

Developing learners at Glasgow Caledonian University: the Effective Learning Service response

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Glasgow Caledonian University (GCU), formerly Glasgow College of Technology, merged with The Queen's College, Glasgow in 1992 when it gained university status. The university has a total student population of over 14,500 students - 60.2% female and 39.8% male (GCU Prospectus 2003). Of those, 80% study full-time, across eight academic schools delivering programmes with a strong vocational orientation. The university is situated on one campus utilising five teaching blocks.

Glasgow Caledonian University has been recognised as “responding well to the policy of widening participation, being above its Benchmark for young entrants from Social Classes IIIM, IV and V, for students from low participation neighbourhoods and for mature students from low participation neighbourhoods with no previous experience of higher education” (Abbott, 2000, p1). In the academic year of 2000/2001, 36% of those on programmes represented classes III, IV and V against a national benchmark of 30% and 28% came from low participation neighbourhoods, against a national benchmark of 15% (Abbott, 2003, p5). Furthermore 21.4% of all full-time undergraduate students are in receipt of Higher National qualifications, the majority of whom enter at second or third level. In common with other institutions however, this success in widening participation is associated with a failure in retention of students (Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2000 cited in Foster et al. 2002). Nonetheless, evidence from some universities indicates success in both widening participation and the proportion of students completing (Abbott 2000). This suggests that widening participation does not preclude enabling a high proportion of students to succeed. In 1999/2000 for example, progression and retention increased for level one GCU students from 79.0% to 84.8% for 2000/2001.

In its response to widening participation it may be argued that Glasgow Caledonian University has adopted a developmental model of learning as proposed by Cottrell. If all our students have study needs, it is more beneficial to adopt a developmental model of learning where additional support, skills modules or peer support are *part of a multifaceted and integrated approach* rather than its focus. (Cottrell 2001: 43).

In part this has been reflected in the establishment of the Effective Learning Service (ELS), one of several institutional interventions aiming to reduce student withdrawal and enhance learning as part of an integrated approach. However, centralised services such as the ELS may be criticised or perceived as being detached or separate from the teaching activities of departments (Haggis and Pouget, 2002), furthermore adopting a remedial model of learning, where support is delivered to students deemed to have additional needs or who are regarded to be ‘in deficit’. Within this context the following briefly discusses why across its activities, the ELS has adopted a learning development as opposed to a deficit model. The effectiveness of the service’s role and its contribution to integrating learner support are evaluated.

The key issue for institutions such as GCU has been how to respond effectively and develop appropriate support to meet the diverse range of learning experiences and needs (Sutherland, 2003) that widening participation has created and the delivery of such support is recognised as being complex and multi-factorial (Gutteridge, 2001). In the retention of non-standard students and typical for an institution as GCU, a range of underlying issues relating to a broad

diversity in prior learning experiences and learning skills has had to be addressed (Sutherland, 2003). This is in common with other findings where in a study of non-completion in Irish universities for example; Morgan et al. (2001) refer to a range of institutional initiatives and innovations aiming to respond to such diversity and improve retention. Similarly HEFCE (2002) has reported on a range of initiatives. Central to these have been the development of 'integrated supportive networks' for the learner (Symonds, 2002: p66). Such initiatives have recognised the need for teaching strategies, which are holistic (Symonds, 2002) and multi-faceted, aiming to promote retention and develop autonomous learners within supportive teaching environments (Greer, 2002).

These approaches are mirrored at GCU in its university-wide approach where all eight academic schools have planned and implemented a range of progression and retention initiatives. These have employed a variety of strategies at modular and programme level. The effectiveness of these can be attributed in part to the adoption of key principles of a learning development model. The model proposes that skills are developed over time as part of a wider process of personal, academic and professional development; an inclusive approach is core to the model, within which all students can improve their learning rather than there being a few in need of remedial support. Learning development and skills enhancement are seen as the responsibility of all staff, with recognition that there will be different levels of involvement in this (Cottrell, 2001). The work of the ELS is also informed by these key principles as reflected across its activities.

The service is seeking to develop skills within wider cross-university processes. To do so the ELS is increasingly building on and developing strong links with academic schools in supporting their existing and future retention and progression initiatives. Within these there has been a strong emphasis on the development of core skills. This has led the ELS to working closely with academic staff in the Schools of Computing and Mathematics, Business, Engineering Science and Design, Law and Social Sciences, Health and Social Care and Nursing Midwifery and Community Health, in the delivery of a range of tailored subject-specific workshops. At the request of staff, these have covered areas such as essay planning and critical analysis for Nursing essays; structuring and writing Engineering Design reports; reflecting on learning with Engineers and Podiatrists and analysing case studies with Business students.

Improving induction activities and specifically responding to the learning needs of direct entry students coming from colleges of further education into levels two and three of degree programmes has also been a core aspect of GCU retention strategies. The ELS has a key role in this, by planning and delivering week-long transition programmes for direct entry students. These aim to be subject specific and liaison with Schools has informed their content. They have also sought to raise awareness of the key differences and expectations between FE and HE learning.

To some extent these developments demonstrate that although centralised, the ELS is well placed to offer support to academic departments and their students in learning development. Opportunities for formal links and joint initiatives like this may be facilitated further through the university's "hub and spokes" approach (Abbott, 2003). The university's Academic Practice Unit currently uses this approach to support the role of all staff at GCU involved in academic roles as managers and facilitators of students' learning. The Unit delivers staff development activities, which cover key topics of importance to academic staff. In its day-to-day work with students from across an increasingly broad range of subject disciplines, the ELS may have a complementary role within this hub and spokes approach, informing those involved in staff development, sharing learning and teaching experiences with Schools and Support Services.

Evaluation of the Service

The Effective Learning Service operates from a central base in the University's library and staff work with students from all of the eight Schools irrespective of their level or subject. Students access the service primarily in four ways: by attending workshops that are on offer to all students throughout the university and as discussed previously, by workshops that are context based. They also may make individual appointments. The latter may also be in the format of a small group of students. Students may collect leaflets from an unmanned stand, which is available to all whenever the library is open.

The students attending individual appointments are formally registered with the ELS. The majority of the students using the service are full-time (92%), and 35% are first level. Of the remaining students, 18% and 25% are second and third level respectively. The latter figure is higher as the university attracts a number of students who enter the university as direct entry candidates.

At the time of writing, 3500 students are either registered or users of the service, in the ways outlined above. The service has one manager, five tutors (3.4 FTEs), one administrator, and two receptionists who job-share. Primarily the staff are employed through widening participation funding although one of the tutors is employed by the university's Mathematics department.

Every student attending an individual appointment completes an initial student record sheet. This requests student's personal details, including course and matriculation number. Other information is also included such as country of origin and disability grouping as appropriate. Students are also asked to indicate why they decided to use the service. The results have indicated that the majority of users (68%) have self-referred, whilst the remainder were recommended to attend by a member of academic staff. Some students have also used the service as a result of recommendations by other students.

At the initial appointment, a Student Support Plan is completed which asks the student detailed information regarding the reasons for the 'presenting issue' and the 'aims for the first session'. This assists the process of assessing students' progression longitudinally. Reasons for attending individual appointments include essay/report writing (42%), English as a second language (10%), dissertations (14%), general study skills (8%), mathematics and statistics (8%). Students attend less for support with oral presentations and information technology. The percentage of those attending for exam support fluctuates through the semesters as the need arises. In addition one in eight attending are students with dyslexia.

The reasons for attending the first session have been scrutinised. They appear to cluster round 'finding out what is available', 'developing and building study skills', 'seeking course guidance' and 'working on re-submission'. However, the categories of 'developing written language skills', 'checking written work' and 'seeking dyslexia-specific support' have informally been noted as being the most popular. The latter has still to be processed formally as the Student Support Plan has only been utilised since the beginning of Semester B in January 2003 and therefore the results require further analysis.

Prior to the end of the first session, students are also asked to reflect on positive personal learning strategies and learning skills that they would wish to develop in any future visits. In the main, students wish to improve both their language skills and their written work. Although a by-product is to raise individual marks, students also have noted that they want to use their study time more effectively, and this is often outlined as being a more important aim for the student. The ELS tutor is also engaged in the reviewing process and brief notes are recorded with recommendations for action.

As well as individual record keeping, small-scale evaluations have taken place to establish the opinions of the students. The small scale research process is within the confines of 'action research', with the intention of informing and improving practice (Cohen & Manion, 2000). This form of research is described as being pertinent for teaching staff as it enables them to make a critical appraisal of their practice, in particular it

...allows us to give a *reasoned justification* of our educational work to others because we can show how the evidence we have gathered and the critical reflection we have done have helped us to create a *developed, tested and critically-examined rationale* for what we are doing.

(Kemmis & McTaggart, 1992, cited in Cohen & Manion, 2000:230).

The evaluation process has focussed on users and their experiences when using the service. Since December 2001, four surveys have been undertaken. The first concentrated on the quality of the exam workshops and the second and third used a questionnaire asking for students' opinions of the service. The fourth survey tried to elucidate the reasons for non-usage, including the level of knowledge about the service among students, and furthermore if students from some Schools were more familiar with the service than others.

For the first survey five exam-related workshops were held over the two months of December 2001 and January 2002. One hundred and thirty one students signed up for all of the workshops. The respondents all indicated that they had found the workshops useful. Although the responses were, in the main positive, the ELS team agreed that students should have the opportunity to identify any special requirements prior to the programme.

In the second survey one hundred questionnaires were sent out to students at the end of March 2002, with a 35% response rate. The potential respondents were informed that the questionnaire would be anonymous. Respondents were initially asked for their reason for using the ELS. Replies included 'seeking help with statistics, English as a second language, dyslexia support, exam re-sit, study support, essay writing help'. The majority of returns (43%) identified essay writing as their major concern. Similar to the previous survey, a high level of satisfaction was expressed by the users, where 100% indicated that they would "use the service again".

Over a period of five days, students using the Effective Learning Service irrespective of use, i.e. collecting leaflets, one-to-one appointments and attending workshops were also asked to complete a questionnaire. As in the former two surveys, students were generally pleased with the provision.

However, the ELS team recognised that although opinions of the users had been obtained, it was important to find out how many students throughout the university knew about the service. The sample applied the method of cluster/convenience sampling in that ten students from each of the five buildings on the campus were selected on the basis of their availability at the time of the interview. It is recognised that the sample did not include representation from every level or every School. Furthermore this sample did not include evening or part-time students as the questionnaire was circulated during the daytime.

The results revealed that 64% of students were aware of the existence of the service and within that percentage, 23% knew where the ELS was situated. All those who had used the service, whether it was in the format of interviews, leaflets or workshops, were satisfied with the provision and would recommend the ELS to other students. However the knowledge level was not comparable throughout the Schools with some students being more knowledgeable than others. Disappointingly, the number of first level students who did not know about the service was higher than expected given there had been an increase in publicity about the ELS

for this particular level. Furthermore, some students thought that the service was only for a certain category of students, which may confirm the perception that the ELS is adopting a deficit model of learning support.

This paper has suggested that the ELS has a distinctive role to play and is having a positive impact on retention and progression. To do so, the service is questioning the nature of the present system which students are accommodated in and responding to the pedagogical challenges presented (Haggis and Pouget, 2002). As a service we recognise the need for more comprehensive links with Schools where effective liaison has resulted in joint good practice, as in the work on reflective learning with the School of Engineering and Design. Evaluation of the service to date has highlighted the need to research further reasons for non-usage and to raise the profile of the service as being for all students.

Overall, our future development is informed by the awareness that 'the experience and circumstances unique to each person, directly affect their capacity and motivation to learn,' (Open University, 1996:102). We are therefore committed to making a positive difference to students' learning by encouraging them to become aware of how they learn and enabling them to manage their own study strategies. To facilitate this and to embed learning development in the university's policy framework for learning and teaching we have adopted a learning development model focusing on flexible, innovative and responsive provision.

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