportive. But the arguments against embedding are well-rehearsed, focusing upon the fact that any time spent on matters such as study skills is time lost to teaching the core academic content of the module.

While almost all of the various forms of support, other than those delivered by academic tutors in teaching sessions, were available to all groups of students who participated in the focus group, there was one that was not, namely the Academic Learning Support Assistant (ALSA). ALSAs are not available to all students across the institution and where they can be accessed their role is not entirely uniform. In regard to the suggestion that all ALSAs from across the institution should be grouped together and located in a single area so that they might easily be found, experience has already shown that there is merit in locating the ALSA within the area occupied by the academic team to which the ALSA is attached, in order that students understand the role to be one that works with and is part of the programme team. At a very basic level, this proximity facilitates the referral of students by tutors to the ALSA without the need to direct them to distant and

perhaps unfamiliar corners of the campus. In addition, the practice of having the ALSA as part of the team encourages student self-referral, which experience shows to account for around half of total referrals. Moreover, it then becomes entirely appropriate and consistent for the ALSA to attend the introductory sessions for first year students at which each member of the team introduces him/herself and outlines their role.

Behind the focus group discussions around what was considered an appropriate level and means of generic academic support were some fairly fundamental questions about the impact on institutional provision of academic support for WP initiatives. Some students arrive far better equipped than others to manage the transition from school to university, and it is the former who resisted ideas of study skills provision within modules, especially any that is not module or subject specific, crowding out time which they would regard as better spent on core material. To date, literature focusing on student responses to embedded learning support or study skills has acknowledged that some students do not wish to be taught these things as part of their core activities, although it is unclear how significant these opinions are within the larger student group (Allan and Clarke 2007). Our small research study indicates some confident students are vocal and articulate in their resistance to such initiatives. While it is argued that embedded study skills and changes to learning and teaching strategies potentially benefit large groups of students, there is no sure way of necessarily gaining positive feedback from significantly large numbers of students as some students do not believe they need learning support, or they believe they can acquire the necessary skills at the appropriate moment. Embedded learning support, therefore, potentially leaves some students feeling in need of more significant challenges. Learning and teaching strategies would therefore need to provide appropriate challenges and stimuli to those who consider themselves experienced and skilled. In contrast, among those for whom the transition is more fraught with issues of confidence and ability to cope, there was a belief that core skills acquisition had a proper place within the first year experience. This was seen as part of the need for academic staff to play a far greater role in guiding students through the transition, facilitating and encouraging the shift from dependency to independence in learning.

Conclusion

This research has provided a number of illuminating insights into the student experience of learning support and expectations surrounding its provision. While drawing upon a comparatively small group of third year students, the focus group generated a varied discussion reflecting the diversity of student concerns and facilitated ascertaining student preferences for learning support.

Of some concern was the finding that few of the numerous manifestations of learning support were widely known across the sample student group; publicity for these services ranked highest in priority in our focus group. Even if one acknowledges that some students are quite happy and more than able to flourish without learning support, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that awareness of support needs to be recognised as a university-wide responsibility to ensure that all students know what is available. How to pass information to students about services, though, is difficult to resolve, especially as students are bombarded with information and there is the risk of duplicating content across modules or programmes if information is provided during taught time. In addition, the question of embedding study skills and/or changing teaching and learning strategies to suit a greater diversity of learners needs to be addressed.

It is important to acknowledge the significance of academic staff to students, especially in a WP context. Such students, as well as some traditional entrants, regard module tutors as the preferred source of learning support almost whatever the nature of the support required. Issues are raised as to how students' sense of security can be developed to move away from dependence upon the module tutor to more participation in the central services offered and greater independence in the long term. For those participating in this study it appeared that the further the locus of support moves from within the programme towards central provision, the more difficult it becomes to engender student involvement (and the harder it is to provide subject and context specific advice).

If findings are correct and some students do not consider themselves as independent learners by the end of their third year of study, then the university would need to consider the effectiveness of its pedagogy. Dependence upon the tutor, in the minds of this research team, reveals how HE has failed to be transformative for some students and it is likely that there will be employment implications for these students. The feedback provided by the students in facilitating the move from 'dependence to independence' feels significant in this regard. Providing students with a model of behaviour, expectations and outcomes for them personally and academically seems crucial for students who have less confidence, and regard for their own abilities: such notions are supported by WP literature and initiatives in WP learning and teaching (Bowl, 2003). Making the pedagogies of HE transparent and managing student expectations could facilitate students to undertake deep learning in relation to their subject. The notion of a 'quick fix' for students on programmes that aim to 'furnish a life' (Cunnick in Bate 2009: 107) poses a dilemma over the conflict between students' expectations and the expectations of academic staff: deep learning, for example, often requires risk taking, creativity of thought and the ability to draw upon and integrate a number of skills. Just as there are few short routes to success for students, there are few short routes to resolving how to facilitate deep learning that utilizes and develops these skills for students in a supportive environment.

This research indicates that embedding study skills and adopting teaching and learning strategies that make the pedagogies of HE transparent would be welcomed by some students and would work towards a fairer learning environment in which a greater number of students could succeed. Moreover, transparency regarding the HE environment and its pedagogies may well enable more students to become independent and obtain subsequent graduate employment. Indeed, such measures would engage with the students' request for support 'that moves from the general to the specific' as well as providing guidance on moving from dependence to independence. Adopting different learning and teaching strategies and embedding study skills, though, poses significant pedagogical challenges to academic tutors and raises issues of training (Thomas 2005: 100).

Implementing learning and teaching strategies which provide stimulus and appropriate challenges for all students (whether confident learners, ready for independence or not) is necessary to make such initiatives worthwhile and satisfactory to significant numbers of learners. Programmes also need to address how and when students should aim to be independent. This is difficult, as balancing learning/academic support with the development of individual students requires sensitivity and an awareness of the issues surrounding the transition from dependence to independence (and it is also anticipated that academic staff will have varying expectations about appropriate levels of independence). Indeed, one of the challenges that such an approach implies is that the transition point will vary from individual to individual and learning and teaching initiatives will therefore need to cater for a range of rates of progress. Adopting pedagogies where confidence and a broad range of skills can be engendered whilst ensuring the identification, measurement and progress of the students would seem to be needed here.

In the short term, while academic tutors and learning support staff consider the implications of such challenges, parity of access to Academic Learning Support Assistants can at least support those students who are prepared to seek assistance from elsewhere and integrate key skills into their studies. It was clear that ALSAs specific to subject areas were necessary to avoid providing overly general advice to students and incorrect advice not appropriate to the subject discipline. Learning support – provided by those who are specialists in their field – can , in the short term, work in tandem to help students achieve the competent standards of work, but it is clear that learning and teaching strategies in the longer term need to cater for the increasing diversity of students in the HE environment.

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