

perspective

The evolution of student services in the UK

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Introduction

There is limited literature that looks at the evolution of student services in the UK and their effectiveness in providing student support. Student support is broadly defined as all services which support students to learn (Thomas et al 2002). The literature available often discusses 'student services' and 'student support' together and the words are used interchangeably. However, I would argue that student support comprises two strands which are 'academic' and 'non-academic'. It is important from the outset of this paper to attempt to define the differences between these two strands when discussing the evolution of student services.

I would define academic support as being mainly provided by academics with administrative back-up and covering academic issues such as learning and teaching. This support is primarily delivered via home teaching units such as faculties, schools and departments. There are some exceptions to the rule. For example, in some universities and colleges (referred to as universities hereafter), study skills, that traditionally come under the umbrella of academic support,



fall under the remit of student services. I will talk more about the role these staff perform later on in the paper.

Non-academic support can be delivered by units such as student services and academic and non-academic staff at faculty/departmental and school level (eg course administrators, personal tutors). Academic and non-academic support are essential

mechanisms in providing holistic student support. In this paper, I will primarily be talking about non-academic support delivered by student services.

In today's higher education (HE) environment student services play a substantial role in the life of the student and within a university's planning team when developing strategies for improving the student experience. However, this has not always been the case. Looking at the literature available and talking to colleagues who have worked in student services, together with my twenty years of experience in higher education, lead me to conclude that the aims of this paper should be threefold. First, to look at the evolution of student services over the past thirty years resulting from government legislation, social pressures and trends, a change in the student body and an increase in student expectations. Second, to discuss the importance of the role, and, third, to highlight the challenges faced by student services in the coming years.

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The structure and role of student services

If you ask students to list the functions provided by 'student services' or 'student affairs' (the term often used in the USA), you are likely to get some of the following broad responses:

- advice for international students;
- chaplaincy;
- dyslexia and disability support;
- financial advice;
- health and counselling;
- language support;
- dealing with student complaints;
- central university staff.

The role of student services today is much broader than this though. Not only does it deliver 'safety net' services such as those listed above but it can also provide 'general well being' services such as:

- accommodation;
- careers advice;
- childcare;
- enrolment and registration;
- entertainment (*eg* bars);
- retail services (*eg* coffee and book shops, onsite shops such as supermarkets);
- sports and recreation;
- study skills;
- students' union.

Student services may even collaborate with colleagues responsible for emergency and security activities. Ultimately though, how an institution defines the role of student services determines the types of services provided whilst the service provision tends to remain non-academic in nature.

The importance of non-academic support

National and international literature suggests that there is a direct link between a student's ability to succeed in their studies and the non-academic support they receive for their 'out-of-class experiences' (Tinto 1993, Yorke and Longden 2004, Pascarella and Terenzini 2005). Research also suggests that non-academic support provided by student services plays an important role in contributing to increasing, and widening, participation in HE, which is an activity supported by governments across the western world (Thomas et al 2002, Universities UK 2002, Morgan 2012). It is also said to aid the retention of students and assist in the delivery of an enhanced student experience across the student lifecycle (Powney 2002, May and Bousted 2003, Morgan 2012). However, it is difficult to quantify the effectiveness of the non-academic support provided by units such as student services because they are not solely responsible for the student experience or retention. Also, there is a lack of institutional and national research into evaluation and monitoring of student services activities (Thomas et al 2002).

As a practitioner responsible for improving the student experience across the student lifecycle, I would argue that 'safety net' and 'general well being' services in the life of the student are underestimated, especially the 'general well being' ones. It can often be these services that prevent students from needing the 'safety net' services. For example, over the years I have witnessed a number of students becoming depressed and withdrawing from their course because of the loneliness they had experienced. Provision such as well-designed accommodation with social

space encouraging students to network, and coffee shops on campus providing students with opportunities to make friends and integrate, can help in reducing the reliance of students on 'safety net' services.

The development of modern student services

Some commentators in the USA argue that the role of student services in HE can be traced back as far as the mid-seventeenth century but that modern student services have really developed since the mid-twentieth century (Nuss 2003). The structure and role of student services in UK universities has evolved over many years and I would argue that the phases of development have reflected social pressures and trends and government legislation. In the 1950s and 1960s, fewer than 7% of eighteen-year-olds went to university, with the majority of students being male (Pugsley 2004). Universities undertook the role of 'in loco parentis' because the age of majority was twenty-one. This meant that they took responsibility for the student in the absence of the parent. University life was very focused around the learning and teaching experience, and academic and pastoral support was often provided by a student's tutor and the 'manager' in the hall of residence. Students' lives appeared more regulated. For example, residences were gender segregated and rules such as curfews, especially for female students, were imposed. The provision of halls of residence was part of traditional university educational support (Pavey 2011).

However, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, UK and European society started to change. People demanded more rights and government introduced legislation impacting on what we did and how we lived.

Social pressures

One of the demands of citizens was to reduce the age of majority from twenty-one to eighteen years of age. This happened in the UK on 1 January 1970 with many European countries following soon after. The 'in loco parentis' responsibility of the university had been waning but the legislation removed all legal responsibility. However, universities did not abandon their cultural role of looking after students. Instead, they developed it to provide a different type of service that reflected the needs of the new student entering university. Traditional universities developed their portfolio of student services provision more quickly than the polytechnics who had a different educational approach and body of students. Traditional universities used non-academic support such as accommodation, sports facilities and 'general well being' services as recruitment tools. Today, all universities advertise these services in their attempt to recruit students especially those from overseas.

Most polytechnics were formed during the expansion of HE in the 1960s. They did not have degree-awarding powers and were often seen as ranking below universities in the provision of higher education. Polytechnic students tended to be local and entered tertiary education with low A-level grades or alternative entry qualifications such as BTEC diplomas. The majority of working-class and ethnic minority students in HE attended polytechnics rather than traditional universities (Archer et al 2003, Tolley and Rundel 2006). Polytechnics tended not to recruit international students, have onsite halls of residence or extensive student services provision. When polytechnics obtained university status in the early 1990s as a result of the Higher and Further Education Act of 1992, they appeared to quickly develop modern non-academic support services enabling them to compete with traditional universities in providing a holistic student experience. As a mature student at a polytechnic in the late 1980s, I was very envious of the academic and non-academic facilities available to my peers attending the redbrick university in my home town. I did not get a place at the 'university' because it tended not to recruit mature students with low A-level grades.

Polytechnics became known as new universities but the student body entering them was primarily the same as before. As a result of the legislation, the number of universities increased from forty-eight in 1984 to 106 by 2007 (Brennan and Shah 2011). Many commentators argue though that although 'the 1992 act was heralded as removing the binary divide between universities and polytechnics . . . a hierarchy of differential institutional status and resource levels persist' (Leathwood and Read 2009: 57).

Government legislation

As well as social pressure, I would argue that the development of student services has been driven by Government legislation. Specific higher education legislation such as the Higher Education Act of 1992, and a range of Government Acts, directly and indirectly impacted on how universities ran and developed policies and processes for recruiting and looking after their students. For example, the Health and Safety Act of 1974 resulted in universities having to ensure that laboratories and workshops where students took classes met safety standards. University accommodation had to comply with fire regulations. The Sex Discrimination Act in 1975 and the Race Relations Act of 1976 required universities to look at their access processes. The Mental Health Acts in 1983 and 2007 encouraged accessibility to mental health services and facilities for students whilst at university. The Housing Act of 1988 required universities with accommodation to deliver services in accordance with tenant management regulations. Basically, Government expected universities to be more mindful of 'customer needs' and their well being.

This approach has been underpinned by research suggesting that students, especially those considered at risk such as those from lower social classes, students with a disability or poor entry qualifications, are more likely to succeed with access to a broad range of support (Thomas et al 2002). The development of sector-wide performance indicators in 1992 and sector-wide statistical benchmarks in 1999 further increased university requirements to deliver a high standard of education (CHERI 2010). The funding agency for higher education institutions has also become more interested in the social and cultural side of the student experience at university. Today, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) is very prominent and dominant in the lives of institutions, requiring high standards of delivery and service across all services whether academic or non-academic. This trend is likely to be accentuated in the future with the publication of the Government's White paper entitled *Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System* (BIS 2011).

Social trends

Student services also appeared to develop alongside social trends occurring in society. For example, as counselling became more accessible on the NHS so students expected to be able to access counselling services within their chosen university. A second example is the inclusion in university sports timetables of recreational activities such as yoga, keep fit and dance and unusual sports such as martial arts and Tae Kwando as they became popular in society. Recreational activities were considered to be just as important as traditional sports to the well being of the student. The increasing number of female students has also made a difference in breaking down the physical education value of a conventional and traditional sports service. Today, it is not uncommon for university student services to provide students and staff with access to nutrition advice, stress management workshops and complementary therapies. Gyms and saunas are a standard facility in many universities today. Students have expected to access various facilities and services during their studies, and universities have felt obliged to deliver them.

Some universities also imported ideas from countries such as the USA where modern educational approaches and student services have evolved more rapidly. It has often been the UK universities that have a large number of international students who have been trailblazers by adopting new approaches to academic and non-academic support. These universities have influenced others through conferences and membership of professional bodies such as AMOSSHE, the UK Student Services Organisation, and the Association of University Administrators (AUA), thus enabling good practice and ideas to evolve and spread.

Social pressure and trends have also influenced other areas of university activities such as learning and teaching. New courses in certain subject areas have been born out of new social environments. In the early 1990s psychology became a popular A-level. At the same time there was a successful ITV drama entitled 'Cracker' which starred Robbie Coltrane as a criminal psychologist. These conditions led to the University of Portsmouth's developing a forensic psychology degree that became known as the 'cracker' course. Today, the increase in popularity of students enrolling onto physics and astronomy courses is not only attributed to the UK Government's approach to and investment in science, innovation and business but to the 'Brian Cox' phenomenon. (Brian Cox is the very popular physicist on BBC TV.)

As well as the changes in the student body, there have been changes in the way students study at university and their entry skill base

Changes in the student body

In the past twenty years, higher education in the western world has changed beyond all recognition in terms of the student body and the courses and services it offers. In part, this arises from the wish of many governments to improve their global industrial competitiveness (DTI 1998) and their position in the global higher education market (DfES 2003). Education has massified since the 1970s with the largest increase occurring between 2000 and 2008 (UNESCO 2009). It has also experienced 'wide-ification' (Morgan 2012) which is the widening of the student body in terms of demographics. The student body in higher education includes:

students from different ethnic groups and non-English speaking backgrounds, international, lower socio-economic backgrounds, mature aged students, students with disabilities, as well those for whom higher education is the first family experience (Crosling et al 2008: 1).

The feminisation and internationalisation of the student body and the increase in postgraduates studying at university have all impacted on the development of non-academic support. As well as the changes in the student body, there have been changes in the way students study at university and their entry skill base.

Students are studying in a more flexible way, whether that be undertaking part-time study; studying as a work-based or distance learner; or entering as a direct entry student. There are a multitude of reasons for this, including students needing to work to supplement their income whilst studying, family responsibilities and the cost of higher education. Part-time study is a growth area. Forty-three percent of the undergraduate student body in 2009–10 were studying part-time (HESA 2010). An increase in the diversity of study patterns is likely to continue with the advent of rising fee levels, especially in the UK.

Other changes include students entering university with non-traditional qualifications to assist governments' widening participation agenda. Traditional qualifications such as A-levels in the UK, Scholastic Aptitude Tests (SATs) and American College Testing (ACTS) in the USA and Equivalent National Tertiary Entrance Rank (ENTER) and Tertiary Entry Rank (TER) in Australia, are no longer the primary entry qualifications. The way the traditional entry qualifications are being taught has also changed with rote learning being common place, coursework as the main method of assessment and a change in the teaching of critical and analytical skills (Morgan 2012). The massification of higher education has increased the opportunities for students to study abroad. The UK is the second largest host of students who study abroad (UNESCO 2009). However, with the impending increase in student fees in 2012, our European and international colleagues may well see more UK students choosing to study in their institutions where the fees will be substantially lower.

Student expectations

Alongside the massification and diversification of higher education, HE has been affected by the increase in society of consumer rights. In today's society, consumers want the best price and value for money and this extends to higher education. Government reports such as the recent White Paper (BIS 2011) reinforce the sector's responsibility for delivering a quality experience in a timely and responsive manner. 'As graduates are asked to contribute more than they do at present, the higher education sector should be more responsive to their choices and continuously improve the design and content of courses and the quality of their academic experience' (BIS 2011: 14).

The move towards students contributing to their higher education experience in the UK began at the start of the 1990s with the introduction of loans instead of grants for living costs. Slowly, students have been required to shoulder even more of the costs of their studies. By 2012, students in England (not Scotland or Wales) will be required to pay fees of approximately £9,000 a year on top of their living costs. It is hardly surprising that as the burden of

student debt has increased over the years, and students have demanded more from universities in terms of the quality, type and amount of provision and support they receive. An example is the provision of accommodation. Standards and rents of university accommodation have risen dramatically. Almost all new university housing is en-suite, something that only a generation ago, would have been seen as a luxury rather than the standard.

The impact of these changes on student services and the delivery of services

Social pressures and trends and government legislation have all impacted on, and, shaped non-academic support and the structure and role of student services in the past thirty years. Student services have undergone a significant transformation and grown exponentially. Non-academic support is hardly recognisable compared with the support provided in the 1950s and 1960s. Universities have chosen, for complex reasons but partly to do with competition for status, to invest large sums of capital and revenue outside the academic area. Universities and governments do not like students to fail or drop out of their course.

Impact of these changes

As student numbers have increased so has the ratio of students requiring specific help and support.

Greater student numbers have led to increases in:

- the percentage entering with disabilities and learning needs;
- the number of international students needing language support and quality accommodation (and prepared to pay for it!);
- mature, first-generation and female students who are likely to need extra study skill support and childcare;
- the percentage from lower socioeconomic groups requiring financial advice and assistance;
- pressure on the enrolment process especially for international students with immigration requirements;
- space facility pressures whether academic, study or social;
- complaints about academic and support services.

The increase in collaboration with partner institutions, part-time study, and distance and work-based learning provides structural challenges for student services in delivering their service provision. They have to provide non-academic support for students registered at one institution but receiving their instruction from a partner institution. This is further complicated when the partner institution is situated in another part of the country or abroad.

Student services are also involved in developing and providing the mechanisms for supporting students studying part-time during the evening. Part-time students are entitled to a similar student experience and access to the same support facilities to help them succeed as full-time students receive.

The traditional delivery of student services provision

Universities have professionalised many of their non-academic support services especially those delivered by student services. Over the years, there has been a move from the provision of non-academic support by 'amateurs' to 'professionals'. Dedicated and trained professional services staff such as counsellors, careers advisers, housing specialists, and finance experts have been recruited to deliver focused quality advice and support. And throughout their development student services have generally stayed within the boundaries of developing non-academic support, leaving academic support primarily in the domain of faculty academic staff.

Student services have tended to operate and deliver their provision centrally, and are commonly situated away from the academic home unit of the student (*eg* school, department, faculty). This silo structure in delivering student support has been a common approach in universities. Some institutions have adopted a 'one-stop shop' or a 'student services interaction area' approach where all or most of the services within student services reside under one roof. The advantage in using this approach is that students have access to all services in one place with the promise of confidentiality and minimal stigmatisation. For staff, advising students where to go and making referrals are made simple. It was common for students to be given student services information at the start of their course in anticipation that they might access some of the services at some point in their studies.

The student experience today requires students to be supported through every stage of their academic and personal journey at university

Delivering effective student services in the future

The student experience today requires students to be supported through every stage of their academic and

personal journey at university and they need their academic and non-academic support to be interlinked in order to succeed. Because of the traditional demarcation of academic and non-academic support roles, it has been very easy for other university units such as faculties, departments and schools to side-step responsibility and delegate delivery of most of the non-academic support to central units such as student services. However, there is an increasing realisation that effective non-academic student support should:

- be delivered at the student's home unit level;
- occur throughout the lifecycle of the student;
- be integrated with some elements of academic support (Thomas et al 2002, Morgan 2012).

Delivery at home unit level

As a practitioner who has worked at university and faculty level, I see the home unit as a particularly important conduit in getting different types of support to students because it tends to act as the first port of call for the provision of academic welfare and support (eg student support officers, course administrators and academic personal tutors). Therefore, I believe that it is essential that units such as student services use the home unit to advertise and even deliver services directly to students. It is becoming more common for student services to bring non-academic support via 'drop-in' sessions to the student within the home unit instead of requiring them to visit a central office. This 'outreach' approach is a positive one especially where student services are on a different site from a student's home unit. It also provides staff in the home unit with a student services presence. In some universities there is a move away from the silo approach as the main method of delivery and towards the adoption of a combination of the two.

Pro-activity throughout the student lifecycle

Many non-academic support services such as those delivered by student services can be reactive rather than proactive in their delivery. For example, the careers service has often been reactive and would commonly support students when they sought employment advice in their final year of study. However, students today are more 'outcome' focused before they start their studies. Many universities are now proactively managing this expectation by involving careers units throughout the student lifecycle. Careers or employability units are increasingly participating in recruitment and admissions activities by providing information in prospectuses, on websites and at open days about how a degree can improve a person's job prospects. Today, student services are very evident throughout the student lifecycle at university and are

quite effective in advertising their service provision to students.

Integrating non-academic support and academic support activities

The roles and boundaries of many academic and non-academic activities that students undertake or participate in today have started to become blurred. There is an increasing recognition by academic and non-academic staff that they need to work together to create cross-functional partnerships in order to support and equip students with key skills (Thomas et al 2002, Morgan 2012) and generally enhance student learning and institutional effectiveness.

Academics have been engaged in non-academic support for a while but it has not been so common for non-academic support staff to engage in academic activities. However, this is now starting to change. For example, colleagues from the careers service are becoming involved in teaching employability skills to students as part of the curriculum. It is also not uncommon to find colleagues from the learning resources centre (LRC: library) teaching study skills on compulsory courses even though they are not 'academics' and traditionally provide non-academic support. This approach is extending to other non-academic support activities because it is increasingly being recognised that

the link between student support and teaching and learning strategies is seen as 'the heart of the issue' by the majority of respondents. Integration into teaching and learning and the embedding of inclusive practice into academic departments is clearly seen by many as the way forward for student services (Thomas et al 2002: 18).

However, commentators suggest that to do this comprehensively and effectively is 'complex, and takes time, energy, and commitment' (Schuh and Whitt 1999: 7).

Future challenges

The landscape of higher education in the UK has dramatically changed and continues to evolve. In light of the changes discussed in this paper, what are the future challenges for managers designing, developing and delivering non-academic support?

I believe that higher education in the UK is at a major crossroads in terms of how it develops its provision. The increasing pressures facing HEIs, especially those in England, is resulting in universities questioning whether they can maintain their current student support activities, especially the non-academic ones. As teaching is primarily the core business of most educational institutions, it is understandable that university

management teams are seeking to reduce and even cut non-academic student support.

I believe that institutions cutting or reducing non-academic support would be a huge error of judgement as I firmly believe that student services deliver critical support to a diverse student body, they enhance the student experience and they play an important role in student retention. If universities continue to recruit more students from non-traditional backgrounds, who invariably require a range of academic and non-academic support, then we have a moral duty to deliver the support to enable these students to succeed. We cannot go back to treating our diverse student body as a homogeneous group in order to save money.

However, although I would object to cuts and a reduction in non-academic student support, I feel strongly that the current delivery and function of non-academic support need to be reevaluated, assessed and adapted in order to survive and prosper.

Revaluation and assessment

Non-academic student support, such as that delivered by student support services, need to demonstrate its value through evaluation and monitoring (CHERI 2010). The AMOSSHE tool kit is a valuable tool for universities and will contribute significantly to the evidence base for the value and impact of student services in the HE (CHERI 2010). However, it is critical that university managers do not take the findings from this evaluation activity and allow it alone to dictate university policy and strategy. Measuring the benefit of non-academic student support in relation to the student experience and its impact on retention is complex. Senior managers must understand that non-academic support is one strand of provision in the student experience. This evaluation must be triangulated with evaluation results from other activities such as learning and teaching and 'in-house' student experience research which can, if done well, effectively flesh out student satisfaction and reasons for perseverance.

Evaluation and monitoring will also require a change in the mindset of colleagues who work in this area. Although they may hold the intrinsic belief that the 'services are of benefit', this conviction must be substantiated. Resources and time will need to be found to train staff to undertake evaluation and monitoring activities. As part of the evaluation and assessment process, managers of non-academic student support activities, whether delivered by student services or the faculty, need to 'identify how they contribute to the mission of the university and determine what outcome measures can demonstrate this contribution' (Clark and Mason 2001: 34). This activity needs to be led and driven by senior university managers who understand and are committed to improving the student experience across the student lifecycle.

Consolidation of the delivery of student support activities

One advantage of evaluating and assessing services is that universities can start to merge activities provided by different university departments. Earlier I gave the example of LRC staff teaching on modules. There needs to be more integration of non-academic and academic activities such as this. More non-academic staff will undertake a 'hybrid' role as they straddle different activities. There is no reason why the careers unit needs to be a silo unit based in a large dedicated building on a campus. Subject-based employability co-ordinators, managed by the careers unit, could be based in the faculties. This would not only save money on building-related costs but it would put the provision of the service at the heart of a student's life whilst at university. It is likely that UK Government policy will require institutions in England to increase the partnership approach between academic and non-academic support and will require it to be led by an effective management structure.

In any evaluation, the effectiveness of the management structure needs to be examined. A criticism levelled at student services is that they 'may be excellent at building good relationships with students that improve learning but less adept at creating a management structure that enhances it' (Doyle 2004: 388). Operating costs can be substantially reduced if the management of those processes is efficient.

Collaboration with business

Universities have tended to manage the 'safety net' and 'general well being' services themselves. Although profit can be made on the 'general well being' services such as accommodation and retail, they are still costly to operate. Some universities have been contracting out cleaning and accommodation services for many years. But we are now starting to see 'general well being' services on campus being contracted out to the private sector. High street supermarkets such as Tesco, and coffee shops such as Starbucks, are replacing university retail shops on campuses. I think this is a positive development for a university, the student and the high street companies as long as the university has an agreement with the companies that their staff will be recruited from the university's student body. Using this approach, companies have staff which reflect the student body, students are provided with an opportunity to gain employment and employability skills, and universities can generate income through rents. It also provides useful marketing material for the university to show that its 'environment' reflects that of wider society. Universities that do not have sports facilities may be able to negotiate 'deals' with local providers thus extending their 'service provision'.

Contracting out 'safety net services' is more problematic. These services have expanded substantially in the past fifteen years owing to student demand. If a

university has a large enough student body, it may be able to engage in talks with the local primary care trust with a view to having an NHS one-stop shop on campus. It could also educate the student body to utilise free health advice via the internet such as NHS Direct.

Changes in delivery patterns

More students than ever before are deciding to study in a flexible way. This pattern amongst English students is likely to increase with the onset of the fees increase in 2012. It is also likely that the new fees regime may well encourage some universities to implement and deliver the much-debated and talked-about two-year degree. Different course delivery patterns demand different student support provision whether courses are full-time or part-time, delivered at the 'home' university, at a partner institution or via remote learning. All students are entitled to the same support. Creative and innovative methods of support will need to be designed and the services will have to be delivered by staff who can work flexibly to fit around the needs of the student rather than the student fitting around the needs of the university.

Conclusion

Students will choose the institution that provides best value for money, a high-quality student experience made up of both academic and non-academic activities and a degree that is current and recognised in their potential workplaces. They expect and deserve a quality experience. If we do not provide this then we will not attract students at a time when students, particularly in the UK, are making tough decisions about whether to study at university or not. We need to evaluate and assess the past in order to build the foundations in the present that create innovative and efficient services in the future.

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