

Supporting students, an academic matter?

Abstract

This paper will argue that student support lies in a sometimes uneasy place that overlaps with teaching. Examination of this place, via a historical account of the roles of academics and professional staff in providing support, permits a greater understanding of the ways students are supported. It does this by emphasising continuity and change in academic roles in this area, the development of new types of university staff and the contested space this creates. If academic practice encompasses a critical discussion of student support then forms of support can be created which serve the academic purpose of the university.

Paper

Introduction

'of or pertaining to a college, academy, school, or other educational institution, especially one for higher education'

'theoretical or hypothetical; not practical, realistic, or directly useful'

Dictionary.com

Student support is an academic matter because it is a part of academic practice and it is a feature of higher education. If this important aspect of the work of universities lies under the radar of academic enquiry then there is a risk of it becoming an academic matter in the other, pejorative, meaning of the word.

Student support includes a range of activities carried out by various higher education professionals. The very term support contains ideas about the nature of students and of their needs, but it will be used throughout for convenience. It is a set of practices that can be better understood by locating them in the context of the history of higher education. This shows that certain key features have formed repeating themes. The theme that will be considered in this paper is the role of the academic in providing support and the relationship of support to teaching. We have moved from a time when the academic was the main source of support to one in which supporting students is increasingly fragmented (Smith 2007), with the potential for separating some practices from the primary educational function of the university.

Method

This article draws on one aspect of the analysis of an extensive range of published material, some archival material and grey literature, related to student support in higher education since the 1944 Education Act. This analysis has developed an explanatory framework of policy and practice which can be used to understand past and present forms of support. The comparative approach permitted by the historical method provides a different perspective on current practices and is a stimulus to the development of a critical approach to the topic (Myers 2008).

Findings

The relative roles of academic and other professionals in providing support for students has been a repeating theme in the history of student support. Issues related to the type of staff who should provide support, the value which that support is accorded and differential access to key areas of the university are not new. The evidence for this contested space will be reviewed below.

The Niblett Report on Halls of Residence highlights the nature of the contested space:

We should regret any development tending to create a corps of personnel devoted to student welfare, quite distinct from, and perhaps little regarded by, the body of academic teachers.' (UGC 1957: 24-25)

As this corps of personnel increased these distinctions continued. Pashley and Shepherd (1977, 1978), reporting on counselling and student health services, argue that these staff were excluded from the opportunity to advocate for students in difficulty because this was seen as an academic matter and their involvement was perceived by academic staff as a threat to academic judgement. Conversely, Cotterill and Waterhouse (1998) bemoan the loss of academic input into mitigating circumstances procedures in the interests of administrative control.

This change was sometimes seen as a positive. During the 1970s it was felt that student unrest and changing social mores had disturbed the informal relationships between academic staff and students (Conference on Student Problems and Performance 1970). Counsellors were seen as professionals who were not part of the university in the same way as academics. Counselling was felt by staff and students to be a 'new' way of providing support, untainted by the paternalistic overtones of past methods (Moodie and Eustace 1974).

Following a study of personal tutoring, Earwaker (1992) argues that student support should be provided by academics because they are central to students' experience of higher education. Centralised student services are characterised as peripheral, with departmental support linked to teaching seen as central. Clegg, Bradley and Smith (2006) also argue that

support needs are bound up with the educational process and that therefore support should be located with teaching, rather than separately in student services.

The separation of support from academic work can be seen developing throughout the period, as first counselling, then advising and then learning itself was removed from the academic role and provided by others. Robertson (HEQC 1994) advocated the development of para-academic support workers to provide educational advice and guidance on the construction of modular degrees. Learning development services expanded following the Dearing Report's advocacy of a generic skills model in which separated skills from subject (Gosling 2001).

The professionalisation of support roles can be seen as a way to ensure that students receive appropriate, accurate and consistent advice and guidance (HEQC 1994), or as a way of deskilling academics in a managerialist culture (Smith 2007).

Discussion

These debates over who should support students can be contextualised in the expansion of higher education. As participation rates increase opportunities for informal interaction between staff and students decrease and interactions become more formalised (Trow 1974). One solution is to fragment the academic role and appoint others to perform formerly academic tasks. As this happens, for example through the role of the learning developer, the relationship between teaching and support is highlighted, posing some important questions for our understanding of the academic role and the extent of academic responsibility for students' learning (Rowland 2000). Those working in the contested spaces may not have access to academic arenas to discuss whether the outcomes of support are educational and may be experiencing other pressures, for example to increase student satisfaction ratings.

If student support is seen as an academic matter then discussion can take place as part of academic practice, and colleagues can identify the benefits of working together to ensure that student support is an academic matter in the positive sense of the word.

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