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“Guidance of Undergraduates in UK Universities: Concepts and Contexts”

Prepared by Bill Johnston, Honorary Research Fellow and former Senior Lecturer & Assistant Director at the Centre for Academic Practice and Learning Enhancement, University of Strathclyde, Scotland. (b.johnston@strath.ac.uk)

Introduction and Overview

This report draws on my experience in the academic field of Higher Education Development, with particular reference to the matter of how undergraduates are guided *as learners* through degree programmes. I suggest that a unifying concept of Guidance, for our purposes, is as a means of engaging students not only in the immediate mechanics of successful university study, but also with the idea of undergraduate education as a ‘stage’ in lifelong learning. Guidance in this sense may be seen as a way for more experienced learners – lecturers etc. – to help newcomers develop fuller and more long-lasting learner identities.

Guidance in universities can be understood in terms of the teaching and support mechanisms provided following admission to help students make the best of their academic potential and also to overcome any particular study difficulties, which might arise. For example by providing general information and guidance on the nature of academic study, linked to more specific measures designed to engage students in effective academic practice.

Particular areas such as learning strategies, study skills, academic writing, oral presentation, use of IT and teamwork are addressed at various stages in the degree. These areas can also be combined as part of mainstream teaching and assessment strategy to enhance disciplinary learning and underpin complex areas of the higher education curriculum such as critical thinking, information literacy, professional employability and lifelong learning.

Guidance of this nature is an integral part of UK higher education and has a variety of historical roots, such as the tradition of pastoral tutoring, along with more modern interventions in the form of university-wide professional services. There is also variation in academic teaching practice across disciplines, which results in different student experiences within the disciplinary curriculum and in relation to graduate outcomes and expectations. Finally each university manages guidance in terms of its own priorities, structures and strategies for ensuring quality student learning experiences.

Concepts and Contexts

In consequence of the range of aspects described above, it is not helpful to conceive of Guidance in legalistic terms or to rely on gathering statistics to provide an understanding of



practice or identify research agendas. Much of the interesting activity where research/practice might interface, is best illuminated conceptually and judged against identifiable trends in practice. How this idea might be deployed in practice and as a focus for research can be discussed by identifying two major trends: one being the position of central service approaches the other the need to entail 'guidance' in the curriculum.

Central Service Model

This model locates much guidance activity in central units resourced as catch all services for students in difficulty, with a general commitment to guidance and aspirations to contribute to the well being of all students. Many place a high value on contributing to wider access programmes. Staffed by professionals from various backgrounds they may include specialist learning advisors who complement the work of lecturers. The main tension is between institutional demands that they deal with student problems and professional aspirations to make a wider contribution to student well being.

Guidance in the Curriculum Model

This model is more diffuse, varied and dependent on departmental/disciplinary culture. Cast as a spectrum, one might see academics in an individual student guidance/ pastoral role at one end, with quite highly developed teaching strategies for whole class student development at the other. Often student development will be presented in terms of skill development – professional or general – including some of the skills mentioned above in writing, team work etc. The demands of professional bodies and graduate labour markets are influential in channeling attention to 'employability' skills, although this can also entail efforts to guide students to become more reflective as learners and potential graduate employees. The older pastoral care tutoring form seems to be in near terminal decline, whilst the curriculum development form is concentrated on a particular range of interests and offset by competing demands on academics.

Summation

Neither model seems to me to meet my suggested unifying concept of Guidance at present, but it would be possible to intervene to achieve that end by developing a research agenda aimed at improving practice.

Some key research/practice areas for the Guidance Theme

- Tension between deficit and developmental models of student learning and support.
- Use of macro features of curriculum such as First Year Experience to develop guidance, which is complex, coherent and developmental.

End.