

Responding to student needs - co-responsibility between students and institutions

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Following the expansion of higher education in the UK there has been increasing focus on the ways in which higher education institutions should support students. In addition, the current changes in funding for higher education in the UK will affect the finances of both institutions and students (Carrel, 2011; Cable and Willets, 2010), making the decision to embark on a journey through a higher education programme a careful and considered one. Decisions for students relate to whether to start such a journey in the first place and, if so, which course they should take and what mode of study they might adopt. The choices for institutions are in respect of what they are prepared to provide by way of programmes, courses, resources and support, in line with their own specific goals and missions (van Vught, 2008). This paper suggests that responsibility for meeting the needs of students has to be shared between higher education institutions and students themselves. The paper considers whether students should be developing autonomy as an attribute before and during their time at university or college and how this might be done.

Student needs

Student needs come in a variety of guises. From the basic personal needs of having somewhere to live, financial security and sustenance, through emotional, social and everyday living interaction requirements, to academic support to assist them through their learning journey. This is particularly relevant to the Graduates for the 21st Century Enhancement Theme because, in order to enhance the graduate abilities of our students, we need to support them in developing these through both academic activities and activities that fall outside of the normal curriculum.

The variety of types of students that we see in UK higher education institutions makes the identification of needs for specific students quite a difficult task, and the combinations of initiatives that have to be considered to deal with the plethora of needs is enormous. Students are diverse: male and female, young and old, home and international, working and non-working, full-time and part-time, religious or not; student diversity is much more representative of the population at large than it was a generation ago. It is obvious that there is no longer a 'typical' student (Mullen, 2010). Institutions have attempted to recognise the variety of needs of students and put in place systems and processes, both academic and personal, to allow students to access and take advantage of the assistance, advice and general support available to help them cope with the difficult, but hopefully motivational, journey through their studies.

In the work done last year (2009-10) as part of the current Enhancement Theme and in respect of the earlier Theme, Responding to Student Needs, it was discovered that, although institutions have improved their support networks, there are still issues in responding to the needs of all students that need attention (Harris, 2010). It was also found - consistent with recent thinking about the biopsychology of motivation - that 'needs' and 'wants' are quite different things (Berridge 2004).



This suggests that perhaps there is a need to identify and separate these different entities to ensure priority attention where it is most needed.

Institutions and students - shared responsibility

It is unrealistic to assume that institutions can take sole responsibility for responding to the needs of students. Nevertheless, institutions have a critical role not just in delivering support for students' needs but in articulating what those needs might be - given that study in higher education develops skills acquired earlier, and will require skills unfamiliar to students, institutions themselves must be prepared to help students identify what their needs actually are. That being said, only students themselves must then take the initiative to cater for these. The issue is one of developing a partnership to cater for needs (Joint Task Force in Student Learning, 1998) that are contextualised in the institution's own mission and goals, directing resources and support for students as appropriate.

A corollary of this is a requirement to develop academic staff so that they can, for example, provide appropriate and adequate feedback, understand the diverse needs of students, and are able to alter their own practice to cater for these differences in so far as is reasonable, ensuring their own behaviour and attitudes are consistent with good teaching and learning (Harris, 2010). Institutions should also assist students in recognising that they have a responsibility to address their own needs, as many come to university not understanding fully the differences between secondary and tertiary education (Straka, 2008/9). It is the institutions' responsibility to enable this.

This integrated approach is critical to success in responding to student needs and in being able to do so effectively and efficiently, creating an ethos of partnership for learning (Davis and Murell, 1993). Institutions clearly have a responsibility to provide for student needs: this is not in question. However, students must play their part in dealing with their own needs and, importantly, in recognising the difference between needs - the essential - and their wants - those things that are desirable but not essential.

What can students do before arriving in higher education to prepare themselves for the experience - to meet needs in advance, as it were?

- Develop the right underpinning for the course they want.
- Understand the course they want to take and why they want to take it.
- Take the right course, not the only one that still has spaces.
- Understand the objectives and passions of the institution they are entering.
- Visit the institution and talk to academics and support staff.
- Work with their school to get the necessary experience.
- Develop a relevant knowledge base and plan ahead.

They can obviously be assisted in this preparation by having good interactions with the institution they are to join, but in addition by teachers, by parents or through employer interaction (if he/she is a work-based student). In thinking proactively about what they might need, the independent thinking which is required at university and is generally an attribute of a well-rounded graduate begins to be established.

Some further thoughts

At the Enhancement Themes conference in March 2011, the author facilitated a discussion to enable additional thoughts to be gained in this area. Sixteen participants - including the author, students, student support, student-associated staff and two academics - discussed the following contestable statements.

- 1 In general, students should be taking more responsibility for responding to their own learning and development needs. They are relying too much on what institutions will do for them.

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- 2 It is the higher education institutions' duty to provide for the needs of all students. They should be providing what students need to be successful.
 - 3 There are many initiatives that we (institutions) can take to make students more autonomous and to take more responsibility for using their feedback effectively.
 - 4 Students can easily take steps to be more autonomous and less dependent on others. If they did they would not only benefit themselves but also the institution at which they are studying.

While not having been subjected to the rigour of scientific analysis, the outcomes of the discussion are nevertheless interesting, and support the 'interactive' model of meeting student needs described above.

(1) It was generally agreed that students should be taking more responsibility, but that they did not rely too heavily on institutions. It was considered that the nature of the relationship between students and institutions has changed over the years and students need, and have the right, to rely on institutions to guide them through their journey. It was suggested that, as they do not 'know' what they do not know, reliance on those who do is natural.

(2) It was considered appropriate that institutions should be providing for all needs of all students, but this duty did not necessarily expand to meet the 'wants' of students, which were recognised as generally different.

(3) This was the most consensual question, and all participants agreed that institutions can take many initiatives to assist students to become autonomous and to be successful. Peer support was considered one of the ways that this can be facilitated, and indeed, using a range of learning, teaching and assessment styles was considered potentially very beneficial.

(4) This caused most controversy and the most divided response, with one participant agreeing, nine partially agreeing and five disagreeing. The word causing concern was 'easily'. While it was considered that students could take more steps to be more autonomous, these were not necessarily easy steps. Issues surrounding the knowledge base, attributes and skills of students on entering higher education, institutional language, systems and protocols, the availability of academic assistance, and prior knowledge, experience and guidance before university attendance were all areas that participants considered made this a difficult task for students. It was considered rather unrealistic and unfair to expect students to take more control of their own learning without the learning that is gained by being part of the system of higher education. It was also considered that this control and autonomy would develop over the years, with the third and fourth level students expected to be much more autonomous than those in first and second. This first and second year/level aspect for direct entrant students to the third and fourth years was also an issue that had to be considered. Schools and colleges were considered vital components in preparing students to be autonomous learners and to understand what higher education is all about, and communication by institutions with schools and colleges was considered an essential but neglected aspect of assisting students to become autonomous academic learners.

Conclusions

Students and institutions are facing ever-increasing demands and financial constraints, but, despite this, student autonomy in addressing their own needs is considered an essential attribute of a successful student; they should be demanding of their institutions and not accept sub-standard provision. Institutions must continue to develop their support services from both personal and academic perspectives, and put in place the necessary accessible support for the issues that they can cater for, and for the students that they accept onto their programmes. They must provide this support if they want successful students. It is also considered that institutions should assist their students in finding ways to get remaining support if it is not provided in-house and is available elsewhere.

There is no suggestion that institutions should pamper students, but they need to understand that it is they who have the experience and knowledge to assist students to be successful and so they should, in general, be the leading and guiding light in this respect. Institutions should, however, also challenge their students to take the steps necessary to ensure that their own expectations are met and be responsible and independent, taking a pivotal role in their own development and in responding to their own needs. Helping students understand what institutions can and cannot do for them is essential.

In addition to the essential development of integrated working of staff in institutions, there needs also to be integrated working between students and staff to ensure a well-rounded understanding of how student needs can be catered for. This extends to communicating and working with colleges and schools to build up the essential knowledge bases, both academic and procedural, that students need when entering what for them is a new world.

The debate on who is responsible for addressing student needs is not straightforward, as can be seen from the foregoing. However, according to Covey (2004, p71),

'...we are responsible for our own lives. Our behavior is a function of our decisions, not our conditions. We can subordinate our feelings to values. We have the initiative and the responsibility to make things happen.'

While this paper argues that students have to realise that they have to make what they want happen, and in order to get what they want they need to work for it, it is recognised that this is neither a consensual opinion nor an easy option. Working together though, it appears possible to respond to the majority of the needs of most students, while still encouraging the gradual development of student autonomy.

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